

'I Think He's Dying'

By William Safire

WASHINGTON.—At a banquet in a foreign country, the American Secretary of State—just making conversation with some people he did not know—chatted about the Premier of China, to whose country he was about to pay a visit.

"He's very ill," the Secretary of State confided to his Canadian listeners, holding center stage with his inside tidbits, "I think he's dying."

In one of fate's exquisite ironies—the bugged bugged—a speakers' microphone had been left open at the table, and all the Kissinger table talk was broadcast to a press room.

Not since "Uncle Don," the kiddies' radio hero of the thirties, said "that should hold the little bastards" into a supposedly dead mike—and thereupon disappeared from the airwaves—has there been a similar episode.

When Uncle Henry's open-mike surgery was reported, the Secretary expressed dismay at the invasion of his privacy, and the press dutifully began a soul-searching about whether it was ethical to write about all that had been so widely overheard. Nobody pointed to the Emperor's nakedness: that it was unforgivably indiscreet for a diplomat to be making that kind of conversation, especially outside the country.

The attention centered on Dr. Kissinger's estimation of his former leader as "unpleasant" and "artificial," hardly an original insight, but fascinating to foreign nationals who are not accustomed to hearing American Secretaries of State running down past Presidents or commenting on the relative sexiness of previous First Ladies at a dinner.

Being a cynosure is fun, and there is pleasure in putting down the man who put you up, especially when you used to be his most fawning and obsequious courtier. But last week's public exposure of the private table talk lifts the lid on the current state of the Nixon-Kissinger political relationship, which has been deteriorating this year.

They never trusted each other, and both were right: Without telling the President, a Kissinger secretary on a "dead key" eavesdropped on every conversation with Nixon; without telling Kissinger, Nixon taped everything. A former top White House official recalled just the other day, "Henry was the main reason why Nixon installed the taping system in the first place."

After the fall, when Mr. Ex became certain that foreign policy was his historic salvation and legacy, and was

hungry for Henry's current briefings, the word was passed to lay off the criticism, and indeed to "give Henry a pat on the back whenever you feel you can."

But at the Vladivostok summit, Dr. Kissinger sought to tout Mr. Ford at Mr. Nixon's expense ("He would never look Brezhnev in the eye"). In a few months, word of Kissinger's way of ingratiating himself with dinner partners by denigrating his old boss drifted out to San Clemente, and Mr. Nixon's dogged support began to fray.

Not long ago, as the Secretary of State basked in the adoration of shuttle diplomacy in the Mideast, Mr. Ford received a message from Mr. Nixon warning the President of the danger of Kissinger hubris, and the need to cut him down to mere superstar size.

And even after Henry called with "profuse apologies" after last week's

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dinnertable revelations, Mr. Nixon's friends let it be known that his attorneys would examine with care the Kissinger replies to 72 questions on wiretapping submitted by lawyers for the egregiously tapped Morton Halperin. If Dr. K tries to pass the buck on everything to Mr. Ex, he might find himself without corroboration.

Curiously, that wiretapping lawsuit is a financial incentive for Dr. Kissinger to cling to his Government job. His longtime personal lawyer in New York, Carlyle Maw has been on the public payroll with car and driver as "Undersecretary of State for Security Assistance," but the primary security he assists is Henry's; together with the Justice Department lawyers assigned to defend him, the legal costs run well into six figures yearly, which the Secretary prefers to have the taxpayer pick up.

This week, at the banquet table in Peking, America's representative will have only pleasant, non-artificial recollections of Mr. Nixon, because that is what those hosts like to hear. But last week's indiscretion about Shou En-lai—that callous "I think he's dying" was surely heard half a world away—raises a new question about Secretary Kissinger's stewardship.

For the remark was neither venal nor amoral, traits which the Kissyphants claim are offset by his brilliance and meticulous care. To say anything like that, just to show off to some dinner partners, is both stupid and careless. And whom the gods would destroy, they first make careless.