

The Washington Merry-Go-Round

LBJ Recalls Kosygin Backdown in '67

By Jack Anderson

In his memoirs, Lyndon Johnson describes in harrowing detail how he maneuvered the Sixth Fleet in response to a hot-line threat of Soviet military action against Israel in 1967 and how he faced down Premier Alexei Kosygin over the Middle East during their subsequent meeting at Glassboro, N.J.

Here are the highlights from our bootleg copy of the Johnson memoirs:

At the height of the Arab-Israeli six-day war, the President received a grim, hot-line message from Kosygin threatening "necessary actions, including military" unless Israel halted its operations unconditionally within a few hours.

There was other provocative language in the message. Declares Mr. Johnson: "In an exchange between heads of government, these were serious words: 'very crucial moment,' 'catastrophe,' 'independent decisions,' 'military actions.'

"The room was deathly still as we carefully studied this grave communication. I turned to (Defense Secretary) McNamara, 'Where is the Sixth Fleet now?' I asked him."

The fleet had orders to stay at least 100 miles from the Syrian coast. The President told McNamara "to issue orders at once to change the course and cut the restriction to 50 miles.

"The Secretary of Defense gave the orders over the

phone. No one else said a word. Some of the men in the Situation Room later recorded their memories of that morning. (Ambassador to Russia) Llewellyn Thompson recalled it as a 'time of great concern and utmost gravity.' (CIA Director) Richard Helms remembered that 'the atmosphere was tense' and that conversation was conducted 'in the lowest voices I had ever heard in a meeting of that kind.'

"We all knew the Russians would get the message as soon as their monitors observed the change in the fleet's pattern. That message, which no translator would need to interpret to the Kremlin leadership, was that the United States was prepared to resist Soviet intrusion in the Middle East."

The crisis faded and, not long afterward, Mr. Johnson and Kosygin held a friendly, face-to-face meeting in Glassboro, N.J.

"At only one point in our first session did Kosygin seem close to becoming really heated," recalls LBJ. "He said we had talked about territorial integrity before the Middle East war, but we had ended by protecting aggression. He insisted that Israeli troops go back to the original armistice lines . . .

"At that point, he came close to issuing a threat. Unless we agreed to his formula, he declared, there would be a war—a very great war.' He said the Arabs would fight

with arms if they had them and, if not, with bare hands . . .

"If they fight with weapons, I replied, we would know where they got them. Then I leaned forward and said slowly and quietly: 'Let us understand one another. I hope there will be no war. If there is a war, I hope it will not be a big war. If they fight, I hope they fight with fists and not with guns.'

"I told him that I hoped both our countries could keep out of any Middle East explosion because 'if we do get into it, it will be a most serious matter' . . .

"Kosygin noted that we now had the 'hot line' and could use that whenever necessary as we had to good effect during the recent six-day war. Kosygin apologized for having wakened me so early in the morning through the 'hot line.' But, he added, together we had 'accomplished more on that one day than others could accomplish in three years.' "

Kosygin was also involved, indirectly, in an earlier crisis. He was in Hanoi on Feb. 6, 1965, when Communist guerrillas struck a U.S. barracks at Pleiku. This led to President Johnson's decision to bomb North Vietnam. He recalls:

"As we talked, there was an electric tension in the air. Everyone in the room was deadly serious as he considered the possible consequences of this decision. Each man around

that table knew how crucial such action could be. How would Hanoi react? Would the Chinese Communists use it as a pretext for involving themselves? What about Kosygin and the Russians in Hanoi?

"Someone suggested that Ho Chi Minh had mousetrapped the Soviet leader by attacking us during his visit. If we failed to respond, we were 'paper tigers'; if we hit back, Soviet prestige might be further involved."

The President went ahead with the first bombing attack while Kosygin was still in Hanoi. LBJ explained at a secret briefing for congressional leaders: "We have kept our gun over the mantel and our shells in the cupboard for a long time now. And what was the result? They are killing our men while they sleep in the night. I can't ask our American soldiers out there to continue to fight with one hand tied behind their backs."

More than three years later, Mr. Johnson ordered the futile bombing stopped. His recollection of the moment:

"I looked, one by one, at the men assembled around the long cabinet table and asked their judgments on my decision. The reactions were quick and unanimous. 'Absolutely,' said one. 'The thing to do,' said another . . . I had the feeling that I was perhaps the most doubtful man in the room."

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