

The Atherton Case: Who Did What to

Alfred L. (Roy) Atherton has been a foreign service officer for 28 years. He acted in the best tradition of that service earlier this month when he took full responsibility for "leaking" infor-

The writer, who for five years was a diplomatic reporter for The Post, is NBC correspondent for national affairs.

mation from classified documents to a Harvard man—a man who had come well recommended by some old colleagues of another Harvard man, Secretary of State Kissinger.

Atherton accepted responsibility because he believed that Kissinger was being attacked unjustly for having authorized leaks to a scholar who had represented himself as sympathetic to the Secretary's Middle East policy. Atherton acted as he did because he believes in what Kissinger has done as Secretary of State, and out of loyalty to the institution of Secretary of State.

Kissinger rewarded him with a severe public reprimand. He then invited Atherton to lunch with the Israeli foreign minister to discuss some of the most crucial issues of American policy in the Middle East.

Atherton did what could be expected from a loyal official with a reputation for scrupulous adherence to instructions.

But was Kissinger's response to be expected? Is it in line with the tradition of his great predecessors?

There are never any precise parallels, but there are precedents. Two come to mind. One was the remark of Dean Acheson that became so controversial that the Secretary offered his resignation to President Truman. Alger Hiss, a former State Department officer, had just been convicted of perjury in a case involving passing government papers to the Soviet Union.

On Jan. 25, 1950, Acheson was asked for comment.

"I should like to make it clear to you that whatever the outcome of any appeal which Mr. Hiss or his lawyers may take in this case I do not intend to turn my back on Alger Hiss. I think every person who has known Alger Hiss or has served with him at any time has upon his conscience the very serious task of deciding what his attitude is and what his conduct should be. That must be done by each person in the light of his own standards and his own principles. For me, there is very little doubt about those standards or those principles. I think they were stated for us a very long time ago. They were stated on the Mount of Olives and if you are interested in seeing them you will find them in the 25th Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew . . . Have you any other questions?"

People who knew Acheson at the time say he was totally unprepared for the storm his remarks touched off in a nation traumatized by the Red Scare. But they are certain he would have said precisely the same thing even if he knew what would happen.

Dean Rusk acted in the Dean Acheson tradition when he defended his spokesman, Robert J. McCloskey, who had said more than President Lyndon Johnson had wanted him to say. At a State Department briefing in the spring of 1965, McCloskey acknowledged that the mission of the Marines who had just been sent to Vietnam earlier that year would be to provide combat support to Vietnamese forces.

Johnson's rage was uncontained; he was in a mood to tear McCloskey limb from limb. In "The Best and the Brightest," David Halberstam, who had

but condoning them, even authorizing them, when they make him look good.

But were times better when Hiss was convicted of perjury? Can anyone who remembers LBJ and his fulminations over Vietnam—and Rusk's own dedication to the cause—believe things were better then?

And what, after all, did Atherton do? The article by Edward R. F. Sheehan, which is at the center of the controversy, is basically friendly to Kissinger and his policy. When Sheehan first wrote to Atherton asking for State Department cooperation in his project—which was to write about Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy—he made it very clear that he was sympathetic, indeed that he approved, the Kissinger policy of peace by small steps. His letter came at a time when Kissinger needed some solace. The March negotiations

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little good to say about Rusk, reported what the Secretary did. McCloskey, he wrote,

"was called upstairs by Dean Rusk, who was very gentle with him. Rusk thought it was unfortunate that McCloskey found himself in the situation that he did, but Rusk could understand it. Anyway, Rusk would try to straighten it out. And so Rusk went over to the White House . . . and offered his protection to McCloskey, and the next day he called McCloskey in and told him not to worry about it, that it would all take care of itself. So McCloskey remained at his job . . ."

And there was no official reprimand in his personnel file.

There are precedents of another kind, too. John Foster Dulles, for example. One of his first acts in office was to obtain the resignation of John Carter Vincent, a foreign service officer and China specialist under attack by Joseph McCarthy. It was in the era of recrimination over the "loss" of China. Dulles will never be forgotten for not protecting his men.

Kissinger's public reprimand to Atherton is being explained as necessary "because of the times." It all could have been handled quietly, it is said, had the press not been yapping at Kissinger's heels, accusing him of complaining of leaks—as from the Pike committee—that make him look bad,

had broken down and Kissinger's policy was a shambles. Kissinger told Atherton to cooperate in the enterprise. Contrary to some reports, Atherton and Sheehan were not long-time friends. They met only last year.

A close reading of the Sheehan piece shows that the only information for which Atherton could have been the source depicts Kissinger in a favorable light. The Israelis don't come out so well. Long a resident of the Arab world, Sheehan reports that the Israelis always "quibbled," that they had a "fixation" on legalisms, that Golda Meir had tantrums, while the Arabs, especially Egyptian President Sadat, never quibbled and appeared always decisive. Those of us who have heard Kissinger's own views would find these characterizations rather familiar. Even Kissinger's belief that the Israelis were out to destroy his step-by-step diplomacy—for a time—is reflected as accepted fact, without attribution.

According to Sheehan, Kissinger was never guilty of telling one thing to one side, another to the other. Even his reports on conversations by Presidents Nixon and Ford reveal that only Sadat was told that the United States thought Israel would have to withdraw to 1967 frontiers on the Egyptian side—not on the Syrian or Jordanian fronts, where there would have to be alterations. Anyone familiar with the Dec. 9, 1969, speech of William P. Rogers knows that this has been the Amer-

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ican position—stated publicly—for more than six years.

Sheehan does find some things to criticize in Kissinger's policy but overall he judges it correct, for he sees no other alternatives.

No one disputes the fact that Kissinger approved department cooperation with Sheehan. So Atherton, and others, talked to Sheehan, although it is said the author was never *shown* classified documents. Sheehan was also allowed to travel, for a time, on last year's August-September shuttle, despite the fact that those seats were strictly reserved for daily or weekly journalists and each place on that plane is personally approved by the Secretary. It became common knowledge that Kissinger was "helping" Sheehan—even to the point of putting in a good word for him with officials who might otherwise be reluctant to give him an interview. Still, officials at State—including Atherton—insist that Kissinger, once he had given "general" approval to helping Sheehan, never gave the project another thought.

Now Kissinger is reported to have been "thunderstruck" by what has appeared in the Sheehan article. It is apparent that the typography itself has caused a lot of the trouble. The quotations—Foreign Policy magazine which published the article calls them verbatim although the department denies this—are set off in indented type, making them look like excerpts from documents. If only they hadn't said they were quotes, Kissinger has been heard to lament.

In any case, the question is not what Sheehan did—any reporter has the right to seek information where he can, although a legitimate issue could be raised about whether a reporter should represent himself as sympathetic to the cause in order to get cooperation. Nor is there any question about what Atherton did.

But what about Kissinger? Even if we accept the contention that he was not involved in authorizing a leak, even if we accept Atherton's *mea culpa* that he misunderstood, or that he did not use proper judgment, could the Secretary of State have taken the responsibility for something that took place in his department on the grounds that his instructions may not have been clear enough? Isn't that what leaders do?

Why a "severe reprimand" to a man who was doing only what he thought was right—his motives have never been questioned—for the greater glorification of Henry Kissinger and for the office of the Secretary of State and for the foreign policy of the United States.

Acheson said each man has to act on his own in the light of his own standards, and his own principles. Acheson had no doubt about his own standards and principles. Neither does Atherton. Does Kissinger?