

# The Mastermind as Mouthpiece

BY BARNARD COLLIER

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Henry Kissinger, in his first television speech before the American public, couldn't stop coughing. Every other word he went ka-hem, or aaach, or kuh, kuh, kuh. His eyes were focused on some terrible middle distance, probably the red light just under the lens on the camera. He tried desperately to cover up his accent, but "which" refused to come out anything but "vitch." I went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee while he was talking, and with his voice unattached to his face, he sounded like a robot groaning two words at a time. Every cell in my brain said that something was wrong if they unveiled Henry Kissinger to make the dramatic announcement of the end of war in our time. This was obviously a panic situation, and Kissinger, who is usually prepared for anything and can hold an audience without a single ah-hem or chu-uuch, had had no time to pull himself together properly. "Henry's ass is on the line," my brain said. "If the negotiations fail, then Henry takes the rap."

I went to find out more about negotiations from a man at the Foreign Service Institute who teaches our diplomats how to negotiate. He was a man who has carefully taught our diplomats never publicly to put any part of their anatomy on the line. So he wouldn't let me use his name. I call him Teacher.

"Negotiations in America began with Benjamin Franklin," Teacher said. "He got France on our side in the Revolutionary War, and part of the way he did it was by being very attractive to the ladies of Paris." Teacher sucked in his belly and tapped some invisible ash off the unlighted cigar he plays with to help him break the habit. He gave me a wink like a horny American college professor walking down the Rue de la Paix.

One way our novice diplomats are taught in the classroom, Teacher said, is with a role-playing game called "Panama Canal Negotiations." The authentic canal negotiations have been dragging on now, off and on, for nearly the entire twentieth century.

"You learn," Teacher said, "that you can't project a win-lose situation in negotiations or you lose from the start. The American public thinks that, when you negotiate with foreigners, you have to come away from the table with the foreigners destroyed. But some negotiations can go on almost forever without getting anything settled, and the good diplomat must prepare himself for those."

Negotiators get a lot of notice in the press, but they are rarely dispatched without instructions that are explicit down to the last dot over the last i. Teacher said that, with modern communications, the man sitting at the negotiating table is often called "the mouthpiece" by the "backup men" on the other end of the telephone line, in Washington.

The backup men forego the thrills of sitting down at the table and watching the other guy squirm. The backup men, Teacher said, get their pleasure quietly among their peers in the secret community, and they consider themselves to be the true brains of the negotiation business.

Teacher said that negotiators must, above all, do exactly as they are told. They must never unwittingly give anything away, and they must catch every nuance, tick, blink, intonation, cadence, gesture, and reflex on the other man's part, without being fooled by the other man's culture and strange language. Teacher said he was born in China, where his father was a Protestant missionary. He explained that a Chinese will wave you to him with his hands pointed down, like a man paddling a surf board. An American waves you to him with his hands up, and if you try it the Chinese way, you will see how foolish it feels in our culture. The professional negotiator learns to recognize significant signs in the other man's body language as well as in his own.

"You don't want to give anything away with your body," Teacher said. That accounts for much of the stiff look people associate with professional diplomats and professional poker players.

Teacher said that back in the Kennedy days President Kennedy delivered a speech at the Foreign Service Institute that put diplomats precisely in their place.

"He said, 'You will do the work in the background, and I will take the credit up front. When it works, I will claim it was my idea because I'm a politician. If it fails, I'll blame it on you for the same reason.'"

"Why the hell would anybody want to stay in a nauseating job like that?" I couldn't restrain myself from asking.

Teacher crossed his legs at the knee, straightened his shoulders, pulled in his chin, and dropped an inscrutable yellow curtain in front of his eyes.

"It's not nauseating," Teacher said. "It has great satisfactions for those who can do the work."

"Well, on that basis, who do you think is the world's best diplomatic negotiator?" I asked.

"If you really want to know," Teacher snapped, "it's Chou En-lai."

I thought about what Teacher said for a few days and decided my brain was right when it told me that Kissinger was in trouble, so I called to find out.

The Kissinger voice on the telephone

was not coughing, but it was as tight as raw nerve and hardened against any signal of sympathy.

"I think we'll still get an agreement," Kissinger said, in the way you say things to concerned callers when your mother is dying in the hospital.

"I had an idea something was wrong when I heard your speech," I said.

"It was all extemporaneous, almost ad lib," he said. "I had maybe three notes in front of me when I got up there. I was up all night, listening to the news come in."

"Then it did come as a surprise?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Hanoi wasn't supposed to release anything under our secret agreement."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's okay," Kissinger said. "I think we'll get something."

"Good luck," I said.

Teacher had said that something ominous always happens when people try to play the brains and the mouthpiece at the same time. □



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALAN E. COBER

Barnard Collier, one of our most frequent contributors, is a freelance writer who lives outside of Washington, D.C.