Henry Kissinger: How and Why He Used the Press

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Donna Mills Will Not Be Denied

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The former Secretary of State frankly admits that he tried to exploit reporters to achieve policy goals—and he suggests how TV news could do a better job.

By Neil Hickey

When President Richard Nixon returned to the U.S. from his famous visit to China in 1972 (along with the hundreds of TV newsmen, technicians and print reporters who had accompanied him), Henry Kissinger—then the President's National Security Adviser—promptly made a round of telephone calls to prominent Republicans to brief them about the trip. One of those, Gov. Ronald Reagan of California, expressed to Kissinger the view that the China visit had been a great television "pilot" and ought to be made into a series.

Eleven years later, Henry Kissinger—lecturer, consultant, memoirist, private citizen, television commentator—sits in his Manhattan office and smiles at the Reagan remark. Yes, he agrees, the China trip was at once a historic diplomatic initiative and a colossal, textbook exercise in how to use television as a powerful tool of image-building and public relations.

"President Nixon was very conscious of the impact of television," Kissinger says. "He always thought that print journalism was not very important—but that television journalism was." And so when the White House made up the press list for the China trip, television reporters and crews won a disproportionately large share of the space. (Nixon aide H.R. Haldeman "saw no sense in making history if television were not there to broadcast it," Kissinger had written in his memoirs.) The arrival in Peking was carefully timed to occur at 11:30 on Monday morning so that it would appear live, via satellite, on American TV screens in prime time in four U.S. time zones on Sunday night—the highest viewing night of the week. "We stayed a night in Guam en route to make sure it would happen that way," Kissinger remembers.

The former Secretary of State leans back in his chair under the portrait of a red-robed mandarin Chinese figure. The familiar wavy black hair is flecked with gray now, and he wears the diplomat's obligatory dark suit—an echo of his momentous, highly visible and (at times) controversial career as a public official that ended with President Gerald Ford's defeat in 1976. Perhaps the most momentous achievement of that career was helping Nixon restore U.S. ties with the People's Republic of China. "Remember that both Nixon and the Chinese had a common interest here. The Chinese wanted to reestablish themselves as an impressive political entity. Nixon wanted to be seen as the originator of a major foreign-policy initiative. And so the Chinese cooperated enthusiastically with the White House efforts."

"You mean the Chinese were "using" American television just as our own leaders were?"

"Absolutely. And they were very sophisticated about it."

Henry Kissinger himself, among public officials of recent times, is credited with being perhaps the most sophisticated and deft handler (and indeed "user") of the media—a distinction he does not quickly disavow. "There is absolutely no doubt that when an official deals with the press he is trying to 'use' the press," Kissinger says. "And there is no doubt that when a reporter deals with an official, he is trying to 'use' the official. That has to be faced from the beginning. An official is very unwise—in addition to being morally wrong—if he deliberately misleads the press. But the press must understand that the official is there not to please them, but to achieve his objective. Did I sometimes use the press? Yes." In the course of delicate negotiations, for example, his statements to the media sometimes were "consciously designed to evoke a reaction" in the opposing party.

So successful was Kissinger, not only in tactically using the media but in forming useful relationships with individual members of the Washington press, that Nixon's inner circle of advisers grew to resent and envy him for it. "What they envied is something that was as available to them as it was to me. I had never →
had any dealings with the press before I came to Washington. I had no idea of the incestuous relationship that develops between men of power in Washington and the press between officials and journalists whom the press meet socially and yet with whom they are in a partly cooperative and partly antagonistic relationship.

It all started, says Kissinger, when the President asked him to give background briefings to groups of reporters every two or four weeks. Those group briefings inevitably turned into individual briefings, he recalls, and begat a broad personal acquaintance with Washington reporters. "But I had no conscious strategy of how to handle the press. I liked most of the journalists I met. I liked them as people, and they probably felt that I respected their efforts. Much of the Nixon White House, however, was antagonistic toward the press. Unavailable to them. Deal with them from a posture of hostility. But they all could have done what I did. I had no special secret.

One venerable technique of "using" the media is the leaking of private information to selected newsmen. In the Nixon Administration, there were three kinds of leaks, says Kissinger: leaks by an official trying to prove how important he was; leaks by people trying to push policy in a particular direction; and leaks, during the Vietnam War, by people trying to undermine the war effort. There is no doubt, he claims, "that when you are in office you exaggerate the significance of these internal maneuvers. They outrage you beyond what the normal person can grasp. Today, a lot of that looks ridiculous to me, because one was reacting to the bad intentions of the person doing the leaking."

