



# Watergate Weakness And the SALT Talks

— Joseph Alsop

**T**HE WORD is that the President and secretary of state went off to Moscow somewhat sadly resigned to making little progress with strategic arms limitation. Once again, therefore, Watergate has profoundly affected major U.S. policy.

The straw that broke the camel's back, so to say, was the ridiculous last minute rumpus about "secret agreements" that the President and secretary had allegedly concluded with the Russians during the first talks in Moscow.

When the rumpus occurred, it was already clear that President Nixon and Secretary Henry Kissinger would have a rough time if they brought back from Moscow any serious ongoing SALT agreement. They were well aware of the administration's Watergate - weakness. The rumpus convinced them that the attempt ought not to be made.

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**T**HUS THE AIM in Moscow is now to work out the "conceptual basis" for ongoing SALT negotiations instead of an actual ongoing agreement. By most tests, it is probably better for the President and the secretary to adopt this lower aim.

Because of Watergate - weakness, the President could not count on much senate support in the quarters that would normally back any kind of SALT agreement. So he was in fact unable to go forward, despite the warnings of the Pentagon leaders. The point here is that the secretary of state is profoundly alarmed about the

rather short term in his area of responsibility, whereas Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger's worries concern the rather longer term in his area.

It is nonsensical to say that there is "a feud," or even a really fundamental difference of viewpoint between the two secretaries. If you ask Secretary Kissinger whether Secretary Schlesinger is correct about the long - term risks, the answer is, "yes." If you ask Secretary Schlesinger whether Secretary Kissinger is right about the short - term risks, the answer is, "yes." But by the nature of his job Secretary Kissinger has to worry more about the short term.

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**A**T THIS JUNCTURE, moreover, Secretary Kissinger is intensely worried about the short term because of the administration's Watergate - weakness. Being a sensible man, the secretary believes it is intensely dangerous for a much enfeebled U.S. government to confront a world situation prickling with more dangers, including more economic, strategic and straight military dangers, than the U.S. has confronted in a quarter century.

Kissinger was originally ready to pay a certain price for an ongoing SALT agreement, in order to lock the Russians into the policy now called "detente." By so doing, he had hoped to reduce the chances of any really brutal or challenging Soviet action, at least until the Watergate - weakness could be partly or completely overcome.