

A Singular Season of Unreality

So far, 1974 has been a charade. From San Clemente to Pennsylvania Avenue, political leaders, the press and sizable portions of the population have been playing one of the most remarkable games in American history.

The game is to make optimistic statements of near-normalcy in the White House and the nation, to print and broadcast them out of a sense of journalistic fairness, and then for some people, out of political loyalty and the fervent hope that believing will be father to fact, to act as if they believe them all.

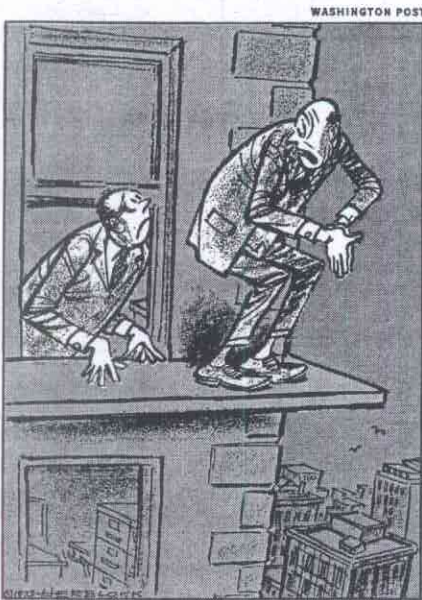
Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, dressed in his best diplomatic gray chalk-stripe, gathered White House reporters last week into a windowless room of the San Clemente complex, and in his outraged-uncle manner denounced the stories that he had become more powerful in foreign affairs than the President. "Totally incorrect," said Kissinger. A Secretary of State is an "agent of the President" or he is "nothing."

Almost every man and woman in the room knew differently. Kissinger's word, the coin of diplomacy, is accepted where Nixon's is not. Kissinger's presence is welcomed where the President's is not. One of the few props that still stands beneath

Nixon is Kissinger. The correspondents quite properly recorded and disseminated the Secretary's pronouncements. But almost all of them were also aware that Kissinger, while uttering technical truths, knew there was much more to the story. It was a genial bit of public fakery but mutual nondeception.

In Washington, Roy Ash, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, was busy at the same ploy. His account of the coming year sketched a productive curve hardly dented by the growing energy crisis and the massive threats of world recession. Again, as it should, the word went out. But the correspondents knew that the worries within the Administration were far more profound than Ash stated (and probably believed).

Presidential Aide Alexander Haig's declarations fit the script of unreality. He reported a President confident that history would vindicate him. He said that the office of the presidency had not been immobilized, that Nixon was not



"I just heard the White House is issuing another optimistic prediction."

despondent. His was the portrait of a man only moderately troubled, hardly diminished. The declarations were greeted with the tolerant disbelief that characterizes this singular season. Haig's responses are those of honor, deeply rooted in his West Point heritage; of a loyal and brave officer following his commander anywhere. The anguish and frustration are behind his eyes and his voice. Haig's account of White House life, while broadcast and printed, drifted off into the mythical world the White House has created.

But beyond all this there is a real world. The major event of 1974 for this nation may well be when the President and his Administration are forced out into that real world. There, the economy and the continuation of the traditional way of American life are not so promising. There, the rituals of inner Administration politics and the requirements of protocol do not blind one to Richard Nixon's leadership disaster.

The symbols of that reality were all around—lines at the gas pumps; Detroit cutting auto production; farmers worrying about fertilizer as they looked toward spring. In Washington's Federal City Club the other noon, one of Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski's men was hailed with a New Year's greeting. "Big January?" asked a friend, inquiring about the status of probable Watergate indictments. "Big February," came the reply.

Up on the Hill in the second floor of the former Congressional Hotel, John Doar, the new special counsel for the House's impeachment proceedings, worked as many as 20 hours a day. Rumpled and tousled, oblivious to other events, Doar pored through thousands of documents to catch up on the background of the Nixon case. He made literally hundreds of phone calls all over the country seeking ideas and help. ("What is an impeachable offense?") Somebody suggested Doar change his wilted shirt. He hardly heard. The work went on through New Year's Eve. When midnight came, Doar raised a glass of Coke to the new beginning, then went back to his papers and his phone.