

*Philip L. Geyelin*  
**Diplomacy:  
 Eroded by  
 Watergate**

It is, as Henry Kissinger observed the other day, "not possible to conduct the foreign policy of the United States under these circumstances." And while he may have been talking entirely about his own predicament, his complaint applies as well to the larger wages of Watergate and to what they mean in terms of the government's ability to function effectively all across the board.

For there is, in truth, an ugly atmosphere in Washington and around the nation today—a prosecutorial impulse, a tension and an emotional pitch which makes it difficult to judge the guilt or innocence, the integrity or the motives, of public officials caught up anywhere near the eye of the Watergate storm and difficult for these officials, however uninvolved, to operate.

Nothing illustrated the problem better than the sudden appearance of Dr. Kissinger, before Mr. Nixon's triumphant Mideast extravaganza had barely gotten under way, in Salzburg, in the morning, eyes brimming, voice breaking, defending himself and his public honor and his undoubted foreign policy achievements from the ravages of Watergate and from the various investigatory processes now unfolding. Suddenly, we were seeing the most vivid evidence yet of the powerful chemistry at work between the conduct of foreign policy and the domestic politics deriving from the scandals known as Watergate.

For what this performance in Salzburg was really conveying in an unmistakable way was that Watergate is all pervasive, that it has become almost a way of life, touching every aspect of our existence, and wearing away dangerously at the ability of the Nixon administration to conduct any policy—including foreign policy—with anything like full force and effectiveness.

Thus, when the trip of the President to the Mideast developed somewhat hastily, there were many who were cynical enough to suggest that this might have something to do with the impeachment process, that it might even be designed to distract us from the whole question of Watergate and all that name means—even though a case could be made in other times that it would provide some useful ceremonial reinforcement of past diplomatic successes, that it had a meaning and a legitimacy all its own. And, in truth it does. For it does signal and consolidate a diplomatic process for which the Nixon administration can rightfully claim considerable credit.

And yet the cynics' putdown of this trip and the forthcoming visit to Moscow is at least partly justified. For there is no doubt that both events are being almost desperately overblown and exploited in a way which inevitably entangles them in impeachment politics. And there is equally no doubt that the effectiveness of the President's efforts in both cases has been eroded by the fact that, by his own



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choice, he is obliged to conduct foreign policy under the threat of impeachment and the dark shadow of Watergate.

The supreme irony of it is that there is in fact much to be said for the Nixon foreign policy—it has worked in some instances rather conspicuously well. You can argue that the evolution with China was coming anyway; but President Nixon made it happen, at a political risk which a Democratic President might not have been willing to take. You can argue that we should have gotten out of Vietnam, much faster than we did—that it cost us as much under Nixon in lives and treasure, while getting out, as it did for Lyndon Johnson to get us in. But Johnson and preceding Presidents did get us in. Nixon did get us out. The same thing may be said for the Mideast. President Nixon's celebrated structure for peace didn't save Israel from its fourth war with the Arabs—and its costliest. But you can argue that there had to be that war and that cruel near-defeat of Israel—that plain showing of Arab military capability—before you could negotiate today's disengagement, and open up the first genuine opportunity for honest negotiations toward a lasting settlement. We had also to create with considerable skill and effort the breakthrough with the Arabs in general and Egypt in particular that made the trip possible. And Nixon and Kissinger did it.

It was not an entirely new idea. I recall a story told me in 1961 by one of the wisest students of the Mideast, Eugene Black, former president of the World Bank, who was called by President-elect John F. Kennedy in January of that year and offered the job of Secretary of the Treasury. He turned it down, at which point Kennedy said, "all right, at least tell me how to handle Nasser." And Black replied: "There isn't anything you can do about Nasser until you are prepared to treat him the same way you treat Ben Gurion. You invite Ben Gurion to Washington. You even invite Tito and Sukarno. But no President of either party," Black said, "has had the guts to invite Nasser. Have you got the guts?"

Kennedy's answer was pure

Kennedy: "Sure I've got the guts," he said. "I'd meet him at the airport with Abe Ribicoff on one arm and Arthur Goldberg on the other."

But he didn't, of course. And now Nixon has actually been to Cairo.

And it is entirely possible that people at home, which is where Mr. Nixon is going to have to fetch up eventually, will be impressed. Perhaps they will also see Mr. Kissinger's Salzburg tantrum in a way that will help Mr. Nixon, as well. For what Secretary Kissinger seemed to be saying was that we had better be careful, that we had better get off his back, because otherwise he might just go away and then where would we all be? "Now see what you've done," was the implicit message: Henry Kissinger, perhaps our only authentic contemporary American folk-hero, will resign, if you keep on picking on him, and with him will go our last hope for world peace. It could work. Or at least it could help—given the complexity of the interplay between impeachment and the conduct of foreign policy. It is hard to know, when we are being asked to judge the President's accomplishments by the number of screaming Egyptians that can be mobilized "spontaneously" on the streets of Cairo, whether the President can successfully present himself—and Dr. Kissinger—as so indispensable to the conduct of foreign affairs that impeachment will seem too terrible to contemplate.

But there are at least a few reasons to question whether this strategy of extravaganza will be as effective as it now appears to be. As a distraction, for as long as it lasts, it can't miss. The crowd counts, the pomp, the circumstance—Peking proved that this will hold our attention for a time. But my own hunch is that the question of impeachment will still be decided in the end—one way or another—on other grounds. Certainly it ought to be. There is no extenuation to be found in the reception accorded Mr. Nixon in Cairo or Damascus or Jerusalem for the crimes of Jeb Magruder or Egil Krogh or Bart Porter or John Dean or Herbert Kalmbach or Chuck Colson or all the rest—or for the fact that the President of the United States has been named by a unanimous grand jury as a participant in a criminal conspiracy. And still less is this a question that ought to turn on whether or not the prosecutorial atmosphere that has grown out of Watergate is working an unfair hardship on Dr. Kissinger.