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Secrets of State

By IRVING KRISTOL

It seems to be a fact, attested to by both history and contemporary experience, that the centralization of power tends to promote paranoia. Though one would think that the more powerful a leader or a government, the more tranquil and secure he (or it) would feel, the exact opposite is more often the case.

It was in the 16th and 17th Centuries, when the absolute monarchy was emerging from the wreckage of the feudal system, that the idea of *arcana imperii*—secrets of state, secrets of ruling—became most popular among ministers and courtiers. These "secrets" were, for the most part, either non-existent or insignificant. Nevertheless, it came to be thought that government itself was endangered unless its deliberations were shrouded in the utmost secrecy.

Thus, the proceedings of medieval British parliaments were fairly open affairs until screened from public inspection by Queen Elizabeth I and it was not until early in the 19th Century that parliamentary debates could be legally reported in the press—although it was obvious that anyone with an interest in finding out what was said, could easily have done so. Meanwhile, in the former American colonies, where government was weak and power decentralized, all such deliberations were public and excited very little attention.

In our own lifetime, we have seen a similar process at work. As the Stalinist dictatorship in Russia became more impregnable to internal dissent, it simultaneously became ever more pathologically suspicious, secretive, and repressive. A comparable development seems to have been taking place, over the past 15 years, in Maoist China. And in the United States, of course, various memoirs of the LBJ White House together with the Nixon-Watergate revelations have made it evident that, as the presidency became more "imperial" in its prerogatives, it also became more obsessively insecure, so that the problem of "leaks" was escalated from a minor embarrassment to a major threat to government itself.

An inevitable counterpart to the paranoid emphasis by powerful governments on "secrets of state" is the no less paranoid excitement among "outsiders"—and here one means journalists, for the most part—about the importance of "exposing" such secrets. In 18th-Century England, the press was full of stories about the Machiavellian machinations of various political "cabals" in government—stories which were likely to be fictional precisely to the degree that they were sensational. And, more recently, "Kremlinology" was for many years a thriving profession, as analysts tried to determine, from the most evanescent of clues, what Soviet leaders were *really* thinking about foreign policy and what was *really* going on inside the "inner circles" of the regime. This industry is now in recession, as it has become apparent that a solid knowledge of Russian and Communist history, a reading of public speeches and texts, the observation of Soviet actions, and frequent glances at the map are quite sufficient guidance as to what the Soviet government is "really" up to.

On the Potomac

But, though "Kremlinology" is now less popular than it was, something which we might call "Washingtonology" is booming. What used to be political gossip has been elevated to the status of political information, ardently pursued and publicly masticated to the last juicy drop. What used to be idle, if interesting, speculation has now become solemn and portentous theorizing. The expose, even of irrelevant trivia, inflames the journalistic imagination. John Mitchell's bank accounts were made public last week by a New York magazine, to no purpose other than to "expose" what had hitherto been thought to be properly private. And the publication of secret government documents has become the kind of journalistic enterprise which wins Pulitzer Prizes—though it is not at all clear what professional skills or talents are being so rewarded.

But, as with "Kremlinology," the discoveries of "Washingtonology," if titillating, are rarely substantial. Though the impression is widespread, especially among those who have never read them, that the Pentagon Papers made important revelations about the conduct of the Vietnam war, this is not really the case. The most breathtaking of such supposed revelations—e.g., that the Tonkin Bay incident was "staged" and phony—are not in fact to be found in the Pentagon Papers at all. (Indeed, in this particular instance, the "revelation" is refuted by the texts.) And anyone who had been reading the newspapers did not find, after the Pentagon Papers were published, that he had any need to revise his judgments as to what was going on, how, or why. Similarly, the publication of that notorious National Security memorandum which showed that Kissinger favored an American "tilt" toward Pakistan, during the Indian-Pakistan war, told us nothing we did not already know from watching the behavior of the U.S. government during this crisis. Moreover, simply reading the newspapers told us *more* than the memorandum revealed, since one knew—what the memo was silent on—*why* this "tilt" was occurring, i.e., because of the conditions of our negotiations with China.

