NYTimes NOV 16 1972

Don't Forget the State Department

Karsh, Ottawa/Rapho Guillumette.

By Anthony Lake and Leslie H. Gelb

WASHINGTON — The hoped-for Vietnam settlement, if it materializes, would be a triumph of personal diplomacy. It could only have been accomplished by Henry Kissinger working with the President alone. But will the President draw the wrong lessons from this experience, as well as from his Moscow and Peking "triumphs," about how to make policy?

Whether or not these breakthroughs could have been achieved in a different manner, the question for the future is how they can be transformed into the stuff of everyday policy. This will require the inclusion of the foreign affairs bureaucracy in the President's plans.

Who really knows what President Nixon and Mr. Kissinger are up to? For three years, scholars, journalists, legislators — and even the President's own national security bureaucracy — have debated the meaning of the Nixon Doctrine. Is it simply a guise to continue the same old world-policeman policies, a kind of cut-rate cold war? Is it a genuine effort to redefine our world interests and refrain from military involvement in the Third World? Is it an attempt to construct a "new alliance system" based on five major powers? If so, does it make any sense to expect Japan and Western Europe to play the same kind of political-military role in the world as the United States, Russia and China? Who is privy to the Nixon-Kissinger game plan? Who can carry on and avoid "the petrification of the international system"?

Certainly not the State Department. When the Russians seemed to threaten making the Cuban port of Cienfuegos a base for nuclear missile-firing subs, it was Kissinger who reportedly worked out secret arrangements with Soviet diplomats. When the SALT talks sputtered, the President and Mr. Kissinger stepped in to bargain directly with the Russians. The China gambit has been entirely their show, like the Vietnam negotiations. And so it goes down the line with every major foreign policy issue.

These moves may be counted as personal successes. But what about the professionals in the State Department who have to deal with these issues on a day-to-day basis and who will be around long after the "masters" have gone? They have been left out in the cold. If they are not given to understand the underpinnings of the Nixon-Kissinger diplomacy and if they are not brought to accept its wisdom, they will purposefully or inadvertently undermine that diplomacy in the future.

Neither is the Defense Department in a position to carry on. While the President and Mr. Kissinger easily have grasped the mantle of diplomacy from State, they have not begun to exercise control over Defense. The time requirements for personal diplomacy have left no time to watch over Secretary Laird's department.

Military officers in Vietnam can carry out sustained bombing raids over North Vietnam without apparent authority to do so. And believing that massive spending on new weapons systems is necessary to his foreign policies, the President has failed to exercise close control over the Defense budget. What we therefore appear to have is the confusing prospect of a peacetime foreign policy and a wartime defense budget.

Nor is the Congress able or willing to provide institutionalized support for the Nixon-Kissinger policies. The Congress remains a multiheaded body with such diverse views and levers of power that it cannot be expected to lead. So far, the Congress has been awed and cowed by the foreign policy successes of the Nixon Administration.

But underneath, many Congressmen are mistrustful. Key Congressional committees have sought in vain to establish regular contact with Mr. Kissinger to find out what he is doing. Secretaries Laird and Rogers will not do. Without a routine basis of consultation with the "master," irritated Congressional leaders are bound to lay in wait for a foreign policy failure on which to pounce.

It is that time of year when in the headiness of landslide victory at the polls, the President will let little things like avoiding the "petrification" of the system fall through the cracks. More than a reshuffling of Presidential appointees is needed. If the President and Mr. Kissinger believe that much of what they have done is worth preserving, they should start institutionalizing their policies now. These months present an important opportunity to reveal and reinforce their vision.

At the least, key assistant secretaries and desk officers at the State Department should be briefed by the White House on what has been withheld from them, given a chance to discuss the issues, and—most importantly—drawn into implementation of the President's policies.

The President and Mr. Kissinger should also question the assumption that higher defense spending is necessary to a "generation of peace." In fact, it will undercut it. Big power distrust thrives on spiraling defense spending, as well as vice versa. While the President and his adviser devote their time to personal diplomacy, increased military spending will reinforce superpower suspicions and confuse the American bureaucracy and public about their leaders' goals.

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