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Kissinger: On foreign policy

By Robert Bendiner

Henry A. Kissinger has probably exercised greater power than any U.S. secretary of state. Having served under Presidents Nixon and Ford, the elder statesman is returning to government service. President Reagan has named Kissinger chairman of a bipartisan commission aimed at seeking support for the administration's policies in Central America.

In this exclusive interview, Kissinger offers opinions on subjects ranging from the role of the CIA in Latin America to the secret of diplomacy. The interview was conducted shortly before Kissinger's appointment to the commission on Central America.

Bendiner: Traditionally, historically, foreign policy has been made by the president and his secretary of state. But now we have a National Security Council and a CIA and a Defense Department, as well as the Senate and even to some extent the House of Representatives, all taking a very active hand in the process. Are there too many cooks for the good of the broth?

Kissinger: Let's make a distinction between the management of foreign policy in the executive branch and the management of foreign policy as between the executive and legislative branches. With respect to the executive branch, it is impossible today for any one man or one department to encompass all the disciplines and interests that have to be reflected in foreign policy. Inevitably, a president has to consider many aspects of a problem and also take into account advisers who reflect still other aspects that have not occurred to him.

This process contains a twofold danger. First, in order to settle a problem, the president may accept the least common denominator by way of bureaucratic compromise. Secondly, each issue tends to be dealt with on its individual merits.

There is not necessarily among the various contenders for presidential attention a representative speaking for the most important of all aspects of foreign policy: the relationship of various measures to each other over an extended period of time. A sense of nuance and of strategy is very difficult to develop in the modern government.

As between the Congress and the executive branch, there is no doubt, in my mind at least, that the Congress is asserting an excessive influence over the day-to-day tactical management of foreign policy.

Q: Are you thinking of things like Congress' refusal to appropriate money for some Central American states unless they improve their human rights record?

A: I don't want to go into which specific decisions would fall into this category, but I can mention one from the period I was in office—just to take the discussion away from immediate controversies. We were attempting to negotiate an agreement between Greece and Turkey on Cyprus. The Congress, in the middle of the negotiations, voted an embargo on arms to Turkey. The end result was that the negotiations stopped entirely, and to this day the Cyprus situation is totally stalemated. Now I can't prove that those negotiations in 1974 would have succeeded, but with every passing month the position of those who occupied the territory became more firmly established.

Q: What do you see as the proper role for some of the agencies that were not created for the purpose of making policy—like the CIA?

A: I don't want the CIA to be involved in policymaking at all. The CIA should be confined to making factual analyses of political situations and to giving its views about the likely consequences of proposed courses of action. Now that second role is admittedly close to the area of policymaking, but I am extremely distrustful of getting the CIA involved in the policy process as a chief player, because there is the great danger that Intelligence will then tend to follow policy rather than guide it with objective information. I would think a major effort has to be made to keep Intelligence and policymaking as far apart as possible.

Q: Would you say that that has been achieved? Is that the relationship between the CIA and the [State] Department?

A: No, I'm afraid it's gone the other way. I shudder every time I see a CIA report published in order to support a policy, because that really means there is a subconscious pressure on the agency to write reports that fit in with official preconceptions. Furthermore, no CIA report should ever be declassified for any purpose until maybe 10 years after the event.

The CIA analysts should write their reports for the president of the United States, and the president should never use them in a public forum to support his position. He might use their information but he should not identify it as coming from the CIA.

Q: Could you say whether this is the tack that you took with regard to the CIA? Say, in Latin America?

A: More or less. You know, when the CIA tells you that the consequence of a communist government in Chile will be to upset the political equilibrium in neighboring countries, this is an implicit policy recommendation. That cannot be helped. But as a general proposition, I think separation of policymaking and Intelligence is the tack that I took. If I did take another one from time to time, it was wrong.

Q: Is open diplomacy possible, and if not, how far can secrecy be carried in a democratic state?

A: I don't believe the question permits a clear-cut answer. In a democracy the results of negotiations obviously have to be made available to the public. Except in the rarest of cases, secret agreements will not stand the test of crisis if the public has not been informed about them. So, clearly, the results of negotiations should be public. The process by which these results are achieved generally should have a private phase and then it may have a public phase.

I believe that it is terribly important in a negotiation for one's interlocutor to understand one's real purpose. In fact, that is infinitely more

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