

FEB 17 1975 Secretary Kissinger's 'Malicious Canard' Roti

ESSAY

By William Safire

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WASHINGTON—Just before leaving for the Middle East, Secretary of State Kissinger took a few hours of his schedule to write a three-page letter to the editor of Harper's magazine denouncing an article of mine in its current issue.

The charge that caused this latest attack of Salzburg fever was this: I wrote that in Vladivostok three months ago, it was Henry Kissinger who orchestrated the touting of President Ford at the expense of President Nixon, enlisting Press Secretary Ron Nessen in the dissemination of the phony line that the SALT agreement was "something that President Nixon could not do in three years, but Ford did it in three months."

Of my statement, the Secretary of State writes: "That statement can only be described as a malicious canard, which in an earlier day—when journalistic standards were higher—would have merited a retraction and apology."

Dr. Kissinger then sets forth proof of his non-involvement in the episode: "Mr. Nessen's statement was made on Air Force One on the way back from the Far East; I was in Japan, preparing to go to China and therefore thousands of miles from the event. When I learned of the statement, I immediately asked that the White House issue a retraction, which it did." He then goes on to pat Mr. Nixon on the head for his assistance in years gone by.

In looking at the record, I am forced to break a "deep background" rule or two. Mr. Kissinger frequently works from the ambush of non-attribution, and reporters anxious for information or afraid of retribution tolerate it; but when a writer is accused of a "malicious canard" by the most powerful person in the world, there is some excuse for lifting the lid.

The opening note of the Kissinger orchestration began on the Anchorage-to-Tokyo leg of the flight to the Far East. Aboard Air Force One, Henry Kissinger told the three reporters who made up the "pool" that "in terms of personality, Ford and Brezhnev are better matched than Nixon and Brezhnev." Under the rules, that opening

cut could not be attributed to any source, nor did Secretary Kissinger make much of it; but it was a start.

While in Vladivostok, Ron Nessen extended the theme in conversation with a few reporters. At 2:00 A.M. Sunday morning in the press hostel, Nessen said that "Nixon could never look Brezhnev in the eye" as Ford could. When asked how Nessen, new to international diplomacy, could be aware of this, the Press Secretary replied: "I dunno—that's what Henry tells me."

This Kissinger line, dutifully un-sourced, appeared in Time magazine later as "While Former President Nixon was often nervous in summit negotiations and had trouble looking his adversary in the eye, Ford never wavered from eyeball-to-eyeball contact."

Subsequently, while still in the Soviet Union, the Presidential party rode Siberian rails from Vladivostok to a Soviet airbase. In the dining car, obviously acting on instructions, Mr. Nessen said on the record that Ford had done in three months what Nixon could not do in three years. Mr. Kissinger was on the same train, not "thousands of miles from the event."

Reporters I have talked to make no secret of the fact that Henry Kissinger was the source of most of the Ford-Nixon comparisons, though they are careful to stay within "deep background" rules.

Even reporters who had no liking for

former President Nixon could not stomach this manipulation of the truth—and of the press secretary—by Dr. Kissinger. John Osborne, writing in the New Republic, slid past the "deep background" barrier to nail the perpetrator: "Secretary of State Henry Kissinger initiated the operation at the expense of his former President for the benefit of his new President. Messrs. Ford and Brezhnev were still in Vladivostok when Kissinger recalled defects of Mr. Nixon. . . . This was strange and ugly stuff, coming indirectly but authoritatively."

As the press backlash began, the "deep background" source sensed this reaction to his overkill, spun around on a dime and ostentatiously rode to the rescue of the former President's reputation. The Kissinger campaign had gone too far to be credible so he scotched it.

Mr. Nessen learned his lesson from this, and apologized to the press corps in withdrawing his unsalable line. But Henry Kissinger has said nothing about this until now.

In fury, he denounces any charge of his participation in this unsuccessful media-washing as a "canard" (from the French *vendre des canards à moitié*, to half-sell ducks, hence, a deception). Worse than that, he calls my protest at his easily demonstrable smear attempt "a malicious canard, which in an earlier day — when journalistic standards were higher — would have merited a retraction and apology."

Journalistic standards are higher now, despite the willingness to tolerate subversion by "deep background" campaigns of denigration. It is diplomatic and political standards that require elevation, especially when a senior official insists that black is white because he says it is.

The saddest part of this dreary episode is that it shows how little Watergate has taught some of our men at the top. Mistakes are bad enough, but they can be dealt with when faced up to; it is when men in high places cover up mistakes with blustering deceit that they get into terrible trouble.