Joseph Alsop

Understanding Henry Kissinger

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The fact may be denied, but it is still remarkably interesting and instructive. The fact is that the Secretary of State of the United States gravely doubts the long-term power of survival of the American society that he now serves so well.

"As an historian," he has more than once said in relaxed moments, "you would now have to predict that our kind of society would very probably not last much longer. But if you are an official, you have no such freedom. You just have to do the best you can."

This profound inner pessimism combined with an extraordinary drive to "do the best he can" are the real keys to Dr. Henry A. Kissinger. Few persons really understand him, simply because they do not understand what somberness underlies the fairly dazzling surface of tireless energy and lucid analysis, swift action and rueful wit.

Yet if you have merely followed recent events with care — in which case you are an odd-man-out in Washington at the moment — you ought to find Henry Kissinger's pessimism entirely justified. Consider, for instance, the true story of the non-visit to Cairo by Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev.

Some time ago Brezhnev's state visit to Egypt on Jan. 15 was formally announced. At that time there seemed to be no doubt at all that the visit would take place. By the same token there was also no doubt at all that, if Brezhnev went to Cairo, the automatic sequel would be an enormous new flow of Soviet arms to Egypt.

There was every reason to believe, too, that the Israeli government had consequently reached a conditional decision of extreme gravity. By all the signs the decision was to launch a preemptive war, if and when more Soviet arms for the Egyptians threatened to tilt the Middle East balance too far against Israel.

In December, therefore, in an interview marking my retirement as a regular columnist, Preident Ford frankly told me that he put the chances of soon-renewed Middle Eastern war above 70 per cent. Moreover, it is nonsensical to suppose that this fearful chain reaction of disaster was averted by the failing health of General Secretary Brezhnev.

If health had been the real problem Brezhnev could have gone to Cairo a bit later; or he could have sent Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny or Defense Minister Andrei Grechko or some other deputy. It is certain, in fact, that the true problem was the refusal of Egypt's remarkable President Anwar Sadat to pay for more Soviet arms by giving the Kremlin a degree of control over Egyptian policy.

In justice, it should be pointed out that the foregoing proved the singularly long-headed calculation which so often lies behind what most people mistake for Henry Kissinger's continuous improvisation of policy. I can remember thinking he was more than mildly paranoid in 1972 when he confided to me that he aimed to change the Soviet-Egyptian relationship quite radically because there was "no other way" to a Middle Eastern settlement. Yet he fully attained this aim.

Last autumn, under pressure from his hotheads, President Sadat invited General Secretary Brezhnev to Cairo because he wanted more Soviet arms, but he still did not want to go back to the former relationship. When the sticking point came with the Soviets, Sadat therefore chose to bet once again, with some boldness, on the Kissinger-offered alternative of progress by negotiation. For these reasons, if we have no Middle Eastern war this spring or summer, the merciful respite will be quite largely owed to the strange pessimist-activist heading the State Department.

All the same, the brush with disaster was still most horribly close, as you can see from President Ford's reasonable estimate of heavy odds in favor of war before the recent and unexpected turn of events. The truth is that the historical process, always dangerous to weak, unwary and self-indulgent nations, has grown much, much more dangerous in our grisly century. And

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Joseph Alsop, who until the first of the year wrote a syndicated column that appeared on the opposite page three times a week, will now be writing a syndicated monthly column. This is the first of Mr. Alsop's new columns. They will appear regularly in this space.

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this is one source of Henry Kissinger's inner pessimism.

The most obvious cause of the increase of danger is the existence of the hideous new weapons. But there are other causes, too. There is the grim new raw-material problem that the energy crisis has revealed. There is the new food and population problem that seems to be rapidly ripening into horror. Above all, there is the ever more intimate interlinking of all parts of the world, so that peril anywhere, nowadays, can too easily become peril everywhere — which was just what promised to happen in the Middle East as long as Leonid Brezhnev was still slated to go to Cairo.

All these are novel historical factors. In the second half of the 20th century, they have created a wholly novel historical situation. For Americans, moreover, this new situation has a central characteristic that is both awe inspiring and regrettable. Among the free nations, in brief, only this country still has the power, the resources, the remaining energies to cope with all the risks and problems and complexities of the historical situation that now confronts us.

Right here, however, one encounters the second source of the Kissinger pessimism. He is also, he is above all, worried about what has been happening to American society. The collapse of anything resembling an American "establishment"; the increasing weakness of vital American institutions; the difficulty of governing America in its present mood and state — all these are constantly repeated concerns of the Secretary of State.

If you think about it a little, the foregoing explains the grim above-quoted summary that Henry Kissinger has more than once offered to his friends. No historian in his senses, after all, would predict the long-term survival of a society carrying immense burdens in a cruelly dangerous time when that society's sense of direction and willingness to carry burdens were both quite rapidly declining.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Henry Kissinger is by no means alone in this inner pessimism, which so strikingly underlies his highly effective activism. The first time that I heard a comparable view voiced by a highly placed and responsible man was in the golden years of President Kennedy. My own hopes were still very high in those days; and I was downright shocked when Robert McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, freely told a friendly gathering that he questioned whether any democratically organized society like ours could ultimately meet the challenges of our era.

At the time I wrote off McNamara's questioning as the aberration of a great technocrat and manager who had little political experience. Since then I have learned better. There was in truth a kind of divide about a decade ago. From that time onward, more and more of the thoughtful key men in the U.S. government have come to share this inner pessimism.

I think now that, if a secret poll were taken of the most admired officials having to do with this country's dealings with the rest of the world, an actual majority would prove to be pessimists about the American future. And here, mind you, I am not even speaking of the kind of economic, monetary and financial difficulties that have suddenly begun to loom almost as large as they did in the '30s, when I first went to work.

Sometimes, indeed, I half-wonder whether Henry Kissinger the activist—the virtuoso manager of our foreign relations—is not a mixed blessing for us. He has so often managed to make great dangers seem undangerous that we take it all for granted—as almost everyone did in the case of the Brezhnev non-visit to Cairo. But one must still pray his virtuosity does not run out.

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