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TO: Department of State

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ANALYSIS BRANCH

FROM : American Embassy, BEIRUT

DATE: March 22, 1968

SUBJECT : TIME-LIFE President James Linen's Interview with Nasser

REF :

TIME-LIFE President James Linen, accompanied by Ed Hughes, TIME-LIFE's Middle East Bureau Chief, saw President Nasser for slightly more than an hour last week. The following is an account of their impressions, given to me by Mr. Hughes, and by Mr. Linen when he transited Beirut. Linen assured me that he would prepare an account of the talk which would be made available to Washington, but his account may be delayed because of his circuitous return to the States via Eastern Europe. He regretted that he had not had the time to brief Don Bergus before his departure from Cairo. The interview was completely off the record, and TIME-LIFE will not use it in any form.

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Nasser was in excellent health. No indications of fatigue or depression. The usual four packs of I&M's every day. "A man of 50 who still looks 40."

Nasser was preoccupied with his internal problems, which he described as real and serious. He kept referring to the frustrations of his people, particularly the youth. His pre-occupation was so great that he dismissed the Jarring Mission with only a few casual comments, and continually returned to the domestic theme, which he discussed frankly and openly.

He was not, however, militant. There was no talk of war, and no threats of war. As Hughes said, there was nothing in the conversation which would not be considered acceptable and

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rational by any responsible American. Linen and Hughes understood of course that this was Nasser's best face forward for an American audience.

Re the riots. Nasser mentioned that things clearly had gotten out of hand. What started as a peaceful, controlled ASU-sponsored meeting at Helwan, which was primarily designed to invoke public reaction to counter the bitterness of the military at the outcome of the trials, soon developed a momentum of its own. The ASU sponsors lost control, and the Interior Ministry people, who had not been informed in advance, took repressive measures which provoked an angry mob response. This was the Helwan mob.

The student riots were spontaneous and the government was caught napping. Interestingly enough, said Nasser, they were surprised to find evidence of activities by both Muslim Brotherhood and Chinese Communist groups, which fed on the general student unrest and frustration. Linen questioned the reality of serious Chicom influence, but Nasser reiterated his statement. Later, according to Hughes, security officials told them that they had no evidence of extensive Muslim Brotherhood activity with the students, but added that Nasser firmly believed in the Brotherhood's role.

Nasser said that he would now have to devote himself totally to the internal political scene, and to offer something to his "frustrated people", who have many of the same frustrations that one sees today in America and Europe. And above all youth must be served. "I know the signs," said Nasser, "I am now 50, and fifteen years ago I was saying the same thing about getting rid of the old men."

Linen queried Nasser about his plans - would he be able to still the discontent by some face-changing in the government and Cabinet? Nasser said that this would not be enough. He would have to offer something more, but he did not reveal his plans.

Re Soviet military presence. Nasser said the decision to bring in the Soviets to re-train the Egyptian military was his alone. Podgorny had turned him down flat in August when he made the request. He "went over Podgorny's head to Breshnev" and got approval. The

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Soviets had been most reluctant to come in, but once there they were behaving well, and doing exactly what he requested. They were in no command relationship to the UAR armed forces, nor would they be.

On the Arab-Israel problem, Nasser gave no indication of any give on his position with regard to "no negotiations - direct or indirect." He said, almost in passing, that it was expected that the matter would come up again in the Security Council in April, and he saw no chance of the Jarring Mission achieving progress before that time. He assumed that the US would continue to be pro-Israel in the new UN deliberations. For this reason, it was impossible for him, given the tense domestic situation, to engage his prestige by resuming diplomatic relations with the US before the UN debate. The Egyptian people would not accept such a decision.

In this connection, Hughes reported that the timing of the release of the LOOK interview could not have been worse, coming as it had on the heels of the riots. The implication was that things would have been different if the LOOK article had been released earlier. (Hughes could not remember whether this statement was attributable to Nasser or to Harold Beeley, whom they also saw. He was inclined to think that Beeley had said it.)

On Viet Nam, Nasser said that Chou en Lai had predicted to him three years ago the exact course of events in the escalation of the fighting in Viet Nam. Nasser had told Chou that he was prepared to mediate. Chou gave him a categorical no, stating that he did not want the non-aligned nations to act as a cat's paw of the imperialists. Chou added that the escalation policy was carefully designed to enable them to "chew up the Americans." It was an unalterable policy.

On Yemen, Nasser said that he had intended to leave all of the Egyptian civilian technicians behind after the withdrawal of his military force, "for obvious reasons." However, he had not counted on the reaction of the Yemenis, who had turned on the remaining civilians and had killed eight or ten of them. At that point, Nasser ordered them to leave. He said that there were only two left in the YAR.


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