Some of the leaks, though, were very serious indeed, Kissinger is persuaded. "In the Nixon Administration, we had near civil-war conditions on Vietnam. We had 550,000 men in that country, and it was a very painful process for us to try to extricate them under conditions that did not lead to a total collapse. America needed to convey the impression that it would not yield beyond a certain point in the negotiations, but constant leaking to the media of fallback positions "undermined our negotiating flexibility."

When Nixon privately was considering elevating Kissinger from National Security Adviser to Secretary of State, somebody leaked that fact to Dan Rather who reported it on the CBS Evening News. The leak "was a political maneuver," Kissinger explains, "and a rather interesting example of how these things work in Washington." Nixon had never discussed with him the prospect of his becoming Secretary of State. So Kissinger assumed that the leak had come either from an ally attempting to nail down the Cabinet post for him, or from an enemy eager to block the appointment by manipulating Nixon into a declaration of confidence for the then Secretary of State, William Rogers. Kissinger decided to telephone Dan Rather. "I asked him whether the thing had come from a friend or from a critic, and he very decently told me it was not from a friendly source. He didn't tell me, obviously, who the source was." Kissinger thus learned, in roundabout fashion, that co-workers in high places were campaigning (unsuccessfully) against him.

Dan Rather, of course, "was not considered a great friend of the Nixon White House," Kissinger points out. "But that never affected me." While Rather was White House correspondent for CBS, Kissinger had "no complaint" about his coverage of matters that related to foreign policy. During the Carter Administration, however, Rather did a 60 Minutes segment on the price of oil that Kissinger thought was "extremely unfair." He sees no point in rehashing that. "I think every reporter is entitled to make a mistake."

During the period of Kissinger's so-called shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East, his plane invariably was well-populated with newsmen and for every scrap of information about the negotiations. Did those journalists represent his efforts accurately? "Obviously, I didn't like every television report that was made. I had an unusually distinguished group of re-

The brevity of the evening news programs, it is suggested to Kissinger, occasionally causes distortion by omission or compression, especially on complex stories relating to foreign affairs. "I think those programs are anchored by serious, responsible people who would not deliberately distort the news," he answers. "But they have a maximum of two minutes for each item. And the impact of what they say is importantly affected by the picture that goes with it. The combination of picture and text can have a very major impact." Thus, events with a high visual component, such as the bombardment of Beirut, are often more successfully conveyed, he suggests, than a speech by Andropov, the "intangibles" of which are very difficult to explain on television.

Didn't that same difficulty obtain with regard to Vietnam, the television coverage of which is often credited with hastening the war's end? The daily pictures on television were bound to create a feeling of revulsion against the war," Kissinger replies. "Television obviously couldn't go behind the other side's lines. So the casualties that were being photographed were always on our side of the lines. I guess that's inherent. Still, I wouldn't ask television reporters not to cover the war. The British were fortunate in the Falkland Islands crisis in that it didn't lend itself to television coverage."

In spite of Kissinger's prolonged labors at the Paris peace talks to hammer out an orderly disengagement in Vietnam (for which he and the North Vietnamese negotiator, Le Duc Tho, shared the Nobel Peace Prize), the image that most Americans retain of our last days in that war-torn land come mostly from the painful television pictures of U.S. soldiers and civilians evacuating frantically into helicopters from the rooftops of Saigon. Did it bother Henry Kissinger that, thanks to television, it is that ignominious tableau that Americans remember, not his efforts to negotiate a departure? "No, I actually think that was a fair image," he answers. "That is what happened. The tragedy is that, for five years before that, there was a systematic denigration of the effort, and almost all journalists had turned against the war. But so had we. I didn't disagree with the need to end it: I was desperate to end it, as was President Nixon, under conditions that were not humiliating for our country, and did not create more troubles elsewhere and more suffering for the people of Indochina." But public opinion was irrevocably against any continued involvement at all, and the North Vietnamese knew it. "When the final collapse came, I think the television pictures reflected it accurately. It was an evacuation from rooftops—maybe the saddest moment in the conduct of foreign policy while I was in office."

Founding a foreign policy on public opinion, however, is dangerous practice, Kissinger is convinced. "You have to ask yourself: what does the public want from its leaders? I think the public expects its leaders to take it to a better future that they themselves cannot necessarily define. The public will judge its leaders by the results they achieve. Of course, as a leader, one has to take public opinion seriously. But one also has to take seriously one's own judgment of the consequences of an action."

