

Schlesinger: Intolerable Dissent

The terminal disagreement over budget policy between Gerald R. Ford and James R. Schlesinger not only reflected underlying incompatibility but stripped bare some harsh realities about this President and his administration.

As Secretary of Defense, Schlesinger simply refused to rubber-stamp deep military spending cuts essential to President Ford's political package of tax and budget reductions. That he should place his highly-informed view of national security above Mr. Ford's political imperatives was intolerable to the President.

But that was only the last straw. Equally intolerable were Schlesinger's prickly insistence on dissent, his semi-public airings of disagreements, his lack of congressional cloakroom good-ole-boy conviviality, his refusal to be a team player.

When repeatedly asked at Monday night's press conference why he had summarily fired perhaps the nation's best qualified and best-performing Secretary of Defense, Mr. Ford refused his reasons. Thus, both the prelude and aftermath of Schlesinger's sacking suggest that the Ford White House, which advertises openness and candor, closely resembles the Nixon White House in abhorring dissent and diversity.

Schlesinger's rumpled appearance and superior professorial tone displeased Mr. Ford even in his congressional days. But while the White House has been spreading the story that Schlesinger was doomed by poor congressional relations, the truth is that probably nobody in the Ford administration stands higher with Congress. Schlesinger's problem was not getting along with Congress but getting along with Jerry Ford.

Schlesinger's sardonic humor did not entrance the President. A high-level defense lobbyist, viewing Schlesinger as the best Defense Secretary he had seen in two decades, calls him "arrogant, abrasive, a cold fish." That Mr. Ford let the latter defects outweigh the former qualities may reflect the congressional mind's emphasis on congeniality.

But Mr. Ford might have tolerated



Schlesinger's uncongeniality had he kept his views to himself. That the Secretary of Defense should suggest the President's detente policy—as structured by Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger—was less than perfect was no more tolerable to Mr. Ford than it would have been to Richard M. Nixon.

Even last Saturday after the President decided to sack Schlesinger (but had not informed him), senior White House aides accused Schlesinger of leaking to the press disagreements with Kissinger over European defense deployments; in fact, he had leaked nothing and so informed the White House. But to the White House, Schlesinger was incorrigible in publicly debating high policy better kept behind closed doors.

The final straw did not involve Schlesinger's serious objections to detente policy but, ironically, support for Gerald Ford's old congressional speciality: strong national preparedness.

Under constant attack from the Kremlin and American liberals for his insistence on

adequate defense, Schlesinger was ill-prepared for the White House request that he slash \$7 billion in defense as part of the President's \$28 billion tax-budget reduction. Although this mirage-like package is an election-year gimmick that will never be enacted, Schlesinger feared voluntarily cutting back Pentagon spending would have long implications. So, he said, he would not do it.

Schlesinger was outraged that Budget Director James Lynn wanted \$7 billion out of the defense budget for the next fiscal year below the level already set by Congress. To Schlesinger (an ex-budget bureau official himself), Lynn is the most politically oriented Budget Director in memory and dedicated only to Mr. Ford's election. So, to appeal over his head, Schlesinger asked for an appointment with the President last Saturday.

If Lynn's Pentagon slash were approved, Schlesinger told the President that morning, he could not support it in Congress. Mr. Ford had already decided to fire him but gave no such indication to



Schlesinger, who mistakenly thought he had convinced the President and departed from the White House in what an associate called "a buoyant mood."

If a defense expert with Dr. Schlesinger's credentials felt the cut endangers national security, why did the President neither dispute him nor accept his argument? Is the answer that Mr. Ford simply wanted to install faithful presidential aide Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense, guaranteeing no interference with election plans? That suspicion was heightened by the President at his press conference. Defending Rumsfeld's specific qualification to be Defense Secretary, Mr. Ford cited his experience as a "naval aviator."

The President clearly was not interested in military or management qualifications, but in the fact that Rumsfeld was one of "my guys." Schlesinger, whose combination of high intelligence and character is extraordinary in the Ford administration, never could meet that cloakroom standard.

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