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The Press as Cloak and Suitor

By Roger Morris

"And I attach great importance to being believed: when one persuades or conquers someone, one mustn't deceive them."

—Henry Kissinger, Interview with Oriana Fallaci, Nov. 4, 1972.

Nowhere is the admiration of Henry Kissinger more apparent than in the blurb-like superlatives of his press clippings. The "Merlin of American diplomacy . . . the name that made foreign policy famous," says Newsweek. One of 56 Secretaries of State, Time thinks he has a chance of being remembered as "the greatest in U.S. history." To Murrey Marder, the experienced diplomatic correspondent of The Washington Post, he "may well be the biggest, permanent, floating foreign policy establishment in our history. . . ." It has been written in The New York Times that we are indeed living in the age of "Pax Kissingerus." Such coverage—plus his stunning diplomatic success—has helped to make him "America's most admired man," as measured by the Gallup Poll.

This is the same Kissinger who also has guided American policy through a savage bombing of Indochina, the near collapse of our international financial position, an ominous alienation of Japan, a back-biting split with Western Europe, silence in response to human rights outrages from Brazil to Bangladesh, and an all but uncontested Congressional massacre of foreign aid, the desperately needed along with the dubious. Not least, by his own claim, he has all the while been one of the most intimate participants in Richard Nixon's Administration ("like two men in a fox-hole," he told Oriana Fallaci, the Italian journalist), where the colossal scale of corruption seems to rival the diplomatic achievements.

This side of the Kissinger record is not so readily apparent. Despite confrontations between the press and the Nixon Administration, the media seem to have made a separate peace with Henry Alfred Kissinger. Like his other achievements, this peace is a product of Kissinger's virtuosity, his hard work, the mutual interests of the parties, and, in some respects, sheer chance. Yet the settlement has its risks, like any other, and the course of the negotiations may turn out to be as important to America as diplomacy abroad. For if the price of this peace is media self-censorship, a surrender of the independent role of journalists in choosing topics to write about, reporting on personalities instead of policies, and the absence of investigative reporting in foreign affairs (and there are signs that it has been all of these), then the peace may be seen as legitimizing an unsatisfactory status quo, as an obstacle to the new journalism that is needed in coverage of foreign affairs.

Partly as a result of Kissinger's energetic accessibility, the media, while covering Kissinger and what he has concentrated upon, have a tendency to ignore what he ignores. Not only do we thus lack an accounting of the weaknesses or oversights of a singularly powerful Secretary of State; more important, there is the danger that public and Congressional attention will not fasten on issues—even urgent ones—that are not to Kissinger's taste. Foreign economic policy is probably the most significant case in point.

The most recent example of neglect of an economic issue by both Kissinger and the media who cover him is the increasingly grave world food problem. It isn't seen as a "Kissinger" story. Both the Government and the media have tended to treat the global food scarcities of 1973-1974 as an aberration, the product of the unusual Soviet purchases or temporary market fluctuations. Yet some experts warn with rising alarm that the problem is becoming chronic, due to unchecked population growth, massive grain imports by the U.S.S.R., limits on yields of vegetable and fish protein, and the rapid dwindling of world grain reserves. It is Kissinger—the man who holds dramatic airport press conferences—who makes U.S. foreign policy on food. Yet he has received only the most perfunctory questioning on this topic.

The record of the past five years suggests that Kissinger has probably spent even less time on human rights issues than on economic problems.

Perhaps the most familiar humanitarian problem was Pakistan's brutal 1971 repression in its then eastern wing, killing uncounted thousands, driving ten million into squalid exile in India, and leading eventually to the Indo-Pakistani war and the independence of Bangladesh. Washington found it hard to condemn these all too visible horrors (apparently out of reluctance to upset a long-standing friendship with Pakistan, and also, it was said, to allow the U.S. subsequently to mediate the conflict). At the time, the U.S. Government clandestinely violated its own embargo on arms to Pakistan.

On the few occasions when he has been questioned about such policies, Kissinger has convincingly argued against moralism in diplomacy, or cast the issue in terms of the limits of U.S. power to affect internal affairs elsewhere, a cogent point for many in the aftermath of Vietnam. But there has been little investigation of whether those were *really* the issues in each case, or of Kissinger's specific role (or lack of interest) in the formulation of these policies.

To some who saw Kissinger at close range within the Government his easy mastery of the media held a paradox. The poised, charming statesman at the microphone was also the insecure, shy, anxious man back in the office who worried about trivialities, often painfully ill at ease in personal encounters. His favorite comment about antiwar demonstrators was: "They don't know who they are." Yet, that diagnosis might have applied to the man himself. Despite his awesome success, he seemed to remain so self-consciously the German-Jewish immigrant, ever an outsider in the American foreign policy establishment. Thus his deliberate aversion to Middle East diplomacy until, as a close friend remembers him confiding last summer, "I am Secretary of State and more my own man."

That lack of self-confidence and identity may well explain too his reluctance to become involved in human rights issues, or to appear "soft" in those he did deal with. If the Averell Harrimans could risk compassion without fearing that their motives or objectivity would be questioned, it was not the same for Kissinger, or so he apparently felt. Similarly, the man so clearly in command of the substance of issues seemed to need as well the support of personal fealty. "Remember," he once whispered to me after an uncomfortable meeting at which some of us had dissented on

the planned invasion of Cambodia, "I supported you on African policy." It was an arguable point, but the same insecurity and urge to personalize explain Kissinger's ardent attention to press relations and his acute sensitivity to criticism.

