

Joseph Kraft

Super-Secretary?

Except for a few sharp questions of bugging and secret bombing, Henry Kissinger's nomination as secretary of state is sailing through the Senate. The response from abroad has been positively lyrical.

But the blare of praise is largely based on a past record not easy to repeat and on extraordinary skill in personal politics. So there is solid reason to wonder whether Dr. Kissinger's actual performance as secretary of state can possibly live up to the advance bal-lyhoo.

Both as a thinker and doer, Kissinger has made his mark in the field of grand strategy. His great feat during the past four years has been to engage both Peking and Moscow in a way that has produced benefits for Washington.

Further dividends from that achievement can be realized, notably in the field of arms control. But to achieve these gains, Kissinger will now have to get hold of some of the major defense programs which eluded his grip in the past. Being secretary of state will make it harder for him to penetrate the Pentagon — the more so as Kissinger is going to lose from his White House staff his chief defense analyst, Phil Odean.

Moreover, the largest possibilities lie in cooperation with Europe and Japan in the field of foreign economic policy. For the first time since the war, the major developed countries are simultaneously experiencing boom conditions. Even discounting inflation, the United States, Japan and Western Europe are all expanding their economies at a good clip.

This widespread prosperity creates a number of extraordinary opportunities. The round of international trade negotiations which opens this week in Tokyo will not have to contend with extreme protectionist trends in the richer countries. There is a good chance for eventual agreement on a lowering of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade — even in the touchy field of agriculture.

Widespread prosperity, and particularly the rise in American exports, also tends to ease a major obstacle to reform of the international monetary system. The meeting of finance ministers in Nairobi later this month should lead toward a new and more flexible system which can minimize drastic shifts in currency rates.

But as secretary of state, Kissinger will not be in optimal position to make the most of these opportunities. Economic policy is not his forte, and he has been reluctant to plunge into the area. Only in the last few months has he taken onto his staff, in the person of Chuck Cooper, a truly first-rate economist with great personal authority.

Neither is the State Department all that well equipped to help Kissinger in the economic field. It may be that



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there is a lot of high-class talent going neglected at State, but if so it is in the field of political reporting. The number of officers able to manage economic problems is distinctly limited.

Furthermore, State's opposition in the economic field is quite strong. The Treasury, Commerce and Agriculture Departments have important interests in foreign economic policy which are often at variance with State's position.

Those departments have strong constituencies in the private economy and more clout than State with the Congress. And there is no coordinating machinery — such as the National Security Council offers in the field of strategy — which Kissinger could use to get hold of foreign economic policy.

What all this means is that Kissinger faces a difficult time at State. To succeed he has to do what comes hardest to him. He has to pick out truly good

men whom he does not know well and give them his trust and confidence.

Maybe he will be able to do that. He is a remarkable person not insensitive to his own weaknesses and with a considerable capacity to grow and change. But the best guess is that the performance of the State Department in the execution of foreign policy will be only marginally improved by the transition of Kissinger to the office of secretary.

Given that outlook, it is no service to anybody to build Kissinger up as the super-secretary capable of pulling all swords from all stones. The Kissinger ballyhoo can only have a bad impact on what is after all the most serious problem facing the country — the problem of developing an honest government ready to admit its limitations.