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Victor Zorza

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Kissinger's Resignation 'Threats'

Recent reports about his possible resignation, Dr. Kissinger says, are really a "permanent" story which appears every year—but he also explains that the length of his service should depend on the period during which he "can be useful." Some of his congressional critics take even this remark as a threat of resignation, as a warning that if they keep making it difficult for him to be "useful," he will go.

They regard this as blackmail, designed to extract from Congress the funds it has denied him—whether for credits to Russia, aid to Turkey, arms for Cambodia and Vietnam. Kissinger certainly maintains that without such funds his foreign policy cannot be fully effective. His critics retort that his threat of resignation is itself a tool of policy, and they point to his frequent use of it as recounted in a new book which is rapidly becoming the talk of Washington.

"When do you think I should leave," Kissinger asked William Safire, the Nixon speech-writer whose book on the pre-Watergate White House, "Before the Fall," is being studied by political analysts for old clues to new puzzles. He had been repeatedly deserted by the White House staff, Kissinger complained, and now they were again plotting against him. "I've been on the high wire doing a somersault for four years now, and I'd like to get out before I break my neck."

To the rest of the world, this might have seemed to be the moment of Kissinger's greatest triumph—the day the Vietnam peace agreement was signed. But just then he was telling White House insiders that he was giving himself only another six months in office. Why? Kissinger told Safire that "his esteemed colleagues were attempting to do him in." He was using Safire, to pass back the message that he would rather resign than put up with the Haldeman-inspired plot.

On another occasion, "furious at what he regarded as a State Department plot to get him," he summoned Safire to tell him: "You and Haldeman don't think I'm serious about it, but I mean it. . . . I cannot stay under these circumstances." The message this time was that "if Rogers doesn't knuckle under, I'll go." The matter was smoothed over, and he didn't go—then, or on the other occasions when he used the resignation threat.

Kissinger, Safire maintains, jockeyed for power and used everyone he could to suit his ends. His power was an amalgam of the reach of his mind, and the power bestowed upon him by the President, "and to lose even the appearance of power" weakened his ability to perform. In many ways the power struggles Safire describes are reminiscent of Kremlin—or Byzantine—politics. Safire intends this as a condemnation of Kissinger, but to the extent his description is true, it is primarily a condemnation of the system.

Where Safire's book will prove particularly useful to some students of political analysis is in showing how the tools of Kremlinology are applicable to Washington. In Moscow the absence of a Kremlin "insider" comparable to Safire from certain public occasions would immediately be noted as politically significant. In Washington, Safire's absence from Tricia Nixon's wedding was noted in the society pages of the papers. In fact, this was the time when Nixon was displeased with the "liberal" political advice pressed on him by Safire and Leonard Garment, the White House moderate, and was making his displeasure known by "freezing" them out of his presence as well as Tricia's wedding.

Kremlinology works because the Communist leaders control not only what the press says, but how it says it. When Nixon was in Peking, a girl came up to Prime Minister Chou En-lai, handed him the galleys of the next day's newspapers—"and there he was, rearranging the front page," Rogers recalled later. "I'd like," Nixon commented, "to rearrange a front page now and then." He couldn't quite do that—but he could provide other Washingtonological clues.

He signalled his readiness for a rapprochement with China by a subtle nuance in his first State-of-the-World message, but he was confident that the press would miss it, because it is "quite unsophisticated" and "picks up only the hot news." He was right then—but more and more news analysts find themselves applying the tools of Kremlinology to the Washington scene.

When words are used as carefully as Kissinger uses them, whether to draw up a State-of-the-World message, or to deny any intention of resigning—while hinting that he might do just that if his "usefulness" is damaged by his foes—public statements may sometimes reveal more than the private confidences of leading officials.

Safire's book provides invaluable insights into the workings of the Nixon White House, and into the way it used words. A master word-smith himself, he offers a key to those who want to learn to read between the lines of any administration's statements—so long as it is an administration that weighs its words.

But for those who seek a broader understanding of how Safire's accounts of foreign policy moves fit into the framework of decision-making, there is a necessary companion book in Morton Halperin's "Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy," recently published by the Brookings Institution. Safire believes that Kissinger is responsible for the wiretap placed on his telephone, and concedes that this "colors what I write about Kissinger."

He sees Kissinger as a "marionette" of Nixon's. To Halperin, the President almost always determines the general direction, but he does not act alone. The "rule of the game" which Halperin has distilled from all the available records of the post-war Presidents' relations with their advisers provide a modern Machiavelian handbook on political manipulation.

No President who wants to control his adviser, and no adviser who wants to influence his President, can fail to read this book. But those who want to understand how the great decisions affecting foreign policy are made in Washington, under any administration, will find in Halperin a guide to the conflicting interests, and to the interplay of forces, which has something to teach us about bureaucratic politics everywhere—even in the Kremlin.

The notion that the President can simply order compliance with his foreign policy and expect his officials to abide by it is shown by Halperin to be a myth. He has to urge, persuade, cajole, manipulate. This is a lesson that Moscow must learn, just as Washington must learn that an order from Brezhnev does not necessarily mean that the bureaucrats will carry out the policy—although they might pretend to do so, in both countries.

An assessment of Kissinger's grand design will have to await the judgment of history, but there is no doubt that, measured against the yardstick of Halperin's book, he has bent the bureaucracy to his will—or to his President's will—more successfully, more effectively, than anyone who had ever attempted a similar task. At the same time he has accomplished a virtual revolution in American foreign policy. The hostility and the bitterness which all this was bound to arouse, the plots and counterplots, the intrigues and power struggles may yet lead to his fall, especially when they are combined with the growing challenge to the political concepts underlying his actions.

His struggles with Rogers, he told Safire, were "like the Arabs and the Israelis. I'll win all the battles, and he'll win the war. He only has to beat me once." One wrong step, he said on another occasion, and he was finished—all the vultures would eat him up. Or would they? Kissinger is given to moods of black despair about the world, as well as himself, but he is still here—and Rogers isn't.

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