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Recalling Talk

With Kissinger

3 Years Ago

BACK in the early months of the Nixon Administration, Dr. Henry Kissinger attended one of those bacon-and-eggs discussion sessions with a group of Washington Journalists. His purpose was to explain the policy of Vietnamization, just then taking form as the President's answer to the inherited dilemmas of an unpopular war.

It was a superb exposition by Kissinger, emphasizing how, at each stage of its unfolding, the new policy would offer incentives to "the other side" to accept a compromise political solution, rather than prolong the military conflict.

We were impressed, all of us, and at that point when the more impressionable of us were ready to exclaim, "By Jove, he's got it!" or something to that effect, our guest suddenly turned the tables — and the mood — on us.

AS NEARLY as I can recall, Kissinger shattered the optimism he himself had created, by saying something to this effect: All of our designs, all of our incentives, all of our stratagems may come to nothing, because the men in Hanoi, who had spent their entire adult lives in single-minded pursuit of the goal of uniting that land under their leadership, may settle for nothing less than victory. A compromise political solution — however attractive to American eyes — may have no appeal at all to them.

And then Kissinger said something that has remained riveted in the memories of those who heard him. "Vietnam," he said, "may be one of those tragic issues that destroys everyone who touches it."

The memory of that conversation, three years ago, came back when I watched Kissinger on television last Saturday, describing the breakdown of the Paris peace negotiations. He looked desolated. The voice was low; the manner, so confident seven weeks ago when he announced peace was "at hand," now notably subdued.

HE MUST KNOW that despite the pyrotechnics of his secret trip to Peking and his other feats of jet diplomacy; despite his apparent in-



Dr. Henry Kissinger

Drawing by Oscar Berger

vincibility in the bureaucratic infighting and in the salons of Washington; despite all this, his place in history will be determined by the outcome in Vietnam. If the war proves intractable to this Administration, it is Kissinger's reputation that is most likely to be destroyed.

The thought on continued conflict, bombing, destruction and death in Vietnam; of continued distraction of national attention, energy and resources, is almost insupportable — and not just to Kissinger.

Almost despite itself, this blase capital city has developed a sense of anticipation over the prospect of beginning a new year and a new presidential term without the burden of its preoccupation with Vietnam. For almost a decade, that war has cursed our politics and the public mood. Finally, we thought, we were to be free of it, the prisoners returned, the bombing halted, the animosities it engendered put to one side.

BUT NOW, it seems, the curse continues. And with a sense of despair that ill suits the season, the capital faces the grim prospect that the new year will bring, not the release of energies into constructive fields, but a renewal of that grim struggle between President and Congress, between the weary critics and the dogged if disillusioned defenders of the Kissinger-Nixon policy of Vietnamization.

Three times — in 1964, 1968 and 1972 — the American people have voted for the man who promised to avoid or to end the struggle in Vietnam. Each time, the returns have been registered but the mandate has not been enacted. The war goes on.

If it is, indeed, to be that way again, it is not only Kissinger who is in despair. The curse of which he spoke is shared by this capital and this country.

Could Vietnam still be an issue in our bicentennial year? The thought is unbearable.