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Kissinger's Anguish Over Watergate

After a brilliant, major foreign policy speech in New York, Dr. Henry A. Kissinger recently answered some questions about the Watergate horror. Two points were noteworthy. What Kissinger said about Watergate amounted to a cry of anguish. And because he mentioned Watergate, his major speech got relatively little notice.

If a man of Kissinger's toughness, wideness of grasp and acuteness of penetration is driven to public anguish, it is worth asking why. As warning, it must be said that the real answer is not palatable. In fact, it is even more unpalatable, and by a very long chalk, than the Watergate horror that now absorbs everyone.

The fact is that the United States, for the first time in our fortunate national history, has utterly lost the huge margin for error this country always enjoyed in the past. In this respect, we resemble a family, formerly enormously rich and given to self-indulgent ways, that has exhausted its line of credit at the banks and has too little cash in hand.

For no less than 181 years—from 1776 to 1957, to be exact—geography gave us our margin. Two oceans placed us beyond the reach of any other major power. All other nations in our hemisphere were minor powers com-

pared to us. We had all the land and all the resources of three-quarters of a continent to exploit as we chose, with no opponents but the wretched Indians. This was what Bismarck meant by his joke:

"God almighty looks after infants, drunkards and the United States of America."

That happy stage began to come to an end in 1957, when the Soviets sent their first Sputnik into the firmament. Long before then, our own land had largely filled up. The Sputnik, to which oceans were as nothing, further meant that all our remaining margin from geography would soon be annulled by technology. In effect, God almighty had washed His hands of us. We now had to look after ourselves.

Initially, this great change in our situation was not apparent, for we still retained two other enormous margins for error. One was our margin of military power. The other was our margin of economic power.

The first to go was the margin of military power. When President Nixon took office, it had already begun to be necessary to talk about "parity" in strategic weapons with the Soviet Union. Today, bleak honesty, though seldom used, compels the substitution of "inferiority" for "parity." Our strategic inferiority is not grave as yet; but it is made much worse by our growing inferiority in conventional arms.

Conventional arms can be desperately important, for instance in the Persian Gulf, where our unprotected energy-jugular is now situated. Here, indeed, both of our more recent losses of margin are dramatically summed up. For the same "energy crisis" that has placed our jugular in the Persian

Gulf, has also cost us our former economic margin.

It is dangerous for any nation to become immemorially accustomed to operating with all possible kinds of margin for error. It is even more dangerous for such a nation to lose its entire margin for error, without realizing what has happened to it. Yet this is

the American situation today.

Henry Kissinger, whose anguished cry has just been heard, has even had his own unintentional role in blinding us to our new national situation. For President Nixon, he has performed in the manner of Prince Metternich, the hero of his own first book, "A World

Restored." By extreme adroitness, in other words, Kissinger has made a dwindling allowance of power go a surprisingly long way. This was precisely the mark of Metternich's Austrian diplomacy until he came a cropper in the end.

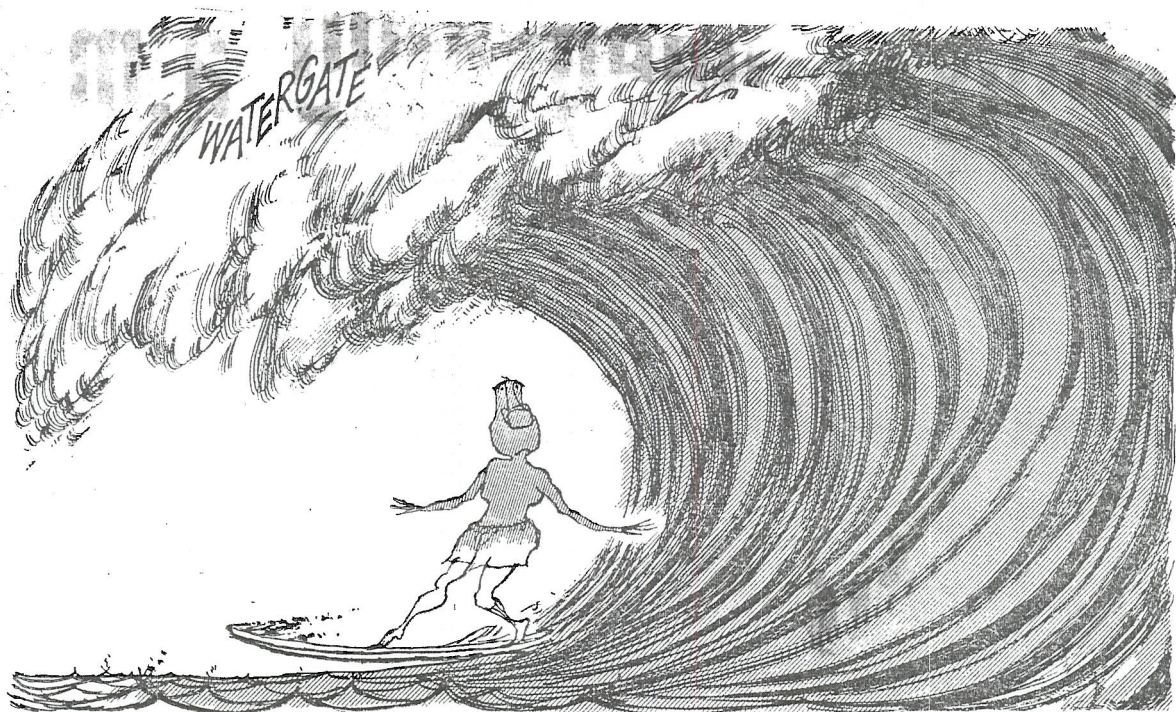
Dr. Kissinger was, and is anguished, finally, because he believes the Watergate horror can cripple the United States, by crippling the President. With no margin for error, it is deadly dangerous to be crippled, about all this, moreover, Henry Kissinger is dead right.

This does not mean that Watergate and its even nastier sequels ought to

have a veil drawn over them. It does not mean that the sleazy and arrogant misconduct of some of the President's subordinates ought to be condoned. It does not mean, either, that the President can be freed of blame. He hired these subordinates. In that sense—and at a minimum—the responsibility is his.

But take former Attorney General John Mitchell. He is a man who would always have been much improved by being boiled in oil. All the same, deep fat-frying for Mrs. Mitchell's husband is still a bit less important than national survival.

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By Mike Peters in the Dayton Daily News