

The Kissinger Mystery

By ANTHONY LEWIS

In Richard Nixon's Washington, Henry Kissinger stands out like Kilimanjaro on an arid plain. He is a man of broad intellect in a narrow and anti-intellectual world, a self-confident man with a sense of humor among the defensive and the humorless.

His accomplishments assure him a place in the history of American foreign policy. His clear vision of great-power relationships, however flawed by inadequate economic interest or understanding, has begun to make possible a new realism in American dealings with China and the Soviet Union. And he has done an extraordinary amount of the work himself: advice to the President, administration, negotiation.

All this makes Kissinger a fascinating figure, not least to the liberal intellectuals otherwise alienated from Washington. But with them more than curiosity is involved. There is pain, and disappointment, and mystery: How can a man as sensitive and intelligent as Kissinger have let our Government say nothing for months while its Pakistani allies raped and slaughtered the people of Bengal? How, above all, can he justify the continuing American destruction of Indochina?

The mystery is explored in a new book, "Kissinger: The Uses of Power." It is by David Landau, who developed his interest at Harvard College before graduation last June. Landau is misled into a little parlor psychoanalysis, perhaps an irresistible temptation with this subject. But he comes back to solid ground in his exploration of the problem to which he wisely devoted half the book: Vietnam.

When Kissinger left Cambridge in 1969, he assured friends that he would have the United States out of that war in months. When his Harvard colleagues came to see him in protest at the invasion of Cambodia in April, 1970, he told them to come back in a year—"you will find your concerns are unwarranted." That confidence about ending the war is a repeated theme. On what was it based?

Kissinger believed in 1969—and made no secret of his view—that Vietnam had proved to be a poor place for the exercise of American power. He understood that the United States could not "win" over a tenacious nationalist force. He thought the U.S. should get out, preserving its credibility as a world power merely by obtaining an assurance from the Communists of a "decent interval" before they took over in Saigon.

The trouble with that theory was that it took too little account of recent Vietnamese history. Twice before the Communists had been offered a deal and believed it: in 1946 when France promised a Vietnam under their leadership, in 1954 at Geneva. Both times they were betrayed.

ABROAD AT HOME

It has always been unlikely that the Communists would believe another unsupported promise to keep hands off Vietnam, least of all from a President whose rhetoric seems constantly to escalate the American interest in a non-Communist Saigon. That is why Hanoi has sought formal agreement with the U.S. on the political future of Vietnam—as an assurance against renewed intervention.

When the Kissinger negotiating theory did not work, the United States turned to threat and to force. And so today the man who was a skeptic about America's involvement in Vietnam serves an Administration which has intensified the involvement and the destruction, paying an ever more terrible price for whatever end is reached.

How did it happen? Landau suggests that Kissinger had "an obsession with U.S. credibility" that obscured his original understanding of realities in Vietnam, and a deep fear of reaction from the right in the U.S. Landau may overestimate Kissinger's ability to influence the President on this issue. And there is the factor of time: As Kissinger said when he went to Washington, he probably had only two years until his ability to innovate faded and he found himself defending policy.

Still, the questions about Henry Kissinger remain: If all he wanted was that facade of a "decent interval" in Vietnam, how could he keep working for a Government that killed so many people for such a shadowy cause? And if the aim was really to crush Hanoi into submission, how could he of all people support such an old misconception?

It is as if there were a gap in his intellect or character. One person who has known Kissinger says that in his focus on the application of power in the world: He fails to understand that foreign policy has moral consequences—for one's self as for others. Another puts it more bluntly: "He does not care enough about killing people."

A year ago Kissinger told some reporters: "What we are doing now with China is so great, so historic, that the word 'Vietnam' will be only a footnote when it is written in history." His tragedy, and ours, is that he was wrong. The United States has been more deeply affected by the disaster of Vietnam, and will be, than by any other contemporary event. Kissinger must know that, and accordingly must yearn for a settlement as much as anyone. The alternative is to believe that a brutal, unending use of force to make one small country conform is Henry Kissinger's *Pax Americana*.