During the Watergate period, was it not the televised Congressional hearings that had perhaps the most telling impact upon public opinion, leading up to the resignation of President Nixon? "I learned most of what I know about Watergate from the
media." Kissinger says. "In the White House, there was almost never any discussion in which I participated on the substance of Watergate. And I sometimes wonder if there was any discussion. Because everybody kept whatever he knew apparently to himself." Still, he has serious doubts about the rectitude of putting people before Congressional committees and live television cameras without allowing them to cross-examine their accusers. That's no criticism of television itself, he is quick to point out, but only of the legal procedure. "I knew the people involved, and while many of them had done things that were very wrong—when you know them and know their families, you hate to see them in that position."

Does Henry Kissinger have any suggestions about how to improve TV's news coverage? As it happens, he does. "The first thing is that the evening news programs ought to be an hour. When they report an Andropov speech, for example, or a Reagan speech, there ought to be more time given to analysis, maybe over a series of evenings so that the average citizen knows what it is that's being proposed here, and what its weak points and strong points are." He'd also like to see more television documentaries even though, relatively speaking, very few people watch them. "You're still talking about, perhaps, five million people and that's more than you can reach any other way, and more than anybody could have reached thirty years ago."

The Sunday morning network interview programs perform a useful service, he feels. The one he much prefers is This Week with David Brinkley on ABC. "I think that is in a class by itself. It's got a very flexible structure. He can adjust it better to fast-breaking news." Still, those interview programs "are not designed for people like me. In my field, presumably I will know the person and I will know more or less what he's going to say." The interviewee's manner of handling himself most of the time "is more interesting to me than what he actually says."

In general, what are Henry Kissinger's television-watching habits? "Actually, I rate sports, old movies, news and news specials. I watch almost none of the serials. Dallas was on for two years before I saw it. Now I've seen it a few times. I watch football and baseball. He likes the 24-hour-a-day Cable News Network "because you don't have to wait until 7 o'clock" to find out what's happening in the world.

Kissinger, in fact, is not a totally disinterested party as regards television news. He has a contractual tie to ABC News that gives them first call on his services for fast-breaking foreign news stories. It's a "very loose arrangement," he claims, which allows him to do routine interviews on other TV networks as well. "For example, if somebody wanted my views on China, or the general condition of our foreign policy, I would be free to do that for anybody."

Also, he is planning to create for PBS a major (perhaps 13-part) series on American foreign policy, putting it in a "historical perspective" and exploring the "philosophy and practice" of the art of diplomacy. He has already outlined the series for PBS and suspects he'll "have to free about a year of my time to do that as my principal activity." So first, he'll finish the third volume of his memoirs (companion to the massive volumes already in print: "White House Years" and "Years of Upheaval") and "sometime over the next year" hopes to start work on the television series.

That will be one more moment on stage for a public figure who has rarely—according to friend and foe—shrunk from the bright lights of publicity. Is that impression of him justified? "If you asked people who were my colleagues at Harvard before I came to Washington, they would not have predicted—that I would become a subject of great publicity. It may sound unbelievable. I did not seek it."

Nixon came to resent the fact that you did become an object of great media attention, he is reminded. "Absolutely," he says. "Any President would. No President likes to share the spotlight."
Feb. 10, 1983

Dear Ms. Vick:

As discussed, I'm enclosing a letter to Dr. Kissinger which contains the direct quotation we plan to use in our article.

Thank you very much for forwarding it to him. And thank you for your earlier help in arranging the interview.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Neil Hickey
Bureau Chief, N.Y.
February 10, 1983

Dr. Henry A. Kissinger
55 E. 52nd Street
Suite 1100
New York, N.Y.

Dear Dr. Kissinger:

As agreed, I am herewith sending you the direct quotations extracted from the article that TV Guide will publish, based on our interview of January 11. I would like to say that the other editors here at the magazine are enthusiastic about the article as it stands, and we expect to publish it as the lead article in an early April issue. Therefore, we are hoping that your corrections and emendations will be minimal in order to preserve the article's inherent value and interest.

In talking about President Nixon's trip to China:

"President Nixon was very conscious of the impact of television. He always thought that print journalism was not very important but that television journalism was."

