

The Art and Style Of Resigning

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By James Reston

The art of resigning from political office—whether to slip or sneak away or go out with a bang—has declined rather seriously in this country in recent years. The people who should resign won't, and the people who shouldn't, threaten to do so.

When the old American politicians of another age differed on principle and policy or felt their "personal honor" required them to resign, they usually went out and slammed the door. But the last really dramatic political exit was Richard Nixon's own Grand Farewell after losing the California Governor's race in 1962, and even then, alas, he didn't keep his word.

Henry Kissinger's recent resignation threat has done nothing to restore the art, and was not up to his usual style and wit. He was understandably irritated by charges that he had not been candid and may even have lied about his part in bugging his associates in the White House, but his threat was out of all proportion to the offense.

There are only three effective ways to deal with useful but aggressive reporters like Clark Mollenhoff of The Des Moines Register and Tribune, who asked Mr. Kissinger, with his customary gentility, whether the Secretary had in fact initiated the wiretaps. The first way, which Mr. Mollenhoff prefers, is to give him the keys to the files. The second is to repeal the First Amendment, and the third is to revive and legalize dueling for cases of "personal honor." But all three are a little awkward.

In this particular case, Mr. Kissinger somehow misplaced two of his most celebrated qualities—his sense of humor and his gift of logic. He performed like a great actor who threatens to quit the theater because he got a couple of bum reviews or was insulted going out the stage door.

"I do not believe it is possible," he said, "to conduct the foreign policy of the United States . . . when the character and credibility of the Secretary of State are at issue. And if it is not cleared up, I will resign."

This does restore an element of spunk and plain speaking in our public affairs, but it is not very logical. For these charges against Mr. Kissinger have been rumbling in the committees of Congress and the back pages of the papers for years, and somehow, in spite of them, Mr. Kissinger has not only managed "to conduct the foreign policy of the United States" but has presided over one of the most

brilliant chapters in the long history of American diplomacy, and has improved almost everything except the Irish question.

Also, if Mr. Kissinger thinks he should resign unless his credibility and character are restored at once by the Congress, what does he think President Nixon should do facing much more serious and prolonged charges about his credibility, character, and violation of the spirit and letter of the Constitution?

Fortunately, the nations of the world, in their dealings with the United States, are not so personal. President Sadat of Egypt, squiring Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger on a whistle-stop tour from Cairo to Alexandria, was probably not devoting much thought to Chairman Rodino of the House Judiciary Committee or Clark Mollenhoff of Iowa, or even to the domestic troubles of Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger.

Presumably he is dealing with the power and influence and ideals of America, which Mr. Kissinger, with his remarkable gifts, has been able

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to make him see. This is the paradox of the present controversy.

For while America's power and influence have always been there, somehow Mr. Kissinger has changed Washington's relations with the Middle East, China and the Soviet Union by the force of his intelligence, personality and character—particularly in his personal relations with Chou En-lai, President Sadat, King Faisal, and the leaders of Israel.

He did not do this by himself. Time, geography and power were the essential ingredients, but Mr. Kissinger seized the moment, and it is ridiculous in his own terms and on his own record and objectives, to talk of resignation.

"I have believed," he said, "that I should do what I could to heal the divisions in this country," but he is not likely to do this by resigning at the wrong time and on the wrong issue. So maybe he'd better stick around.