

Joseph Alsop

# Surprises in Store at State

Henry A. Kissinger's appointment to lead the State Department has been discussed in every possible medium and at inordinate length. Nonetheless, a small bet is hereby offered that Kissinger's secretaryship of state will produce major surprises.

The point is that Henry Kissinger is an habitually surprising man. There is the matter of his press relations, to begin with. In an administration bitterly and often deservedly unpopular with the press, it is always easy for any individual official to gather harvests of laudatory notices in print. Discreet disloyalty is the common method.

Kissinger has never used this method. He has instead achieved excellent press relations by the most curious combination of rational discussion, toughness, self-mockery and effectiveness in action. But the same combination, although with rather more difficulty, he has also achieved a remarkably successful behind-the-scenes relationship with key leaders in Congress.

The initial difficulty with Congress arose, of course, from the fact that he was then performing the real functions of a secretary of state but lacked the title and the public responsibility. Now that he will be secretary in the fullest possible sense, the handicap of the formerly ambiguous situation will be automatically removed. This by no means guarantees the immediate conversion of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to the administration's policies. But it plainly creates a situation in which Kissinger's least noticed but far from least remarkable talent will have full play for the first time.

Kissinger has a talent for public exposition of delicate situations and complex policies that is unlike any this town has seen since time out of mind. Anyone who doubts this needs only to find a friend in one of the television hierarchies. Then request a replay of the tapes of one of the more dazzling Kissinger turns, like the press conferences in the Soviet Union explaining the first SALT agreement.

President Nixon perfectly understands this remarkable talent of his secretary-designate. It was the President, for instance, who positively insisted that the SALT press conferences must be held by Kissinger, and by no one else. But for obvious reasons, even the President himself could not exploit the Kissinger talent in anything like full measure, as long as Kissinger was officially no more than a leading member of the White House staff.

Now this curious talent for public exposition will be persistently and powerfully exploited. President Nixon has in fact told Republican leaders that one of his many reasons for wanting Kissinger in the secretaryship was to "have him talk to the country about our problems." At a guess, Secretary Kissinger regularly talking to the country about the vast problems arising from the current American place in the world, will astonish, persuade, electrify and horrify, all simultaneously but in differing degrees.

One has to make one reservation, to be sure. The great Kissinger feats of



public exposition to date have all concerned easy topics. Here again, the SALT press conferences are perfect cases in point. Almost everyone was eager to be persuaded that the SALT agreement was a good one. So persuasion was not hard.

The Kissinger power to persuade when people do not wish to be persuaded has yet to be tested, in fact. Yet it is bound to be tested; and this is why some pretty important figures in this town are due to be horrified. Here, in truth, we have reached another surprise that Henry Kissinger has in store.

The surprise is that as Secretary of State, Kissinger will be acting upon a view of the political-historical process so somber that it is close to anti-American. The American view is all optimism and all morality at any rate, until our own hard interests begin to be seriously affected. Now that the deed has so long been done, it is considered coarse for anyone to admit the historical common-placeness of a continent being conquered by eliminating unfortunate red Indians. We must instead pretend to be shocked by the source of all our wealth and power.

That is not the way Henry Kissinger thinks, however. He never expects any nation to put morality above the chance of great gain. He never expects pleasant things to happen and horrible things to stay away because what is pleasant is nice and what is horrible is also uncomfortable. He never deceives himself about the fundamental harshness of the political-historical process which he must now try to influence as well as expound.

These are all dreadfully unfashionable views, nowadays which is odd in a world in which no nation's prosperity or even survival can be guaranteed any longer. So Kissinger's final impact should be interesting to watch for.

© 1973. Los Angeles Times