

EXCERPT 6

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN JFK DEFIES A CARDINAL RULE OF MODERN POLITICS TO BREAK THE MIDDLE EAST'S CYCLE OF VIOLENCE?

As the nation and the world argued, Israeli forces crossed the Suez and took possession of the abandoned Egyptian weaponry. Kennedy called Levi Eshkol. We find ourselves, he told the Prime Minister, at a tipping point. The world is still formulating its opinion on the extensive U.S. bombardment, and any Israeli movement towards the heart of Egypt made it difficult to argue that America's core intention was to pave the way to a lasting peace. "Mr. President," Eshkol replied, "you are telling me that in virtually destroying the Egyptian army, you will not be viewed as warlike, while in securing the area after the fact, we will?"

"Mr. Prime Minister," said the President, "I am certain that you can appreciate the difficulties we have chosen to accept here. We have done so willingly as a way to create an environment within which your nation can be more secure. I would think that a thoughtful assessment of the situation would have you deferring to our judgment as to what the next constructive step will be. Will you withdraw back to the East Bank of the Canal?" Eshkol replied that he would have to confer with his Cabinet before taking action.

The President's bedside telephone rang at 4:30 the next morning. Ten minutes later he sat facing Secretary of State Fulbright and CIA Director Reynolds across his desk in the Oval Office. They described the movement of two divisions of Israeli army trucks, tanks and other armored vehicles down the west bank of the Canal heading towards the city of Ismailia. According to Reynolds the city's residents had begun to flee across the desert towards Cairo any way they could.

Bobby arrived a few minutes later and listened on an extension as the President initiated another call to Levi Eshkol. "I am deeply, deeply disappointed, Mr. Prime Minister. I thought we had an agreement."

"We agreed that I would assemble the Cabinet to deliberate, Mr. President. I did so. It was our unanimous judgment that there will be no better moment than this one to establish a buffer zone that protects us permanently from Nasser's tantrums. We thought that winning the Sinai last year would accomplish that and we were wrong. We will not be wrong again."

"You will not be wrong again," Kennedy echoed with a measured tone. "It becomes apparent to me that you have no conception of how much more difficult you are making our task, Mr. Prime Minister — a task, I would remind you, that we have undertaken solely to establish the peace that you claim to be seeking. It is time, sir, for you to appreciate the larger picture."

Kennedy went on to describe his telephone conversation with Leonid Brezhnev hours before the air strike against Egypt. The Soviets, Kennedy reminded Eshkol, had been Nasser's staunch supporters, and had dramatically reduced their military aid after the Johannesburg Accords. But Johannesburg couldn't change the world overnight, and Kennedy knew that Brezh-

nev would feel cornered by a direct attack on an ally the Soviets had so purposefully protected. “I said as much to Secretary Brezhnev,” Kennedy told Eshkol, “and asked him what we could do to make his situation more viable. What he said to me was, ‘Take the lesson to your friends as you have to ours.’ He said, ‘If the Zionists take advantage of this attack to expand their borders yet again, we will hurt them as they have not been hurt before, and I will expect from you the same silent acceptance that you are about to receive from me.’ Do you know what I told him, Mr. Prime Minister?”

“I do not.”

“I assured him that he would find no need for that. I said that your country and mine would settle affairs between us — no matter what.” Kennedy paused for emphasis. “It was a mistake for you to cross the Canal, Mr. Prime Minister. For you to continue marching towards the heart of Egypt would be a far more serious mistake.”

The next pause was ended by Eshkol. “You have your calculations,” he said. “We have ours. If yours are in error, you will proceed to — what is the expression? ‘Go back to the drawing board?’ So it is with all comfortably distant observers of our situation. If we err in our calculations, we die. Even if—”

Kennedy interrupted crisply. “We are something more than observers of this situation, sir.”

“Yes. Granted. Yet you are not us.” A slight tremor flushed into Eshkol’s voice. “You do not wake up every morning wondering if the day will bring the decisive battle for your country’s survival. Every morning of your life, Mr. President.”

“I know that feeling better than you think, sir. Today I no longer live with it, because we managed with Mr. Brezhnev to break through the circular dead-end thinking about one another that trapped us in fear for fifty years, that gave each of us a constant supply of excuses to stoke the fires of war, exactly like the one you are giving me now to storm through Egypt. I am telling you — not ‘observing,’ I am telling you, sir — that it is time for you to stop.”

Neither spoke for several seconds. “What I am telling you, Prime Minister Eshkol, is to turn your forces around and bring them back to your side of the Canal.”

“That is something I cannot do. To do so would be to tell Nasser and the world that Israel is nothing more than America’s toothless pet, a pet that might be put to sleep if we dare misbehave.”

Kennedy looked across his desk to Bobby, who nodded without expression. “Mr. Prime Minister,” Jack said. “Ismailia is a fortified city. If you attack it, you will suffer a prompt retaliation. Not from the Soviets, but from us. And not a diplomatic retaliation, but a military one.” Another long pause. “I need to know if you understand what I just said, sir.”

“What you said was very plain, Mr. President. I will advise my Cabinet of our conversation.”

“You advised your Cabinet before, Mr. Eshkol. The results were not favorable. You need to advise them right now that this is not idle talk. This is something we very much would not like to do, but—”

“I should say you wouldn’t, Mr. President,” Eshkol said, his voice rising. “You are engaging here in a rather dramatic understatement. Please don’t think that in focusing our energies on the matter of survival we have lost sight of American politics. A strike by the U.S. military against the state of Israel? Assuming that you and I still inhabit the same world, sir, your attempt to frighten us is greatly undermined by the obvious absurdity of your threat.”

“I see,” Kennedy replied. “Mr. Eshkol, the gist of what you’ve just said to me is that a targeted strike against you is not a pragmatic option for us. I would ask you to consider that in a larger context pragmatism obliges us to make sure the world community understands that our highest priority in the Middle East is to build a lasting peace, not to unconditionally protect one particular party because of our domestic politics or our interest in oil or anything else.”

“‘One particular party,’ Mr. President? Do you—”

“We are coming to the end of this conversation, Mr. Eshkol. The most useful thing I can think to do is to repeat my message to you so that there can be no misunderstanding: if Israeli forces attack the city of Ismailia or any other settlement west of the Suez Canal, I will order a military attack on Israeli forces. Now. Do you understand what I just said? Do you have any questions?”

“This decision you say you have made,” Eshkol said. “Have you consulted with others about it? Senator Javits? Governor Reagan?”

“Do you have any questions about the substance of what I have said to you just now? About the direct consequence if you proceed to attack the Egyptians? Do you understand my literal meaning, Mr. Prime Minister?”

“Yes, Mr. President. I do.”

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