

WXPost
George F. Will NOV 5 1975

Dampening Dissent...

The firing of Defense Secretary James Schlesinger was a foolish thing done in a foolish way.

Gerald Ford, the itinerant incumbent, has seemed less than presidential recently. He certainly did not seem presidential when he remained silent while newsmen notified a distinguished public servant that Mr. Ford fired him. And he will not seem presidential as long as he seems subservient to the desires of Secretary of State Kissinger.

The fact that Donald Rumsfeld, who sits at Mr. Ford's right hand, got Schlesinger's job indicates that the firing was, to a certain extent, a routine exercise in Washington careerism. Rumsfeld is more gifted than Schlesinger was as a Washington operator, but the real winner is Kissinger. The firing virtually completes the purge from the executive branch of those who dissent from Kissinger policies.

Schlesinger was the most distinguished Defense Secretary since George Marshall. Reflective, and with scholarly achievements more distinguished than Kissinger's, he was the most senior official capable of contesting with Kissinger in the policymaking process.

That probably is why he was fired. There is every reason to believe that Kissinger wanted Schlesinger out, and there is no reason to believe that Mr. Ford has independent views—*independent of Kissinger*—about matters touching foreign policy.

Schlesinger believes what, according to recent polls, most Americans believe. He believes that the Soviet Union is benefiting more than is the United States from the policy of detente as conceived, formulated and administered single-handedly by Kissinger.

There is an absurd rumor that Schlesinger was fired because he was insufficiently skillful in handling Congress. If that were a reason for firing Cabinet officers, Kissinger would have been fired for his mishandling of the problem of aid for Turkey.

And there is breathtaking cynicism in linking Schlesinger's dismissal with meaningless removal of Kissinger as head of the National Security Council, and the replacement of him by his obedient servant, Gen. Brent Scowcroft. Only politicians at the highest levels of our

government are cynical enough to believe that people will be taken in by this transparent ruse. It is an attempt to make Kissinger seem to be sacrificing something, while actually he is sacrificing nothing.

No one should be surprised by this latest evidence of Mr. Ford's passive acceptance of Kissinger's desires. Mr. Ford came to office at a moment when the public was extraordinarily skeptical about politicians. He was not accompanied into office by a reputation for pronounced views, distinguished or otherwise, on foreign policy.

A series of accidents have landed Mr. Ford in a position higher than any to which he ever aspired, higher than any to which even his most warm admirers recommended him. Regarding foreign policy, he is adrift on a stormy sea he never asked to sail, and he is clinging to Kissinger the way a queasy tourist clings to the rail of a cruise ship.

The night Richard Nixon resigned, about 14 hours before Mr. Ford was sworn in, Mr. Ford came out in front of his suburban Virginia home to say a few words to the watching world. His most obviously heartfelt words were that Kissinger had agreed to stay aboard. Mr. Ford has done everything possible to make life pleasant aboard.

But Mr. Ford and the nation will pay a price for protecting Kissinger from the competition of men of Schlesinger's stature.

The removal of Schlesinger will alarm our NATO allies who by and large trusted him and who by and large trust Kissinger rather less. It also will confirm both the Soviet Union and China in their not unreasonable beliefs that the U.S. is still willing to sacrifice a lot on the altar of Soviet good humor.

Regarding domestic politics, the firing is the latest in a long series of blunders that have caused Ronald Reagan to doubt that Mr. Ford is competent to be President, or even to secure the nomination. It is well to remember that the series of blunders began last summer when Kissinger instructed Mr. Ford, in the interest of Soviet good humor, to snub Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Kissinger is one of Washington's most gifted survivors. Mr. Ford may not be.