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ROGERS DEFENDED ON ROLE IN POLICY

State Department Says He
Plays a Decisive Part

By TERENCE SMITH

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WASHINGTON, March 3—
—The State Department today defended the performance of Secretary of State William P. Rogers and said he "has played and continues to play a decisive role in foreign policy decisions."

A spokesman, Robert J. McCloskey, listed a number of areas in which he said Mr. Rogers had played an important role and added that the Secretary had tried to be as "forthcoming as possible" in his appearances before Congressional committees.

It was the first time in recent memory that the department's spokesman, at a regular news briefing, had publicly defended the Secretary's role.

His remarks were the latest in a continuing controversy over Mr. Rogers's impact in decision-making compared with that of Henry A. Kissinger, the President's adviser on national security.

Yesterday Senator Stuart Symington, a Missouri Democrat, said that Mr. Kissinger had become "Secretary of State in everything but title" and that, as a result, Mr. Rogers had become "the laughing-stock of the cocktail party circuit." President Nixon, through his press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, said the statement was inaccurate and unfair.

Envoys Confirm Belief

Despite the denials, the controversy has served to confirm the belief of many foreign ambassadors that Mr. Kissinger is in fact second to the President in foreign affairs. One Asian envoy said today that his embassy preferred to deal directly with Mr. Kissinger and the White House on important matters.

At the briefing Mr. McCloskey was asked whether the Secretary felt that his effectiveness in dealing with foreign governments had been impaired by the debate. While making it clear that Mr. Rogers had been distressed by Senator Symington's remarks, Mr. McCloskey said the Secretary nonetheless "feels he enjoys the confidence of the foreign ministers with whom he deals."

The spokesman said Mr. Rogers telephoned Senator Symington yesterday to get an explanation and their 10-minute conversation had been "civilized and gentlemanly."

Mr. McCloskey read a prepared statement in answer to a question in which he asserted that the Secretary had been particularly influential in decisions on the Soviet-United States talks on limitation of strategic arms, improving relations with Communist China on Indochina, the Middle East, United States forces level in Western Europe, African affairs and the problem of oil supplies.

Asked whether the Secretary objected to Mr. Kissinger's practice of meeting directly with foreign diplomats, Mr. McCloskey said an understanding had been reached recently that most contacts would be carried out by the State Department.