Kissinger: The Price of Power

By Richard Holbrooke

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PARIS — In Europe the reaction to the news that Henry Kissinger had returned home from triumph in the Mideast to Watergate-related domestic troubles was all but unanimous: Politics is a dirty game, and you Americans get too excited over such little things as wiretapping. There was also sympathy for Kissinger's personal dilemma.

But questions exist now that demand answers, one set at a technical and legal level, the others at a deeper and more basic level.

At the technical level, the question is one before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the courts: Did the Secretary of State commit perjury during his confirmation hearings last fall, and did he, as charged in separate lawsuits by two of his former staff members, participate in violating their rights under the Constitution and the Crime Control Act of 1968 by placing wiretaps on their home telephones?

These are momentous questions, involving the fate of the secretary of state and opening up new and important areas of the law. But perjury has not yet been proved, only suggested, and the same is true of the civil charges brought by Anthony Lake and Morton Halperin. We must await the outcome of the Senate and court proceedings.

We do not, however, need to await those outcomes to consider the larger tragedy which Kissinger's dilemma illustrates.

A Tale of Power

KISSINGER'S STORY offers some insight into the dilemma of high public service. Nothing in the Kissinger story is new, but his case is so dramatic, the contradictions so sharply delineated, that it can serve as sort of a morality tale about power.

Several points must be made at the outset. First, Henry Kissinger is no fool, and it is nonsense to believe that he did not know of the atmosphere that surrounded him in the Nixon White House. He knew, and he made his choices. One can criticize or approve of those choices, but one should not pretend—as he sometimes wants us to—that he was unaware.

Second, this entire matter, no matter how serious, is not a direct reflection on his conduct of foreign policy. The two matters can be separated, as I suspect historians will quickly do. His achievements internationally stand on their own merits.

Third, he must be held liable like anyone else for his actions. Thus, the suggestion that he made in Salzburg that his value to the nation and to the world is so great that he could not tolerate even the questioning of his integrity surely exceeded the bounds of reason. If in fact his claims of innocence are sustained, then the storm will pass. But it will not end the Mephistolean drama of Henry Kissinger.

The Kissinger Dilemma

KISSINGER, LIKE many men before him, was presented with a fairly obvious choice: If you want a piece of the power that can come with high government service, you may have to accept certain activities of which you may not approve.

In Kissinger's case the choice was far more dramatic than for most men, and the power that lay within his reach was, by any standards, staggering. On the other hand, the associations which would come with such power were of a singularly distasteful nature.

See KISSINGER, Page C3

MacNelly in the Richmond News Leader

"Hang on, Henry . . . I'll try the exterminator again!"

Associated Press

Kissinger at news conference in Salzburg at which he threatened to resign.

KISSINGER, From Page C1

Kissinger was well aware of the risks involved. But it is doubtful that he hesitated long before moving towards the power and position which lay within reach. It was a natural choice. Kissinger had had a taste of power in the early 1960s, had failed to stay the course partly because he had stood his ground on some substantive disagreements with President Kennedy, and, he would recall years later, had learned some important lessons from that experience. By the time he played a careful and effective role in an abortive attempt to negotiate with the North Vietnamese in 1967, he was ready for a larger role, and would have been prepared to serve, in the proper job of course, under virtually any potential President who would have been elected in 1968.

When that President turned out to be Richard Nixon, and when Kissinger's domestic associates turned out to be H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, Kissinger had an obvious dilemma. His private solution was a complicated set of compromises, the exact nature of which will not be known for a long time, if at all. But the public and semi-public part of his solution, which he executed with brilliance, was to leave in his wake the hint, the gentle suggestion never quite attributable to him, that he disapproved of the other side of the White House, and—more important and more explicit—that he had nothing to do with it. There was a clear line between foreign and domestic matters, he said, and when the storm broke around the President, there was Kissinger, safely on the other side of that line.

Making a Choice

BUT THAT LINE could not exist to the extent that Kissinger wanted to believe. True, there is a compartmentalization of functions which permits the President and his national security assistant to deal with one set of problems, while the President and his chief of staff deal with another.

But since at least the President's statement of May 22, 1973, when he tried to obscure illegal activities of certain staff members by putting them under a "national security" umbrella, it was inevitable that the line would blur and erode, revealing the mire in which one had to live in order to function at the White House.

One should resist the temptation to feel too sorry for this brilliant man. He knew he was making a choice, and he had to be prepared to risk the consequence. If he is proved to be innocent of the specific accusations of a legal nature that he now faces, both in the Senate and from the lawsuits of Lake and Halperin, then he will survive this incident. If not, then he may pay a heavy price.

Was Henry Kissinger, then, the one clean man in a school of skunks, thinking only of the national interest, keeping things together while Washington burned? So some believe, adding the implication that those journalists who have pursued the wiretap question are conducting some sort of witchhunt against him (a strangely welcome event perhaps from the President's point of view, since it brings Kissinger directly into the White House effort to discredit the press for its Watergate coverage).

Or was Henry Kissinger another member of the team, involved in some kind of "White House horror"? So some others believe.

But the more likely fact is that he was somewhere in between, that he made a deal, attempted one of his own delicate balancing acts, in exchange for an opportunity to play an extraordinary role on the world stage. In most ways it was a good deal. But every deal has a price.