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Why Did Mideast Surprise U.S.?

Washington, D.C.—In her annual New Year's Day prediction, Mrs. Jeane Dixon, Washington's famed seeress, took a deep look into her crystal ball and reported that the U.S. was headed for a major crisis in the Middle East. So President Johnson, she prophesied, will shortly face "the most momentous decision of his life."

Mrs. Dixon might have been a little more specific, but compared with the State Department's stargazing she was right on target. This is not to suggest that Mrs. Dixon be made secretary of state, but it does suggest that the department, with all of its immense resources, might be expected to match her assessments of the Middle East situation.



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Now that the immediate crisis has subsided, it may be a good moment to do a little stock-taking, for our future policy in that troubled area will no doubt be influenced to an important degree by the same officials who were so slow and hesitant in anticipating and coping with the Arab-Israeli explosion.

It is always easy game to second-guess the State Department, but considering that the taxpayers are spending about \$1 billion a year to provide it with every form of intelligence, it is hard to understand why the performance was not better. State has hundreds of Middle East experts, it has its own bureau of intelligence and research, it has a large policy planning staff, and it also has all the reports of the CIA.

Yet it is clear that (1) State underestimated the danger of a war in the area, (2) it had no acceptable contingency plan ready for the President when war did break out, (3) it was not even certain what America's obligations were and (4) the plan it belatedly did settle on (a consortium

of maritime nations to break the Gulf of Aqaba blockade) was a failure.

Numerous foreign diplomats and foreign correspondents foresaw the trend of events long ago, as did our charge d'affaires in Cairo, David G. Nef, who reportedly sent Washington "clear warning months in advance," but was regarded as an "alarmist" by State.

It also comes out that in the three critical months preceding the crisis, there was no U.S. ambassador to the United Arab Republic. It appears that no U.S. official spoke with Nasser during that time, nor since for that matter. A new but inexperienced envoy, Richard Nolte, finally did arrive at Cairo on May 21 after Nasser had started mobilizing. When asked about the crisis, he is reported to have said, "What crisis?"

Now that Congress has returned from its recess, it will be interesting to see what if anything comes of talk of a congressional review of the State Department's performance, as proposed by Sen. Charles H. Percy (R-Ill.). In his opinion, the emergency "left grave questions about the quality of our advanced planning."

Rep. Wayne Hays (D-Ohio), chairman of a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee, has already held a closed session with Nef. Hays charges State with "contributory negligence" in failing to heed the warning from Cairo. He says the subcommittee feels there has to be an improvement in "the way messages from crisis areas are handled at the department."

It is significant that the complaints on the Hill come from spokesmen from both parties. Rep. Gerald R. Ford (R-Mich.), the House Republican leader, says the administration "got caught napping." Sen. Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.), the Democratic majority leader, said the same.

The President earned some good marks for his personal diplomacy during the crisis, but it was obvious he was improvising and playing it by ear, rather than depending on a carefully planned strategy devised in advance by the professionals.