Alex Spelling makes several important points in his well-researched article on U.S.-British relations during the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war. He correctly focuses on Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s deep irritation with Britain’s refusal to cooperate with a ceasefire initiative in the October 11-13, 1973 period. Spelling believes the British had good reasons not to play along with Kissinger and blames him for overreacting to a perfectly rational British decision. Secondly, he notes the importance for Britain of dependence on Arab oil imports at this time and the prevailing view in the Foreign Office that Britain should try hard not to offend the Arabs during the crisis surrounding the war.

Spelling holds Prime Minister Edward Heath essentially blameless for the tensions in transatlantic relations and concludes that the entire incident was more a “temporary falling out”, not a significant rift (504). My knowledge of the details of this case comes from two sources. I was on the National Security Council (NSC) staff dealing with the Middle East during the October war and was present during almost all of the meetings of the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) where issues of strategy were discussed. I can confirm that Kissinger was indeed very annoyed with the British because of their refusal to put forward a ceasefire resolution in the UN Security Council on October 13. I have also, as an academic, written about these events and have recently gone over many of the declassified documents, some only made available in the past year or so, that deal with these matters. From this perspective, I will make a few observations on specific issues raised in the Spelling article.

Spelling seems to believe that the British were generally better informed about the Middle East than were the Americans. He particularly notes President Richard Nixon’s apparent disinterest in doing anything to advance Arab-Israeli peace negotiations (480).
This is not quite accurate. Nixon had made a clear decision not to tackle the Arab-Israeli issue until after his reelection in 1972 – he was indeed a politician sensitive to domestic concerns – but there is ample evidence in the records that he was aware of the danger of allowing the conflict to fester and he repeatedly urged Kissinger to turn his attention to the Middle East. Kissinger was more reluctant, although even he was intrigued by a possible engagement with Egypt that began to emerge with the opening of a backchannel communication via President Anwar Sadat’s National Security adviser, Hafiz Ismail, in spring 1972 (not February 1973 as suggested by Spelling). Indeed, Kissinger was impressed by his meeting with Ismail in February 1973 and began to develop ideas for an initiative that he thought could be launched soon after the Israeli elections late in 1973.

We now know – I did not at the time, even though I worked for Kissinger – that in December 1971 Nixon and Kissinger had reached a secret agreement with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir that there would be no U.S. diplomatic initiative on Arab-Israeli issues during 1972 or 1973 unless both parties agreed. This would get Nixon and Meir through their respective election years. The real mistake that both Nixon and Kissinger made was in thinking that Sadat would sit tight until after the Israeli elections since he had no realistic military option. This view was shared and reinforced by Israeli strategists and policy makers at the highest level.

Despite this complacency in both Washington and Jerusalem, Kissinger did try to persuade Meir that some movement needed to happen before the end of the year. Just days before the war broke out on October 6, he told the Israeli ambassador that the old understanding with Israel dating back to December 1971 was dead and that a new approach was needed urgently. It was Meir who was adamant in her refusal to budge, and Nixon, who on some level knew better, was so deeply immersed in his Watergate-related problems that he provided little leadership as war approached.

Let me turn to the ceasefire issue, which is still not entirely clear, since crucial documentation is missing. Around October 10-11, Kissinger began to reconsider his initial assumption that the war would quickly turn in Israel’s favor and that the U.S. should support a ceasefire tied to a return to the status quo ante – a position that would initially favor Israel, but would be seen positively by the Arabs once Israel turned the tide and recovered, and even expanded its control over Arab territory on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts. By this time, Israel had indeed gone beyond the pre-October 6 lines on the Syrian front and the Syrians were ready for a ceasefire. On the Egyptian front, Egypt had crossed the Suez Canal and was dug in. Kissinger was in daily touch with Sadat, Meir and with the Soviet leadership through its representative in Washington, Ambassador Analtoly

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1 The source for this information, which is not in the U.S. archives, is the notes kept for the Israeli War Cabinet and only made available for researchers in 2011-12. Yigal Kipnis, an Israeli historian, wrote a book in Hebrew in 2012 which appeared in English last year, Yigal Kipnis, 1973: The Road to War, Charlottesville, VA.: Just World Books, 2013. Chapter two covers this episode in convincing detail.
Dobrynin. Kissinger was led to believe by Dobrynin that Sadat was ready to accept a ceasefire in place, but he did not want to be seen as succumbing to pressure from the two great powers. The Soviets suggested that they would abstain on a Security Council resolution, and that it would be best if the U.S. did likewise and did not take the initiative itself. Unfortunately we have nothing from the Soviet or Egyptian archives, or even credible memoir materials, that would allow us to judge whether there was any substance behind this bid.

