

Dr. Feelgood

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OBSERVER

By Russell Baker

Henry Kissinger has told James Reston of The New York Times that he will not resign as Secretary of State. This is good news, if true, but can we rely on it?

Mr. Kissinger's forte as a diplomat lies in telling people what they want to hear, and while he may have concluded that Mr. Reston wanted to hear that he would not quit, he might just as easily tell someone who wants him to resign that he is on the way out.

This is what makes it so good to have Kissinger around. He likes to please. In 1973 when Americans wanted to hear that the Vietnam war was over, he told them it was, which improved everybody's mood on this side of the Pacific.

General Thieu, of course, didn't want to hear that the war was over, he wanted to hear that it wasn't over, so Kissinger, naturally, told him it wasn't, and everybody was pleased.

Letters went off to the General over President Nixon's signature saying that Americans would be back in full force if things went badly for the General, and Mr. Kissinger collected the Nobel Peace Prize, while the war went on and Americans enjoyed the peace.

It was a happy time for all, thanks to Kissinger's knack for telling people what they wanted to hear. General Thieu proceeded on the assumption that the Americans were at war, and Americans proceeded on the assumption that they were at peace.

Henry Kissinger hated to spoil things for everybody by explaining the reality of the situation, which was that he had been kidding both sides.

As a result, General Thieu pressed his war too hard, got into trouble and called on Washington to keep its promise.

What war? What promise? Americans asked. Aren't we at peace? And with honor? Are there commitments we don't know about?

Americans wanted to hear that there were no commitments, so Mr. Kissinger told them there weren't. General Thieu wanted to hear that there were commitments, so Kissinger told everybody there were "moral" commitments, and sent President Ford to the Capitol to ask for a billion dollars in military hardware and relief money for General Thieu.

Senator Jackson said that there were real diplomatic commitments. Ameri-

cans did not want to hear this, so President Ford, who speaks for Kissinger on foreign policy, said there were not.

Whereupon one of General Thieu's assistants published the Nixon letters promising American military intervention if the General got into trouble. The Americans did not want to hear that they had been deceived by their own Government in something as important as this. So Kissinger's Presidential spokesman told them the letters said nothing more than had been publicly stated two years earlier.

During the struggle to find out what the reality was, General Thieu collapsed. The Americans did not want to hear that this resulted because Administration policy had been based on duplicity, fiction, reluctance to face reality, and incompetence, so Mr. Kissinger told them it was Congress's fault.

Americans have always wanted to believe Henry Kissinger, perhaps because he has always told us what we wanted to hear, whether it made sense or not. Thus, during the Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972 we wanted to hear that it was Nixon and not the humane peace-making Kissinger who was responsible, so Kissinger, speaking privately, told us we were exactly right.

When some of his closest friends and colleagues had their telephones tapped, we did not want to hear that Mr. Kissinger had stooped to police-state snooper, even though F.B.I. documents bore his authorization, so Kissinger told us he had not.

In the Middle East, we wanted to hear that a peace agreement could be miraculously wrung out of two intractably opposed enemies, so Mr. Kissinger told us it might be possible. When the inevitable failure occurred, we did not want to hear that no miracles are possible in diplomacy, so Kissinger blamed the Israelis.

When we wanted to hear that the threat of nuclear devastation would be reduced by his détente policy, he told us of an agreement with the Russians that would limit the number of missiles in the world. When we learned that the "limit" would allow both sides to build all the missiles their war establishments wanted, we wanted to hear that the agreement was not a hollow fiction, so Kissinger told us it was a vital first step toward better agreements to come, one of these days.

So it is good news that he will stay, if he is not actually planning to quit. Who else can keep us so cheerfully deceived about reality?