



U.S. Has Lost Its Margin for Error

Joseph Alsop

AFTER a brilliant, major foreign policy speech in New York, Henry A. Kissinger recently answered some questions about the Watergate horror. Two points were noteworthy. What Kissinger said about Watergate amounted to a cry of anguish. And because he mentioned Watergate, his major speech got relatively little notice.

If a man of Kissinger's toughness, wideness of grasp and acuteness of penetration is driven to public anguish, it is worth asking why.

The fact is that the United States, for the first time, has utterly lost the huge margin for error this country always enjoyed in the past. In this respect, we resemble a family formerly enormously rich and given to self-indulgent ways, that has exhausted its line of credit at the banks and has too little cash in hand.

★ ★ ★

FOR NO LESS than 181 years — from 1776 to 1957, to be exact — geography gave us our margin. Two oceans placed us beyond the reach of any other major power. All other nations in our hemisphere were minor powers compared to us.

That happy stage began to come to an end in 1957, when the Russians sent their first Sputnik into the firmament. The Sputnik, to which oceans were as nothing, further meant that all our remaining margin from geography would soon be annulled by technology.

Initially, this great change in our situation was not apparent, for we still retained two other enormous margins for error. One was our margin of military power.

The other was our margin of economic power.

The first to go was the margin of military power. When President Nixon took office, it had already begun to be necessary to talk about "parity" in strategic weapons with the Soviet Union. Today, bleak honesty, though seldom used, compels the substitution of "inferiority" for "parity." Our strategic inferiority is not grave as yet; but it is made much worse by our growing inferiority in conventional arms.

★ ★ ★

CONVENTIONAL ARMS can be desperately important, for instance in the Persian Gulf, where our unprotected energy-jugular is now situated. Here, indeed, both of our more recent losses of margin are dramatically summed up. For the same "energy crisis" that has placed our jugular in the Persian Gulf, has also cost us our former economic margin.

It is dangerous for any nation to become immemorably accustomed to operating with all possible kinds of margin for error. It is even more dangerous for such a nation to lose its entire margin for error, without realizing what has happened to it. Yet this is the American situation today.

Kissinger was, and is anguished, finally, because he believes the Watergate horror can cripple the United States, by crippling the President. With no margin for error, it is deadly dangerous to be crippled. About all this, moreover, Henry Kissinger is dead right.