

Anthony Lewis

Henry Kissinger's Symbol of Manhood

WHY IS HENRY KISSINGER so determined to hold back the process of political change and accommodation in South Vietnam — a process that even right-wing Vietnamese want to begin?

The answer goes back to the winter of 1969, when Kissinger came to Washington as President Nixon's assistant. One of the first things he did was to discuss Vietnam in a series of secret meetings with the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin. Marvin and Bernard Kalb disclose the meetings in their book, "Kissinger," and report that Kissinger made "veiled threats" of tough measures against North Vietnam. But they do not indicate how tough.



Kissinger told Dobrynin that the Nixon Administration would not hesitate to destroy North Vietnam if necessary — necessary to preserve a non-Communist government in Saigon. He made clear that this was a basic American price for detente: the Soviets would be expected to help achieve a Vietnam settlement leaving the Saigon government in power, or at least to tolerate whatever measures the Americans used.

The Russians implicitly accepted that price. They were unsuccessful in bringing pressure on Hanoi for a settlement agreeable to Kissinger. But they did tolerate the roughest American measures of military escalation, the expansion of the war into Cambodia, the mining of Haiphong, the bombing of Hanoi.

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THAT BACKGROUND MAKES CLEAR why the maintenance of a staunchly anti-Communist government in Saigon — and in Phnom Penh — matters so much to the secretary of state. He has made it a symbol of manhood in his diplomacy. If we permit a change that we told the Russians we would never permit, he reasons, they will not take us seriously on any issue.

The Kissinger position has little to do with the wishes of the Vietnamese or the Cambodians.

This commitment to a particular outcome in Vietnam and Cambodia — an outcome attainable only by perpetual war — also conflicts with the image of himself that Kissinger conveyed over the years to people who opposed the war.

And Kissinger took the decision to make Vietnam his symbol of strength without consulting Congress — or even informing it of his true thinking.

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HE COMPLAINS ABOUT legislation restricting his freedom of action. But Congress has obviously been driven to that by its feeling that this secretary of state, more than any in memory, secretly commits the country to doubtful propositions. Even when Congress does set guidelines, he is adept at slithering past them. If a law limits the use of Air Force planes and personnel in Cambodia, then next thing you know planes have been "chartered" through a private company — without charge.

The great mystery is why Henry Kissinger, with all the important things he had and has to do for this country, chose to make a symbol of Vietnam, that graveyard of reputations. In any event, the time has come for Congress to see that American civilization is not symbolized by endless war in Indochina.

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