

Donald Rumsfeld's Dangerous Game

Only marginally shrouded by President Ford's conspicuous public success on his European trip in asserting his own dominance over U.S. foreign policy, the backstage maneuvering to reduce Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's stellar role is now reaching a crescendo of its own.

Its impact on Kissinger himself is beyond dispute. When he first read an authoritative dispatch to *The New York Times* on May 28, Kissinger, about to start a meeting in Paris of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), was white-knuckled with anger. That dispatch from Washington stated that the President was "reducing" his reliance on Kissinger and that Kissinger was losing his near-total "grip" on the nation's foreign policy.

Subsequent stories during Mr. Ford's European journey embroidered the theme. High-level administration officials, both inside and beyond the White House, are convinced that the source of much of this backstage, highly-authoritative leaking was Donald Rumsfeld, 42-year-old chief of the White House staff.

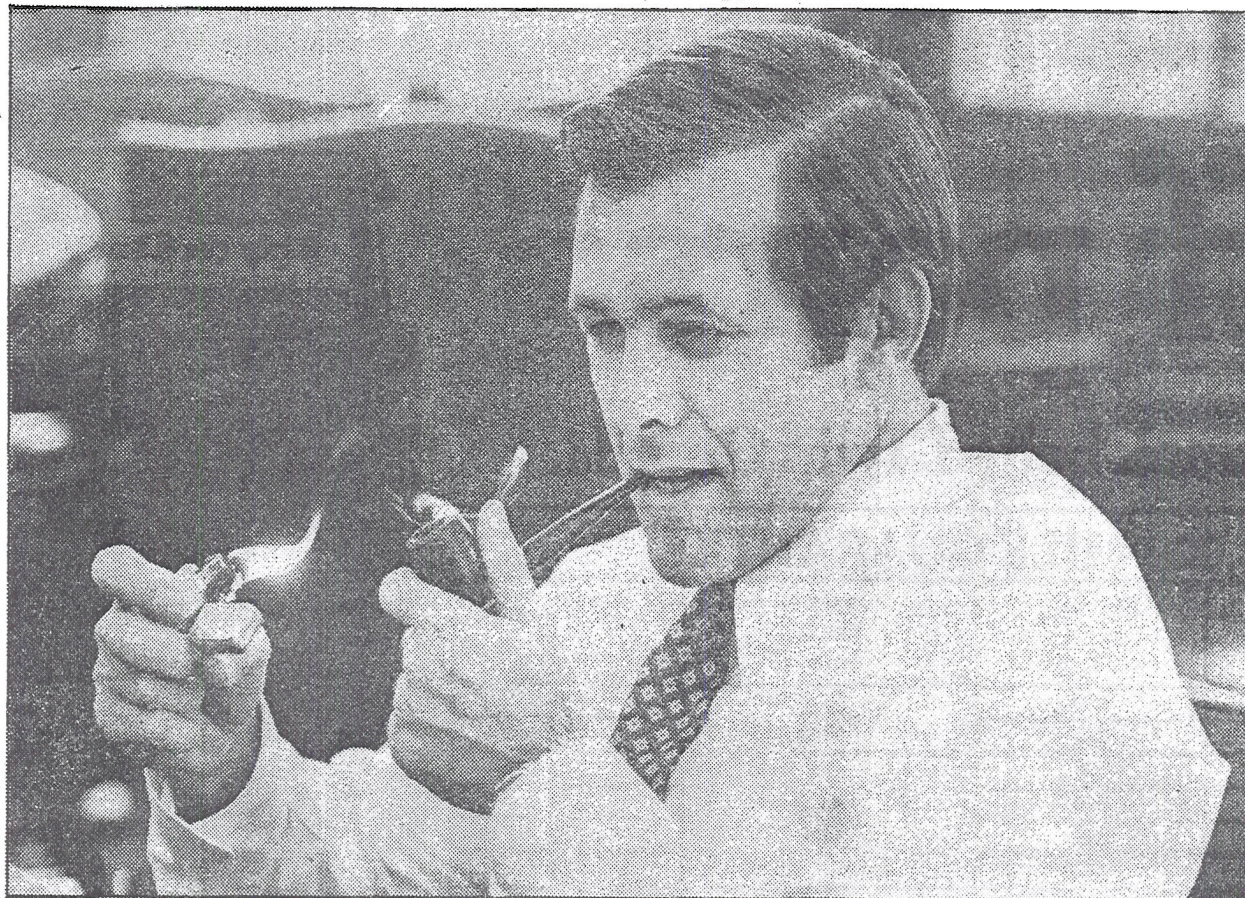
It would not be the first time that Rumsfeld, who returned there eight months ago from his post as U.S. ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to organize Mr. Ford's White House staff, has demonstrated a taste for backstage power-brokering. Nor are Rumsfeld critics certain that his motives are all that suspect.