You mentioned that the arrival in Peking was timed so that the television pictures could appear live in the U.S. on Sunday night, and that:

"We stayed a night in Guam en route to make sure it would happen that way."
The time zone difference:

"allowed every banquet to be seen live on the morning news,"

And you added:

"Remember that both Nixon and the Chinese had a common interest here. The Chinese wanted to establish themselves in the American public mind as a major civilization, and re-establish themselves as an impressive political entity. Nixon wanted to be seen as the originator of a major foreign policy initiative. And so the Chinese cooperated enthusiastically with the White House efforts."

I said, "You mean the Chinese were, in a sense, 'using' American television."

"Absolutely. And they were very sophisticated about it."

I asked about that expression, 'using' the media:

"There is absolutely no doubt that when an official deals with the press he is trying to 'use' the press. And there is no doubt that when a reporter deals with an official, he is trying to 'use' the official. That has to be faced from the beginning. An official is very unwise---in addition to being morally wrong---"
if he deliberately misleads the press. But the press must understand that the official is there not to please them, but to achieve his objective. Did I sometimes use the press? Yes."

By that, you meant that your statements to the press during a delicate negotiation were sometimes: "consciously designed to evoke a reaction" in the opposing party.

I mentioned that, as you say in your book, your success with the press was sometimes envied by Nixon's inner circle of advisers:

"What they envied is something that was as available to them as it was to me. I had never had any dealings with the press before I came to Washington. I had no idea of the incestuous relationship that develops between men of power in Washington and the press---between officials and journalists whom they meet socially, and yet with whom they are in a partly cooperative and partly antagonistic relationship."

You gave background briefings to the press every now and again:

"My strategy was to hold seminars on foreign policy. I explained what we were trying to do. I think it's a mistake to try to give hot, current, secret news to the press. Most of what is considered secret is very evanescent. What the press really needs is an understanding of what an Administration
is trying to do. So I did that."

And you added:

"But I had no conscious strategy of how to handle the press. I liked most of the journalists I met. I liked them as people, and they probably felt that. I respected their efforts. Much of the Nixon White House, however, was antagonistic toward the press. Unavailable to them. Dealt with them from a posture of hostility. But they all could have done what I did. I had no special secret."

We talked about the several kinds of leaks to the press by public officials, and you said there is no doubt:

"that when you are in office you exaggerate the significance of these internal maneuverings. They outrage you beyond what the normal person can grasp. Today, a lot of that looks ridiculous to me, because one was reacting to the bad intentions of the person doing the leaking."

Still, in connection with leaks:

"In the Nixon Administration, we had near civil war conditions on Vietnam. We had 550,000 men in that country, and it was a very painful process for us to try to extricate them under conditions that did not lead to a total collapse."

Leaks:

"undermined our negotiating flexibility."

With regard to the leak to Dan Rather on your appointment as Secretary of State: It was

"a political maneuver" and "a rather interesting example of how these things work in Washington."

"I asked him whether the thing had come from a friend or from a critic, and he very decently told me it was not from a friendly source. He didn't tell me, obviously, who the source was."

You mentioned that Dan Rather "was not considered a great friend of the Nixon White House", but "that never affected me. You had "no complaint" in those years about his coverage of matters relating to foreign affairs, but a 60 Minutes segment on the price of oil was "extremely unfair." You added: "I think every reporter is entitled to a mistake."

You said you weren't in the habit of complaining to network executives about TV coverage:

"I don't think I ever called the head of a network or any official at a network to complain about television coverage. But that's partly because I didn't always have time to watch the news."

You read transcripts of news broadcasts, which you found:

"rarely objectionable enough to tempt me to call anybody."
With regard to TV fairness:

"the negative on Vietnam was covered more than the positive. Still, I did not believe that those programs were deliberate hatchet jobs."

About the newsmen who travelled on your plane:

"Obviously, I didn't like every television report that was made. I had an unusually distinguished group of reporters with me---Marvin Kalb, Ted Kopple, Richard Valeriani, Barry Dunsmore. These were people who were not just covering with pictures. They really knew something about the substance. I met with them on a thinly-disguised background basis after every meeting I had, and I gave them a sort of philosophical appreciation of what I was trying to do."

Rather than tell them precisely what was said in negotiating session, you gave them "a sense of where I was trying to head" and once they understood that "I was telling the truth about my purposes"....etc.

