

The Age of Ambiguity

By William Safire

PARIS, Nov. 25—Sweet are the uses of ambiguity.

The essence of Richard Nixon's foreign policy for the last five years has been to establish a transition: for the previous generation, American power had kept the peace; for the coming generation, a new set of relationships, between a handful of major power centers, would have to keep the peace.

Mr. Nixon viewed his Presidency as the critical time in between. America had to withdraw without becoming withdrawn; to accept the necessary end of postwar predominance without swinging back to prewar isolationism.

"America's strength must be second to none," he said in ringing tones, but that defiance had a certain poignancy, because it was a tough-sounding way of admitting that the Soviets had become an equal in power.

To adjust to this reality, Mr. Nixon has had to make fluid what had long been hard-and-fast lines of confrontation and alliance. The Sino-Soviet split, the economic surge of Japan, and the weakening of the Europeans' unifying sense of weakness all helped bring about today's state of flux.

Enter the uses of ambiguity.

Our enemies, whom we now call our adversaries, do not know exactly where they stand in our planning, nor we in theirs; the possibility of miscalculation is greater, but the likelihood of deception is less. We smile at each other a lot as we begin to build connective tissue.

Our allies, whom we now call our competitors, no longer take our sup-

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port for granted and no longer grant us the commission to lead. We scowl at each other a lot as we begin to tear away connective tissue.

In such a fluid situation—with stanch enemies and implacable allies—realignments can take place in great power relationships without the shock of war. The greatest challenge in an age of ambiguity—what Dr. Kissinger calls "the central problem of our period"—is to prevent "the rivalries of client states" from pulling the clients' patrons into unwanted conflict.

That is what did not happen in Europe, did not happen in Vietnam, but nearly did happen in the Mideast. The strategic object in the age of ambiguity, in the transitional time, is the absence of superpower war—not peace but warlessness; a necessary precursor to the settlements of the period of peace to come.

Remember those glass paperweights we used to shake up to watch a snow-storm? Mr. Nixon and his agent Kissinger have gently been shaking the world to induce a warless blizzard of changing relationships.

But the flakes will have to settle sometime; a time of transition, however brilliantly handled, must lead to general settlements, which will require an end to calculated ambiguity.

There's the rub: both Messrs. Nixon and Kissinger are architects of ambivalence, virtuoso conspirators, men whose gray matter has an affinity for gray areas—the perfect team for an age of ambiguity.

But the time is drawing near for the establishment of new alignments. The transition time required men who established respect even if they had to introduce a note of fear; the time of settlement will require men and institutions that can establish situations of trust. Transition time calls for a reputation for unpredictability and daring settlement time calls for a reputation of predictability to the point of stodginess.

That is why we hear Dr. Kissinger hoping aloud about the "institutionalization" of American foreign policy. He well remembers what happened when the last man who carried the intricacies of the world around in his head, Bismarck, passed from the transitional scene: the man who followed him struck balances of power so rigid they led to World War I.

Both Messrs. Nixon and Kissinger know they are transitionaries, not stabilizers. It is foolish to think of a superstar institutionalizing himself: a year ago, the President planned to replace Dr. Kissinger, and the good doctor wisely had in mind jumping before being pushed.

Buying time for the survival of his Presidency, Mr. Nixon changed his plan and went with Dr. Kissinger—and the irony is that both men know that the time for personal diplomacy is ending, that 12-nation junkets and headline-grabbing summits should be diminishing, and yet—a netless high-wire act is what they have become best at performing. That is what gets the applause desperately needed to drown out the jeering.

In the couple of years they have left, Messrs. Nixon and Kissinger cannot conclude the age of ambiguity by trying to reprise their old glories, triumphs, spoils. Nor can they now pretend to be what they are not—the settlers, the makers of long-range economic deals and creators of situations of trust.

Messrs. Nixon and Kissinger—each of whom ambiguously considers the other both an albatross and a life-saver—should stop holding their coteries and start playing the roles in history they have assigned themselves. They should be taking action now to create the foreign policy establishment that will soon operate in a world where Mao and Chou and Leonid and Georges and Willy will fast-receding memories