"Rummy plays hard ball," said one such critic. "But he's got the President's best interests at heart—as well as his own."

The most conspicuous White House-engineered pressure against top Cabinet member prior to the current moves against Kissinger came last winter against Secretary of the Treasury William Simon. Leaks from well-placed White House sources greased the resignation skids for Simon at a time when Simon was the most loquacious and conservative holdout against the administration's anti-recession budget deficits.

At the time, Treasury Department operatives were convinced that the source of the anti-Simon barrage was Roy Ash, then head of the office of management and budget (OMB). These same operatives, however, are now convinced that it was Don Rumsfeld, not Ash, who was hurling the anti-Simon thunderbolts.

Even before that, moreover, top aides of Secretary of Defense James



By Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post

Schlesinger privately complained that Rumsfeld, partly because Schlesinger had upstaged him at earlier NATO meetings in Brussels, was conducting a low-decibel campaign against the Defense Secretary. As with Simon, nothing happened, although muted White House criticism of Schlesinger continues.

The hardest-fought Rumsfeld campaign, however, came not against any Nixon-holdover Cabinet member but against Vice President Nelson Rockefeller. The issue was whether the President should permit Rockefeller to name his own staffers to run the Domestic Council.

Rumsfeld fought a hard but losing battle on that one, and his reasons were both sound and carefully considered: If the Vice President as chairman of the Domestic Council could control its top staff, he would command its operations, and such command might conceivably become a heavy political liability for the President. Mr. Ford, however, sided with

Rockefeller—and Rumsfeld made his displeasure known subsequently by returning an early draft of a Domestic Council working paper to director James Cannon with a caustic order that it be redrafted.

The downgrading of Kissinger, however, moves Rumsfeld into far more dangerous waters. Kissinger is a proven master at the art of bureaucratic in-fighting. He easily surmounted and survived two earlier flanking attacks on his power:

First, when Rumsfeld and other White House political aides failed to persuade the President to disengage himself from the Vietnam debacle in his state-of-the-world speech to Congress on April 10; and second, when reports leaked from the White House press office (obviously with Rumsfeld's personal approval) that Kissinger should give up his second hat as head of the National Security Council fell flat.

Some Rumsfeld critics take the conspiratorial view of these torpedo

attacks by the President's youthful and ambitious White House staff chief. Rumsfeld, they say, yearns to be Secretary of the Treasury, Secretary of Defense, chief of the National Security Council or even Secretary of State. These critics point to the gaudy personal publicity that has been coming Rumsfeld's way: the Merv Griffin Show; an ABC television show on the "President's right-hand-man"; a Washington Post series on the "second most powerful" man in Washington; the cover of last Sunday's Parade magazine, to name a few.

But others see a loftier Rumsfeld target: to make Gerald Ford come alive as complete master of his own administration—in short, as President in fact as well as name.

Whatever the rationale, Rumsfeld is now taking high risks with his torpedoes aimed at Kissinger. Firing torpedoes is not President Ford's style, a fact that Kissinger himself will soon make full use of.

©1975, Field Enterprises, Inc.