The Watergate scandal was one of those instances when there really was a "secret of state"—the existence and operations of "the plumbers"—and when it really was exposed. But such cases of official conspiracy are extremely rare, and their exposure is even rarer. (What would we know about Watergate without the tapes? And how often are conspirators so obliging?) Just as extreme cases make for bad law, so the obsessive interpretation of political reality in terms of Watergate—of secrets of state and their exposure—makes for bad journalism.

Indeed, this obsession with penetrating the veil of government secrecy even when the veil is transparent to the casual eye can attain ludicrous dimensions. I recall speaking to a senior editor of a major newspaper at a time shortly after President Nixon and George Meany had had a weekend meeting on price and wage controls. He expressed great annoyance that he, and the press in general, did not know "what had happened" at that meeting. I expressed surprise, and affirmed that I knew precisely what had happened at that meeting, since it was obvious from their subsequent statements and actions. He peremptorily dismissed this rejoinder with the remark that what he wanted to know was the details of their conversations. In other words, he thought he was interested in news but was really interested in gossip. As a consequence, he thought he knew less than he in fact knew.

And this is the important point: one of the dangers of "Washingtonology" is that all of us are so easily seduced into ignoring what is clearly visible on the surface in order to speculate darkly as to what mysteries lie at the heart of things. The conduct of American foreign policy by Henry Kissinger seems to me to provide an excellent illustration of this danger.

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order to understand American foreign policy, you have to understand Kissinger. This had led in turn to a flood of gossip, rumor, and amateur psychoanalysis. ("That lust for the secret and shady obviously feeds Mr. Kissinger's delight in the pride of power," a recent magazine editorial pontificated.)But that is, of course, exactly the wrong way to look at or think about political matters. Henry Kissinger is neither Superman nor Machiavelli. It is senseless to explain American foreign policy in terms of Kissinger. What does make sense, but is rarely attempted, is to explain Kissinger in terms of American foreign policy. When that is attempted, all those mysteries about what Henry Kissinger is really up to dissolve like the mists of morning.

No Consensus

For the plain fact is that Henry Kissinger is Secretary of State of a world power that has no foreign policy at all—which, indeed, *cannot* have a foreign policy because, after Vietnam, there exists no consensus of public or congressional opinion on the fundamentals of any such policy. There is no consensus as to our relations with NATO. (Is NATO worth the stationing of 300,000 American troops in Europe?) There is no consensus as to our posture vis-a-vis the oil-producing nations. (Should it be threatening or conciliatory?) There is no consensus as to our attitude toward Russia. (Cold war or detente?) There is not even any consensus as to whether we wish to remain a military power of the first magnitude.

And once these quite obvious features of the American condition are realized, Kissinger ceases to be any kind of a riddle. He is busy substituting himself—his dynamism, his articulateness, his negotiating skills, his intellectual powers—for a foreign policy that does not exist. In short, he is maintaining an American great-power presence in the world at a time when his countrymen are divided and unsure as to whether there should even be such a presence, and most certainly as to what its purpose might be. He cannot say this, of course, but there can be little doubt that he is fully aware of it. (He would have to be exceedingly stupid not to be aware of it—and though Mr. Kissinger has been accused of many things, stupidity is not one of them.) But our journalists and pundits seem not to be aware of it—precisely because their attention is so passionately focused on "demystifying" Kissinger rather than on understanding American foreign policy. In a way, this is a tribute to the brilliance with which Secretary Kissinger has carried out his grand maneuver; diverting attention to himself, and away from the muddle of our foreign policy, is his sovereign intention. But it is no kind of tribute to American journalism that his sleight-of-hand should be so successful.

Men in power like to think that there are important "secrets of state," since that adds glamor to power. Journalists like to think so too, since that adds glamor to the exposure of what the powerful are up to. This peculiar relationship between government and press—an adversary relationship that is also parasitic—has its costs. For one thing, it tends to spread the impression that government knows a lot more about what is happening in the world than we, the people do—whereas the truth is that government will frequently know less. For another, it inclines us all to think that we know less about what our government is up to than, in fact, we do know. And these two impressions combine to make it appear that democratic self-government is little more than a solemn farce, and that our very capacity for self-government is questionable. A democracy has enough serious problems without demeaning itself, unnecessarily, in this way.

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