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Background Blues

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Dec. 15—Dr. Henry Kissinger can get into and out of China in high secrecy, but lately he can't seem to give a backgrounder without having his cover blown. Maybe he ought to draw the conclusion that he and what he usually has to say are too big to hide.

Last week Dr. Kissinger summoned the Washington press and filled them in on the Nixon Administration's inner thoughts about the India-Pakistan war. The subsequent stories, according to White House rules, were attributed to vague spooks and goblins known as "high Administration sources" or "White House officials" or "informed sources." But when a transcript of the session fell into the hands of Senator Barry Goldwater—who is himself as candid as anyone in Washington—he had it reprinted in the Congressional Record, apparently to Dr. Kissinger's chagrin.

Nevertheless, Dr. Kissinger tried again on the way to Washington from Mr. Nixon's Azores meeting with President Pompidou. The doctor sat down with a small "pool" of reporters who had been permitted aboard the Presidential plane to represent colleagues who were flying in a separate press plane. He proceeded on a "background" basis, to be attributed only to those same spooky "officials," to discuss the Azores conference. Then he went into "deep background" to say that if the Soviet Union did not begin to restrain the Indians in their war with Pakistan, "the entire United States-Soviet relationship might well be re-examined" and "a new look might have to be taken at the President's summitry plans."

"Deep background" is a further refinement of "background" in which—as the Washington press well understands—the information given out is not supposed to be attributed to anyone and must be written as if from the reporter's own independent knowledge.

In this instance, The Washington Post, asserting that its White House reporter had not been in the pool but that the identity of the background official had been learned "independently," attributed the whole story to Dr. Kissinger; The New York Times in its late editions did the same thing.

This has brought the White House down on the press like the Indians on Dacca, but a good share of the blame has to go to Dr. Kissinger and his boss. It is true that "background" and even "deep background" are sometimes useful, to press, public and Administration alike; obviously, there are times when certain information ought

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to be published but to identify the source of it would be embarrassing or prejudicial or troublesome in some other way.

But a high official threat to reassess Soviet-American relations is not one of those times. That is a matter of major importance. If Dr. Kissinger did not mean to make such a threat, he had no business being in a position where his words could be so interpreted; if he did mean it, the precise position of the Administration should have been stated in some unmistakable fashion.

Worse, if Dr. Kissinger only wanted the Russians to think he meant to make such a threat, he was misusing the American press as a Government messenger boy and misleading the public. As it happens, the White House now is pulling back from the story, but that only leaves the episode to be interpreted any way one chooses.

The carelessness of this whole procedure was compounded by the fact that the pool reporters' notes, clearly identifying Dr. Kissinger and approved by him, were typed, reproduced and handed out wholesale to the press plane reporters. It is one thing when a high official talks privately to a single reporter, making sure he understands what is intended; it may still be acceptable if he talks to a group directly; but it is risky indeed when he discusses matters of major international significance with pool representatives who are then supposed to relay the word to another group.

That raises astronomically the odds that someone will misunderstand what was intended to be said; for instance, the quotations above are from the pool reporters' notes of what Dr. Kissinger said, not from a verbatim record. Anyone who has had to rely on someone else's notes knows that they can easily be misinterpreted, even if they are accurate.

Finally, if what Dr. Kissinger purportedly said to the press pool for relay to the press plane had been contained in an official Government document, it would surely have borne a high security stamp. Yet, here was the President's highest-ranking national security aide passing such information to the press. What more confirmation is needed of the contention of The New York Times and other newspapers in the Pentagon Papers case that the Government itself hands out all sorts of security information, on any occasion when to do so serves the Government's political interests?

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HENRY KISSINGER
Cover blown