About the brevity of the evening newscasts:

"I think those programs are anchored by serious, responsible people who would not deliberately distort the news. But they have a maximum of two minutes for each item. And the impact of
what they say is importantly affected by the picture that goes with it. The combination of picture and text can have a very major impact."

About television and Vietnam:

"War is a very unpleasant business. The daily pictures on television were bound to create a feeling of revulsion against the war, and to create the impression that this was something very dirty and nasty. Television obviously couldn't go behind the other side's lines. So the casualties that were being photographed were always on our side of the lines. I guess that's inherent. I wouldn't ask television reporters not to cover the war. But I think any policymaker will have to face this problem in any future conflict. The British were fortunate, in that sense, in the Falkland Islands crisis in that it didn't lend itself to television coverage."

About the last days of Saigon and the TV pictures showing Americans evacuating from the rooftops:

"No, I actually think that was a fair image. That is what happened. The tragedy is that, for five years, before that, there was a systematic
denigration of the effort, and almost all journalists had turned against the war. But so had we. I didn't disagree with the need to end it. I wanted to end it, as did President Nixon, under conditions that were not humiliating for our country, and did not create more troubles elsewhere and more suffering for the people of Indochina."

"When the final collapse came, I think the television pictures reflected it accurately. It was an evacuation from rooftops—maybe the saddest moment in the conduct of foreign policy while I was in office."

About public opinion polls:

"You have to ask yourself: what does the public want from its leaders? I think the public expects its leaders to take it to a better future that they themselves cannot necessarily define. The public will judge its leaders by the results they achieve. Of course, as a leader, one has to take public opinion seriously. But one also has to take seriously one's own judgment of the
consequences of an action, because ultimately the public will not forgive leaders who bring about disaster, even if the disaster resulted from a study of the public's wishes. "You cannot turn for policy, certainly not for foreign policy, to public opinion."

About television and Watergate:

"I learned most of what I know about Watergate from television. In the White House, there was almost never any discussion in which I participated on the substance of Watergate. And I sometimes wonder if there was any discussion. Because everybody kept whatever he knew apparently to himself."

About the live televising of the Watergate hearings, and the fact that accused cannot confront their accusers, nor cross-examine:

"I knew the people involved, and while many of them had done things that were very wrong—when you know them and know their families, you hate to see them in that position."

About improving the evening news shows:

"The first thing is that the evening news programs ought to be an hour. When they report an Andropov
speech, for example, or a Reagan speech, there ought to be more time given to analysis, maybe over a series of evenings so that the average citizen knows what it is that's being proposed here, and what its weak points and strong points are."

About the small audiences for TV documentaries:

"You're still talking about, perhaps, five million people and that's more than you can reach any other way, and more than anybody could have reached thirty years ago."

With regard to the Sunday morning interview programs.
The one you much prefer is This Week with David Brinkley:

"I think that is in a class by itself. It's got a loose structure. He can adjust it better to fast-breaking news."

Still, those Sunday morning programs.

"are not designed for people like me. In my field, presumably I will know the person and I will know more or less what he's going to say."

The interviewee's manner of handling himself "is more interesting to me than what he actually says."
About your own television-watching habits:

"Actually, I hate to tell you. I watch sports, old movies, news and news specials. I watch almost none of the serials. Dallas was on for two years before I saw it. Now I've seen it a few times. I watch football and baseball."

You sometimes tune in the 24-hour-a-day Cable News Network "because you don't have to wait until seven o'clock to find out what's happening in the world."

Your contract with ABC is "a very loose arrangement". "For example, if somebody wanted my views on China, or the general condition of our foreign policy, I would be free to do that for anybody."

The projected PBS series will try to put foreign policy in a "historical perspective" and examine the "philosophy and practice" of diplomacy. You expect that you'll "have to free about a year of my time to do that as my principal activity."

About the fact that you have become the object of great press attention:

"If you asked people who were my colleagues at Harvard before I came to Washington, they would not have predicted---and I would not have predicted---that I would become a subject of great publicity. It may sound unbelievable. I did not seek it."
But President Nixon was somewhat upset when you did become the object of great media attention:

"Absolutely. Any President would. No President likes to share the spotlight."

That ends the direct quotation.

As I mentioned, we like the story pretty much the way it stands, and we hope you do too.

On behalf of the other editors and myself, I'd like to offer our sincere thanks for your cooperation in producing the article. We intend to give it the display it deserves. We know that our readers will be fascinated by your comments and insights.

Very respectfully,

Neil Hickey
Bureau Chief, N.Y.