

NYTimes

MAY 28 1973

# Henry at 50

By William Safire

ESSAY

Friends of Henry Kissinger gave a party for him on the occasion of his 50th birthday last Saturday night.

Not everybody came—these days, even Frank Sinatra thinks twice about being seen in the company of Administration officials—but many who did come to New York's Colony Club were the glamorously powerful and the powerfully glamorous. They wanted to salute an authentic American hero midpoint in his first century.

Henry's 50th year was his most eventful; in the last three months especially, his fortunes have taken a wild roller coaster ride, and surcease is not at hand.

Riding high after the signing of the peace agreement, he had reason to hope that an end to hostilities abroad would bring a beginning of reconciliation at home, but this was not to be.

At first, Watergate did not turn Henry's roller coaster downward; paradoxically, he seemed headed higher than ever, since men like Mr. Kissinger—as well as George Shultz and John Connally—were pointed to as men close to Mr. Nixon who were untouched by charges of complicity.

Then along came revelations that Henry had known about, or tolerated, or did not vigorously oppose, or perhaps even asked for an unprecedented twenty-month program of wiretapping 17 aides and newsmen.

Down went the roller coaster, greased by slippery-sounding explanations that Henry only went along with the tapping for the protection of the tappers. Since the presumption of innocence was so long denied so many members of his staff and of the press, the burden of proof is now on Henry to show why he did not put a halt to the wiretap proliferation. He may have a persuasive answer, but he has not put the answer forth publicly.

For a while, it seemed that Henry might be dragged down by the "linkage" with political burglaries he had nothing to do with. To prevent this, his emphasis has been to define and separate (1) the wiretapping he went along with to stop casualty-causing leaks, and (2) the excesses of political warfare that was outside his purview.

Assuming he can build a firewall between the campaign to stop the leaks and the campaign to stop the Democrats, Mr. Kissinger will then have the task of defending his role in the overkill used in stopping leaks. A lot of people who believe in the New Federalism, the work ethic and the Nixon Doctrine get off the bus at the tapping of reporters telephones.

There are signs that the coaster's roll may be bottoming out: the television networks, by rotating coverage of the Ervin hearings, are saying that

daytime viewers are more interested in "As the World Turns" than in "As the White House Burns," and despite massive coverage of corruption, most people tell pollsters they are more concerned with the cost of living. The President is now counterpunching on the national security issue, and hoping that Daniel Ellsberg can be tempted into climbing into the ring.

In this Presidential defense, Mr. Kissinger—who has many ironies in the fire—may wind up the hero of the people he cares about least (those who will buy any action on the grounds of national security) and the villain of those he cares about most (those who fear that national security will be used as an excuse for inexcusable encroachments on civil liberty.)

If he does retain what he calls his "moral authority" in the face of unfair links with scandal and quite fair questions about decisions to wiretap, the Kissinger experience will teach a lesson to White House aides: that a passion for anonymity does not always serve the President, and that years of accessibility to influential newsmen is like money in the bank, enabling the prudent depositor to obtain shelter, or at least a sympathetic hearing, on rainy days.

Arthur Krock, who devastated the Truman Administration with the phrase "government by crony," warns of the dangers of "journalism by crony," and there is much in that, but would the public be better informed if candor, color and cultivation offered a public official no reward?

Henry's decision to buy another ticket on the roller coaster will have little to do with how much the President needs him or how it might look if he deserted a ship that did not sink.

Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger still have mountains left to move and only a few years left to move them. Both will be judged by history for the whole body of their work, not just for the missteps that so preoccupy us today; the need to strike a five-way balance of power, to redirect our energies in worldwide economic competition, and to hammer some more nails in the structure of peace will stick the shoemakers to their last.

There is also a human, humorous addiction to the play of power. I took Henry to a football game some years ago, and when we heard the public address announcer put out a routine call for some physician, Henry said with a gleam in his eye: "You know how we could empty this whole stadium out in five minutes? Have the announcer say 'Dr. Kissinger, call your office — urgent!'"