Nor have the media come to grips with the glib paradox of Kissinger's relationship to, the corruption all about him. Again, with so little investigative journalism in this area, we have been left to speculate about how this man, so totally involved in "national security," privy to the President's grappling with antiwar sentiment for four years, could have been wholly ignorant of the Ellsberg break-in. There was a brief stir of attention to Kissinger's role in authorizing phone taps on some of his National Security Council staff, journalists, and other officials. But it seemed to melt away after Kissinger reportedly offered in private to Congress, and to some of those tapped, extravagant personal praise of the victims.

Traveling with Kissinger compresses and intensifies the pressures on journalists. Many of the same seductions, though, are present in Washington. Kissinger is often witty, ingratiating and intimate in his State Department press conferences, where the transcripts reflect a "clubby" atmosphere of first names, flatteringly personal references to "former students," and laughter strategically placed to break the tension of a tough question.

By no means do all the factors that constrict the media's coverage of Kissinger stem from his style, the singular setting, or personal vanities of journalists on the scene. His courtship of the media satisfies as well powerful urges among editors. There is the persistent myth, for example, that authoritative information goes strictly with high-level authorities; the higher the leaker, the better the leak. It is a theory belied by much of the prize-winning reporting of the last decade, but it continues to put a premium on a working journalist's contact with officials like Kissinger.

Looming over all this—for reporters, editors, columnists—is the incalculable privilege of access. Without the right access in this *de facto* Administration where one man and a small circle of staff aides direct American foreign policy, a diplomatic correspondent may easily feel professionally and personally threatened.

The most telling instances suggest that internal self-censorship—limits of judgment, bias, what one reporter called "just plain stupidity"—accounts for failures to fully cover Kissinger and his policies at least as much as any conscious effort on his part to orchestrate the news.

On Wednesday, Dec. 13, 1972, The New York Times ran a front page story by James Reston from Paris. The story was apparently based on a talk with Kissinger and it said that the Vietnam peace talks were going well. Meanwhile in Washington, William Beecher, then The Times's Pentagon correspondent, got the first hints of quite another view—that the talks were foundering and that the Administration was considering grave and immediate action to revive the negotiations, including resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam. Beecher filed what The Times sources remember as "quite a complete story" on the imminent resumption of the bombing on Thursday, Dec. 14. But the story did not run in Friday's paper, and there ensued what participants remember as an editorial "tug of war" over perhaps one of the most important stories of the Nixon Administration.

The New York editors of The Times, say several Timesmen, were reluctant to publish the Beecher story because it contradicted the earlier Reston story and because their "instincts," as one source put it, "were that things were great and the Pentagon was leaking to Beecher to upset the negotiations." In any case, Beecher was asked to go back for more confirmation, and later to "recast" the story to include the South Vietnamese role in the breakdown of the negotiations. Sources describe Beecher as "utterly convinced" by Friday that the story was solid. But even then, remembered one journalist watching the exchanges, "The desk wanted him to go further. They just didn't want to go off on something opposed to what the Government was saying." On Saturday, Dec. 16, a news conference statement by Kissinger about difficulties in the negotiations—predicted in the unpublished Beecher story two days earlier—finally convinced the doubting New York editors of the validity of Beecher's story. A "cut down" version was printed on the front page of The Times on Monday, Dec. 18. But it was no longer an advance story. Hanoi had announced the resumption of U.S. bombing, and The Times duly printed the news.

The Beecher episode suggests dubious judgment in the media, but it also illustrates again some elements upon which Kissinger has built his relations with the press—the reluctance to contradict “authoritative sources” (Kissinger and Reston) and the presumption of Pentagon plots. “Things like this happen from time to time,” said one experienced journalist. “It’s not every day, but it’s not as rare as a comet either.”

A number of reporters have described a singular pre-Watergate atmosphere at The Washington Post after Agnew’s criticism and Mr. Nixon’s ostracism. “It was a constant fight in 1970-1971,” said one, “on any major article critical of Nixon.” That Henry Kissinger was a direct and specific beneficiary of these internal politics at The Post shows nowhere in the consistently professional diplomatic reporting by Marder. But it seems equally clear that such a climate in a newspaper with the potential reach of The Post—a reach demonstrated by its metropolitan staff in Watergate—was bound to have its effect on the readiness to probe beyond the routine of diplomatic journalism. “Kissinger was one of the few in the Administration who’d talk to us,” recalled one Post source.

It is probably inevitable, and not all that meaningful, that highly intelligent, charming, convincing people, who also happen to purvey the secrets of the business, will have an easier time at the hands of the media—and the less gifted or less powerful, but perhaps also less culpable, will take the heat. Yet there are some habits here to be unlearned, and compelling public reasons for a new journalism in foreign policy no less than in domestic affairs.

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Roger Morris was a senior staff member of the National Security Council under Henry Kissinger, 1969-70. This is excerpted from the May-June issue of the Columbia Journalism Review.