

A Kennedy Man Views the Presidency

New York

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has come full cycle.

Like Henry Kissinger, his old colleague, he armed himself for public service at Harvard's history department. He shares with Kissinger the conviction that a sense of history is the difference between competent and incompetent politics.

But the former special assistant to President Kennedy and court philosopher of Camelot (he is now called King Arthur, but he more closely resembles Merlin) says he is through with government service. As a professor of the humanities at City University of New York, he has recycled himself to his scholastic roots.

And he is clearly enjoying a phase of life that comes to few 56 year olds. His year old son, Robert, and his young, vivacious wife, Alexandra, have restored a youthful vigor to the Pulitzer Prize winner.

"We have never had grandchildren," says the father of six, playing with his sixth. "So Alexandra and I collaborated to manufacture our own."

Little Robert has the luxury of a full-time mother. Although Alexandra is taking history courses, she has little interest in competing with Arthur, as a political activist.

They met when she was a student at Radcliffe, but, according to Arthur, "We became aware of each other only a few years ago, at a cocktail party." They have been married over two years, and they've lived in their East Side townhouse since September.

Throughout the Schlesinger household, there is an emphasis on style. A sense of style is a quality that Schlesinger says is distinctly missing at the White House.

Schlesinger's voice is resigned when he talks about the Kennedy and Nixon administrations. He does not

seem to comprehend some subjects. One concerns his old colleague Kissinger.

"Henry Kissinger," he says, "has learned about the advantages of doubletalk."

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Alexandra would prefer to talk about painting rather than President Nixon: She is convinced Mr. Nixon has a secret impeachment wish that makes him reopen questions on Watergate whenever the public starts to forget about it. But there are more pressing priorities in her life than the President. They are Arthur Peter—her 8-year-old son from a previous marriage—and little Robert, who rules the Schlesinger house like a benevolent despot.

She once studied painting in Paris, and her mother's paintings fill the walls of her

Nixon 'doesn't have his bearings'

living room. But perhaps the most creative room is the bathroom, which features a long, languid tub surrounded by a collage of mirrors.

"We had to find a house with a tub that was long enough for my wife," explains Arthur.

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Schlesinger's latest book, "The Imperial Presidency" (Houghton Mifflin), examines the historic precedents that have left the presidency in its current controversial state. He looks upon presidential decision as dependent on eventual public approval, a pattern that did not backfire until the 1960s. As a precedent for the U.S. entry into the Vietnam war, he cites the deployment of American troops to the North Atlantic before Congress approved the action.

Most recently he has

drawn upon psychology for some of his conclusions. He sees the roots of many of the nation's problems in the roots of Richard Nixon.

"He doesn't have his bearings. He doesn't know what's appropriate. I don't think he is making policy decisions anymore. He is reading a speech written for him on the energy crisis; he's sleeping while decisions are being made on nuclear alerts..."

Then Schlesinger perks up a bit. "This may be a change for the better. Most of the policies he made by himself were terrible."

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It's uncanny. At certain angles, Alexandra bears an uncanny resemblance to Nancy Maginnis, Kissinger's long-standing companion.

She seems to be totally devoted to Robert, who may be one of the most energetic 1-year-olds in the world. She feels New York is certainly an excellent city to live and grow up in.

"It's like a tin box filled with everything that makes a city beautiful," she says.

A native of New York, Alexandra rates only London as a more exciting city. She reveals a natural native reaction when anyone speaks ill of her city.

Schlesinger has been here only since 1967. He, too, says New York is a grand city. "At least, it has less crime than Albuquerque."

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Schlesinger is convinced the present form of government in the U.S. is the best possible for the country.

"It's been said that the British would have removed their government a long time ago if it suffered from Watergate-type scandals. But when was the last time a prime minister was retired for reasons of scandal?"

"Our government at least suits our history and genius."



Historian and professor of humanities Arthur Schlesinger Jr., at home in New York with his wife, Alexandra, and their year-old son, Robert

The parliamentary system requires a discipline that wouldn't suit our loose coalitions."

More than anything else, Schlesinger wants to dispel political myths. One that particularly irks him concerns the role of the "egghead" in government. He worries about the apparent distrust of the Ivy League community by the Nixon Administration.

"Much rests on a president's security. President Truman had less education than any president of this century, yet he was quite comfortable in the company of scholars. Nixon doesn't want to be challenged. He wants to be reassured. This results in his closest advisers being Ron Ziegler and General Haig."

There is another myth Schlesinger would like to destroy. It concerns Camelot.

"Camelot is a lot of nonsense. It was something that was never heard of until after the murder of President Kennedy. President Kennedy would laugh at the idea of Camelot if he were alive today."

There is nothing as unexpectedly entertaining as watching Arthur in horseplay with Robert.

It suddenly becomes clear that Arthur has a rubber face. It is a face he usually keeps hidden beneath a slightly curious, scholarly expression. But, suddenly, the distinguished Dr. Schle-

singer is rolling his eyes, waving his hands behind his ears and acting the role of a court jester.

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Despite Schlesinger's attacks on the abuse of presi-

'Kennedy would laugh at Camelot'

dential power. the last thing he wants to see is a weakening of the presidency.

"I still favor presidential discretion on troop deployment. I think the president should be responsible for

balancing the budget. The worst thing that can result through the present administration is a weakening of responsibilities, due to massive irresponsibility."

It isn't only this country that is lacking in leadership, according to Schlesinger. "The world is suffering from a tremendous deficit in leadership." But he thinks both Congress and the presidency will regain their power. "There have been strong and weak periods of Executive and Congressional power before. My father had established the idea that history evolves through cycles."

He is positive of one thing: he has no intention of going back to government service — even if Edward Kennedy were to become president.

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