

NYTimes
Kissinger and Petersen

JUN 21 1974

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IN THE NATION

WASHINGTON, June 20—Six weeks away from Watergate seem to have made no difference at all. Like Old Man River, it just keeps rolling along. Like a river, too, it keeps eating away at its own banks until it appears as if everyone and everything in the vicinity may ultimately be engulfed. Has any episode ever so glaringly disclosed the corrupting nature of power and the tendency toward mass ethical blindness at the heart of modern institutional life?

The latest example is that of Henry Petersen, the Justice Department career professional who once had an enviable reputation for incorruptibility and nonpartisanship. His supervision of the early Watergate investigation has, at the least, raised questions about his conduct. By his own admissions to the Senate Judiciary Committee this week, Mr. Petersen oversaw an investigation that was "snookered" by untruthful or secretive witnesses from the White House and the Committee to Re-elect the President; and he did not push his own suspicions of high Administration involvement—suspicions of which, in fact, he was "ashamed."

Mr. Petersen also sought to make more of a distinction than others are likely to see between treating political figures "gently" and treating them "with restraint." After all, net effect of the "restraint" with which Mr. Petersen and Earl J. Silbert conducted the original Watergate investigation was that their inquiry never got past the tip of the iceberg. Yet, when Senator Sam Ervin and other members of the Senate Judiciary Committee raised questions about these matters, Mr. Petersen erupted in anger.

"This is a terrible, terrible thing," he shouted at Senator Ervin. "Do us justice, will you?"

The justice Mr. Petersen seems to want is not to be questioned at all about his supervision of the Watergate investigation. To him, it is an unjustifiable questioning of his integrity to ask, for example, why he allowed Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans to give a deposition rather than testify before a grand jury that could cross-examine Mr. Stans.

Mr. Petersen's reaction was reminiscent of that of Secretary of State Kissinger, when the latter returned from his Middle East triumphs to find himself under renewed questions about his part in the wiretapping of seventeen officials and newspaper report-

ers during the first Nixon Administration. Mr. Kissinger, too, reacted angrily; ultimately, in his remarkable Salzburg news conference, he demanded, in effect, that the questioning stop and that he be cleared of the charges, on pain of his resignation.

In Mr. Kissinger's case, this may not have been quite the tactical error at first supposed, nor even the reaction of a man exhausted to the point of losing his good judgment. Henry Kissinger happens to be about the shrewdest manipulator of the press ever to get himself quoted as a "senior official" telling the public what he wants it to know. The major effect of his Salzburg performance was to get the United States Senate virtually on record that he was an honest man who ought not to be questioned by the bloodthirsty press. Mr. Kissinger also created considerable public sympathy for himself and shifted the focus of the controversy; now the question is not so much whether he did anything he shouldn't have, but whether the press should have raised such embarrassing questions about a man who was busily creating a generation of peace.

Mr. Petersen probably will not succeed so well. Senator Ervin and the Senate committee are not as good targets as the press; Mr. Petersen's anguish was a little shrill by comparison to Mr. Kissinger's beautifully measured sorrow; and Mr. Petersen has not been bringing us a generation of peace, if anyone has.

It is surely to be hoped that the Ervin hearings on the Silbert nomination—which is to say on the early Watergate investigation — and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's inquiry into the Kissinger wiretap charges will result in the exoneration of both Mr. Petersen and the Secretary of State. Too many once-respected officials already have been shown to have succumbed to the lust for power or the need to go along with their peers and superiors; more defendants would be a drug on the market, but the nation could certainly use a few examples of men who defied the pressures of power and conformity.

But neither Mr. Petersen nor anyone else is likely to prove himself such a man by banging on tables and denouncing those who inquire into his conduct. In the long run, that conduct will speak for itself, and louder than anyone can shout.