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The Georgetown Blacking Factory

By Charles W. Colson

WASHINGTON—On the C.B.S. Evening News, Monday, Jan. 8, 1973, Dan Rather announced to the twenty million faithful followers of the Cronkite show that the reported rift between the President and Henry Kissinger was “past the rumor stage to the fact stage.” He thereby elevated to gospel that which had been for weeks the speculation of Washington commentators and columnists.

Mr. Rather’s “fact” was a full-blown myth born in the Washington Georgetown cocktail circuit.

Elevating this piece of gossip to serious national news was quite another story. This was not merely fodder for the banal inanities which float around the Washington elite in their social gatherings. This was an effort, perhaps deliberate, to drive a wedge between the President and his closest foreign-policy adviser in a way that could only hamper the very delicate negotiations then under way.

Those of us in the White House went to great lengths to assure reporters that there was no Nixon-Kissinger split, that there was no difference in policy, that Kissinger was not in fact pulled back from the “brink of peace” as Joe Kraft and company suggested. Nor was he opposed to the bombing, as Scotty Reston, in what would have to be one of the classic failures of timing, proclaimed on Dec. 31, the day after it had been announced that negotiations would resume.

But the juicy tidbits were simply too tempting. A difference in tone and inflection was interpreted to mean a policy split. If Kissinger failed to see the President on a particular day, that was reported as further evidence of the “growing split between the two men.”

All of this made Mr. Kissinger’s task the more difficult. If the North Vietnamese thought that there was a split, then would it not be very much in their interest to attempt to exploit it? Would not a delay in reaching a final accord be wise if indeed America’s chief negotiator had lost the confidence of his principal? Hanoi’s negotiators might well conclude that if the man with whom they were dealing was in “trouble” with his boss, he could be maneuvered into hasty concession.

There was almost a gleeful feeling among some of the President’s war critics that perhaps they would be proven right and the President wrong, that with the Nixon-Kissinger “split” the peace talks would fail and they would be in the sunny position of saying “I told you so.” George McGovern, who since Nov. 8 has acted as if the election were still to be held, helped dignify the myth on the N.B.C. Today show, Dec. 26, when he said:

“I think there’s developing a fundamental conflict between his [Kissinger’s] view of the war and Mr. Nixon’s view of the war.”

Mr. McGovern also opined that Kissinger “is being forced to do things” and “to say things on television . . . that he didn’t really believe.”

Now the simple truth is that Senator McGovern had not a shred of evidence for this monumental distortion of the truth. He was merely repeating what his fuzzy-headed friends like Clark Clifford and Tom Braden were telling him and maybe there was a touch of wishful thinking in it all.

John Osborne, the White House correspondent for the left-wing New Republic, gave impetus to the merry myth-making with a Dec. 16, 1972, column. Osborne suggested that Kissinger overstepped the Presidentially established boundaries on Vietnam and that the President punished Mr. Kissinger by talking to him by telephone only rather than seeing him in person. Petty nonsense.

Joe Kraft, whose column appears regularly in The Washington Post, is a favored critic of the war. Though Kraft has never made a correct prediction or assessment on the conflict, his columns are holy writ to the sellout brigades. Thus, Kraft’s contribution to the myth was that Kissinger really abhorred the policy he was executing and merely lent “a cover of respectability to whatever monstrous policy President Nixon is pleased to pursue.” Kissinger, in Kraft’s words, had been “compromised, and everybody in town knows it.” That meant everybody but President Nixon and Mr. Kissinger.

Newsweek magazine asked in its New Year’s day edition: “Is Kissinger in Trouble?” Newsweek’s observation that Kissinger had “lost a measure of influence around the White House” had to be music to the ears of those who wished the worst for America’s course in Indochina.

The same week, Time pondered as well over the myth of the split. And while both publications hedged their bets somewhat, they contributed, by dint of their combined circulation, to the erroneous impressions of divisions at the top.

Braden even went so far as to joyfully predict that “Kissinger will go.”

The steady drumbeat continued through the Inauguration and right to the eve of the President’s announcement that an agreement had been concluded, bringing peace with honor to America’s involvement in Vietnam.

One thing is clear: there was no Nixon-Kissinger rift and through all of the torrent of gossip-column reports, President Nixon and his chief negotiator persevered to achieve that which many thought the President would never achieve—an honorable and successful peace in Vietnam.

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