Kissinger undertook to secure Israel’s agreement to a ceasefire in place, which he managed to do with some difficulty around October 12. During this period he was still not responding fully to Israeli requests for an arms airlift and there has been inconclusive speculation about whether or not this served as pressure to get Meir to accept the idea of a ceasefire in place. Again, the documentation is very scanty here, and the Israeli records have not yet been opened. Needless to say, Kissinger was very careful not to record much of what he said to the Israelis on this sensitive topic. We have just one reference in the declassified documents when he implies that he was quite rough with Meir in getting her to accept the idea. At this point Kissinger turned to the British and asked them to introduce a ceasefire-in-place resolution in the UN. He specifically warned them not to ask Sadat if he would accept. The Soviets had told him that Sadat, if asked, would say no, but if presented with a fait accompli in the form of a UN resolution he would acquiesce. Kissinger and the Soviets were eager at this point to preserve détente, and seemed to realize that if the war went on much longer there would be the risk of a serious clash of interests. The Soviets were already airlifting arms to their Arab allies, and immense pressure was building for the U.S. to rush arms to Israel.

Spelling argues that in these circumstances it was reasonable for Heath to have asked Sadat if he would accept such a resolution before introducing a text in the Security Council. And, as Dobrynin had predicted, Sadat said he was not interested. Spelling attributes much of Heath’s concern to his desire not to take a position that would be viewed unfavorably by the Arabs, largely because of Britain’s dependency on Arab oil imports. Heath was also worried about British credibility if an initiative was taken that failed (494).

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While Heath’s caution is understandable, it is worth thinking about what might have happened if a ceasefire-in-place resolution had been introduced and voted on at this time, October 12-13. If Sadat had said yes – and the Syrians had already told the Soviets they were ready – and if the Israelis had stuck to their word, the war might have ended by October 14-15. There would have been no movement of Egyptian tanks toward the Mitla and Giddi passes, no subsequent crossing of the Canal by Israeli troops, no massive airlift of arms to Israel – yes, Israeli losses would have been replaced, but with less of a sense of urgency -- there might not have been an Arab oil embargo and the follow-on production cuts, and there would not have been the stage-three nuclear alert at the end of the war. So, a ceasefire in place might have been a very smart move at this time; Kissinger briefly put his considerable talents behind it; and he was genuinely angry when the British failed to play their assigned role. True, he could be unpleasant when angry, and he was under enormous pressure, but I think it is worth thinking seriously about whether or not Heath’s caution was really in the best interests of seeing the crisis ended quickly and with least risk to the global system of security. Heath’s actions may well be seen as quite justified and understandable without being viewed as particularly statesmanlike or wise.

This leads me to a final point about the lack of deep understanding of the international oil market in both London and Washington. The British official view seems to have been that the best way to insulate Britain from the oil weapon was to stay on the good side of the Arabs. That was also the view in places such as Tokyo and many European capitals. Washington had its own blind spot which was more akin to the old saw that “the Arabs can’t drink their oil”. What no one seemed to appreciate fully was that the oil crisis would not take the form simply of an embargo, which might be inconvenient but manageable, given the nature of the international oil market, but that the embargo would be accompanied by oil-production cuts that would drive the price of oil to unprecedented levels, affecting all importers, whether they were friendly to the Arabs or not.

Finally, Spelling quotes with seeming approval from a message dated December 1, 1973, from Heath to British Ambassador to Washington, Lord Cromer. The Prime Minister claims that Britain had better intelligence on Soviet intentions than did the U.S. during the crisis and that this should end the “absolute nonsense” over the ceasefire issue (500). I wonder if there is any real evidence to back up this claim, or whether this is just a politician engaging is self-flattery and ex post-facto justification.

As Spelling correctly notes, the strains in U.S.-British relations were short-lived. The whole episode is a relatively minor footnote in transatlantic relations, although the issue of the ceasefire still deserves more attention. One day, when the Israelis open the next batch of archives dealing with the October war, we may learn more about how Kissinger persuaded Meir to agree to a ceasefire in place. Perhaps there is more to learn from Soviet and Egyptian archives, but the Egyptians in particular have been very reluctant to open theirs. And almost no one knows what Sadat had in mind on or around October 12-13. If he had accepted the ceasefire at that point, it might have been to Egypt’s considerable advantage, since in the ensuing days the Egyptian military position...
collapsed and by October 22 a true debacle was on the horizon as Israel moved to cut off two Egyptian armies in Sinai.

I will add one personal observation. During the almost five years that I served on the NSC staff under two presidents, Britain was considered a special ally. I met frequently with my colleagues at the British embassy; we shared information in a way that was more open than with any other NATO ally. Indeed, there was only one country that had a more “special” relationship with the Nixon White House. And that country, as the Kipnis book shows in graphic detail, was Israel.