

As Kissinger's Stock Falls, Talk of His

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 13—Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger's political standing in Washington seems to have fallen so low that even his top aides now wonder whether he

News
Analysis

can last out the remaining 11 months of this Administration. His supporters, in fact, appear divided on the wisdom of his continuing to absorb the criticism and attacks leveled at him with increasing frequency. Most think he must remain for the good of the country; some think he should quit and thereby remove himself as a factor in the political debate.

Mr. Kissinger himself has been equivocal about his future. He tells visitors he is leaving open the possibility of resigning. Yesterday, in a contentious news conference, Mr. Kissinger said he would quit if he thought doing so would serve the national interest. But he also indicated that he did not want to leave if it seemed he was doing so as the result of what he regards as "totally irresponsible and essentially untrue charges" against him.

Anger and Frustration

His attitude these days was illustrated by the news conference. Mr. Kissinger's remarks were on the whole defensive; he seemed to have no zest for the give and take with reporters.

Rather, he appeared alternately angry, frustrated and irritated with his inability to stem what he regards as repeatedly false accusations made against him in the report of the House Select Committee headed by Representative Otis G. Pike of New York and elsewhere; and more pointedly, his failure, despite repeated speeches around the country, to end the sharp divisions in

Washington over the conduct of foreign policy between the Democratic-led Congress and the Republican Administration.

Some of his aides sought to justify Mr. Kissinger's testiness on personal grounds. They said that he has been troubled about his wife's stomach operation, carrying his concern to the point where he attributes the aggravation of his wife's ulcer condition to her reaction to the personal attacks on him. Moreover, the aides said that Mr. Kissinger, who prides himself on his own physical stamina, strained his back earlier in the week and this had taken its toll on his usual ability to joke about himself.

But Mr. Kissinger has had gloomy moments before. Yesterday was not the first contentious news conference.

A Change in Balance

In the past, however, he could count on widespread support on Capitol Hill. It would have been inconceivable two years ago for a House committee to have assembled the kind of anti-Kissinger report that the Pike committee produced. In the current mood in Washington, Mr. Kissinger's charges yesterday about "a new version of McCarthyism" against him received no support from any political figure.

It seems politically more advantageous to be on the side of the Pike committee than on that of Mr. Kissinger.

The criticism has not been necessarily consistent.

As Mr. Kissinger has lamented in his speeches, the Administration has been attacked for trying to act conciliatory toward the Russians in trade and in arms-control talks; yet when the Administration sought support for confronting the Russians in Angola it failed to receive backing even from those who deplored detente.

In the Pike committee report, for instance, Mr. Kissinger was attacked for being party to the

covert supplying of arms to Iran for transfer to the Kurds fighting in Iraq; yet when Iran withdrew its backing of the Kurds, the report attacked Mr. Kissinger for not having done more for the Kurds.

In fact, the discussion of the Kurds — and especially two anti-Kissinger columns written by William Safire of The New York Times — has particularly angered Mr. Kissinger. Yesterday he said the committee's version was "a total falsehood."

Target of Candidates

Certainly, in these early weeks of the Presidential campaign, political candidates seeking Mr. Ford's job have found no risk in directing their foreign-policy attacks at Mr. Kissinger personally.

Reporters covering New Hampshire primary campaigning have detected that Ronald Reagan, the Republican challenger, and five Democrats seeking their party's nomination have all drawn applause when promising that if elected they will name a new secretary of state.

Mr. Kissinger has been attacked for detente — described by Mr. Reagan as a give-away program to the Russians. He has been attacked as devious and arrogant by such Democrats as Representative Morris K. Udall of Arizona. And despite denials from Mr. Ford and Pentagon officials, Mr. Kissinger is repeatedly accused in the Pike committee report and elsewhere of undermining American interests in the talks on strategic-arms limitation.

On Capitol Hill, Mr. Kissinger finds himself criticized by such Democratic liberals as Senator Alan Cranston of California for his refusal to openly criticize countries committing human-rights violations. Conservatives such as Representative Edward J. Derwinski, Republican of Illinois, who support Mr. Ford,

nevertheless distrust Mr. Kissinger.

"I have been saying the same thing [as Ronald Reagan] for some time," Mr. Derwinski said last week. "As far as I am concerned, Kissinger is President Ford's No. 1 political liability."

Mr. Kissinger's own aides regarded the Senate vote in December barring further covert funding to Angola as the kind of vote of no-confidence in Mr. Kissinger that in a parliamentary government would have led to his ouster.

These negative political signs have not gone unnoticed by Mr. Ford's political advisers. Mr. Kissinger and his aides have been angered for some time over what they regard as efforts by some on the White House staff to undercut Mr. Kissinger.

The November decision by Mr. Ford to take away Mr. Kissinger's job as national security adviser, along with his dismissal of Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger, was regarded by the State Department as a sign of Mr. Kissinger's reduced political fortunes.

Obligation to Ford

Yet Mr. Ford still voices full confidence in Mr. Kissinger. Just the other day, he told reporters that he would ask Mr. Kissinger to stay indefinitely if he were re-elected, even though Mr. Kissinger has privately said he plans to leave even if Mr. Ford is elected.

Mr. Kissinger feels that he has some obligation to Mr. Ford to try to remain through the rest of this term. It would be a shocking development if he were to leave suddenly — as did Daniel P. Moynahan the United Nations representative — and it would raise questions about Mr. Ford's political leadership.

But more significant, Mr. Kissinger has been so intimately involved in the negotiations on strategic-arms limitation now in a crucial phase that it would be virtually impossible for the

TIMES, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14,

Leaving Rises

talks to succeed if he left office before the negotiations concluded.

In the Middle East, Mr. Kissinger has also developed an intimate relationship with the principal leaders; a sudden departure would probably ruin chances for further diplomatic progress, although prospects even with Mr. Kissinger in charge do not seem very good anyway.

Most of his aides have advised Mr. Kissinger to stick it out despite the personal attacks. They have counseled him to adopt a low-key attitude and avoid as much as possible rancorous debate.

Others believe that the attacks on Mr. Kissinger have become so bitter and vindictive that it will be impossible to bind up the nation's wounds until he leaves. But even these officials say that it would be difficult for a competent replacement to be found for the remaining months of Mr. Ford's term.