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Take It Easy, Henry

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By James Reston

Henry Kissinger's threat to resign is the silliest thing he has done since he came into the Government and is not really to be taken seriously.

The issue apparently is whether he "directly" initiated the wire taps on his White House associates, which he denies, or whether somebody else "initiated" them and he went along. This was back in 1969 at the beginning of the first Nixon Administration, and it is a fine distinction. Whether he "initiated" the wiretaps or tolerated them in silence is no big deal. Certainly, he knew about them, and this he does not deny.

Maybe it could be argued, on Kissinger's own terms, that he should have resigned then rather than go along with tapping the telephones of his own colleagues, or that he should have explained the issue more explicitly when he came before the Foreign Relations Committee for confirmation as Secretary of State.

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But to threaten to resign now in an emotional press conference in Austria at the start of the President's tour of the Middle East, and just before the really important discussions with the Soviet Union on arms control and trade, and with the Europeans on the future of the Atlantic Alliance, is very odd.

What startled and diverted Mr. Kissinger from his concentration on the great issues of foreign policy was the press conference he held after his long painful and successful negotiation of the Syrian-Israeli cease-fire in the Middle East.

Apparently, he expected to be questioned about how this remarkable compromise had been worked out.

WASHINGTON

Instead, he was confronted by questions that had come up while he was away. They were very hard questions. In short, had he not lied about his part in the wiretapping of his aides in the White House?

All last weekend Mr. Kissinger troubled about these questions. How could the United States, he asked privately, conduct foreign policy if the President was charged with impeachment and the Secretary of State was being charged with perjury?

On Sunday last, after reading the charges against him in The New York Times, he considered skipping the Middle Eastern trip with the President. He consulted with his aides in the Government and with members of the Congress and the press, who told him he was turning an old controversy into an unnecessary crisis.

Accordingly, he decided to make the trip, but somewhere along the way apparently he concluded, as he had said last Sunday, that this was a question of personal honor that had to be resolved. His news conference in Austria before a traveling White House press corps that had nothing else to report dramatized his threat to resign.

This was obviously the wrong issue at the wrong time and in the wrong place, but it illustrates the paradox in Mr. Kissinger. He is a highly intelligent and rational man, but he is also deeply sensitive, and he has probably been traveling too far under too much tension.

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Also, going back to the original controversy on the wiretaps, he was, like so many others in the White House, under great pressure from "the other side" of the Executive Mansion.

When there were leaks to the press and Messrs. Ehrlichman and Haldeman were demanding that the leaks be stopped, Mr. Kissinger himself knew he was suspected as being the source of the leaks. He was not even sure that his own telephones were not being tapped.

Somewhere in this atmosphere of suspicion somebody "initiated" the wiretapping proposal, and Mr. Kissinger, rightly or wrongly, went along, believing that if he didn't he himself would be accused of the leaks.

The Kissinger threat to resign is only the latest evidence that everybody in the Nixon White House seems to be deranged or corrupted by the lack of trust there.

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Even the most intelligent of men do strange things and the Kissinger press conference is stranger than most. There was no great issue about him in the public mind. He was the one practical man, dealing successfully with intractable questions, but now he has made a big issue out of it and the Congress will have to try to sort it out.

Meanwhile, he has placed himself along with the President as a victim of an irresponsible press, and this is precisely what he has always tried to avoid. He has wanted to be separate, to keep Watergate and foreign policy apart, but now he has linked them with himself, or at least made a big issue out of them, and this makes things even worse than they have to be.