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Henry A. Kissinger

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*From Our Summer 1978 Issue . . .*

## The Admiral Raymond A. Spruance Lecture

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Henry A. Kissinger

### **I**NTRODUCTION: VICE ADMIRAL JAMES B. STOCKDALE

Under Secretary [of the Navy R. James] Woolsey, ladies and gentlemen:

My interest in the political history of the Vietnam years is intense and tightly focused. It centers on the variations in our national military policy. For you see, I represent a constituency of about 400 Americans who were committed to battle by one administration and rescued by another. I *mean* rescued, because at least 300 of us would still be behind bars if the conditions of our release had entailed appeasement, pardon, amnesty, or any plea or apology from us. Any form of parole is against the Code of Conduct and against what we grew to agree was proper national and personal pride and honor. It is a psychological fact that resolve intensifies rather than decays as the years of degradation wear on.

So we were the guys who cheered the Cambodian operations, booed the bombing pauses, and wept with joy on that magic night of December 18th, 1972, when the B-52s thundered in and commenced the bombing that finally registered a national commitment. We knew from the street sounds and from the reactions of our captors that we were going home at last.

Emotional kooks, were we? Not exactly, for we had sensory inputs that were not available in Washington. We grew to know that pausing and retreats meant gloating and contempt on the streets of Hanoi, and that attacks, blockades, and B-52s brought silent blanching and even solicitousness toward American prisoners. That tells you something right there.

The recent proliferation of written memoirs makes it hard to know whom to credit with what during those years. Naturally, I prefer the version that casts our speaker of the evening as a "hawk of hawks." But of course I was not in Washington in those years and I can't speak with authority. But my wife Sybil *was* there, time after time, when a certain Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs met privately and without fanfare with the wives of the captured and missing. He spent hour after hour with them, month after month, not to get them off his back but to level with them and tell them the truth they deserved to hear. "Vell, ladies," Sybil remembers him saying, "I'm sorry to say that I see

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no hope of relief at all for the next six months and very little for the succeeding six. . . ." Why not appease, promise them victory, as certain others had done for the preceding six years? Because he was not capable of that falsehood, that ultimate cruelty.

Ladies and gentlemen, a diplomat of consummate skill, a man of truth, compassion, and character, a great American, the Honorable Henry Kissinger.

### **D**R. KISSINGER

Admiral Stockdale, Sybil, ladies and gentlemen:

I do not think I have heard any introduction of which I am more proud than this one. I only met the Admiral personally a few minutes ago. Yet I felt I was meeting an old friend, because Mrs. Stockdale visited me frequently throughout a very difficult period. As I said to the Admiral, what moved me most was that never once was I, or the U.S. government, asked to do anything dishonorable, or weak. The ladies whom she headed always knew that the honor of the United States was at stake, that we had to bring the war to a conclusion commensurate with our history and with the sacrifices that had been made.

It is not the fault of those who had fought so bravely and who had suffered so much that our domestic divisions brought it about that an honorable outcome could not be maintained. But I hope that we all learned, from this conflict, not the lessons of defeatism, but the lesson that never again must we permit our domestic divisions to debase what brave men have fought for.

I thought I would speak to you tonight about the relationship of military power to foreign policy in the contemporary period. The Admiral very kindly

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Dr. Kissinger, born in Germany in 1923, came to the United States in 1938 and was naturalized in 1943. He was awarded a bachelor's degree cum laude at Harvard in 1950, earning a doctorate in 1954. He was on the Harvard faculty until 1969, when he was appointed Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs; in 1973 he became Secretary of State, serving until 1977. He is the founder and chairman of Kissinger Associates, Inc., and a member of the Council of Foreign Relations and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is the author of, along with numerous articles, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957), *A World Restored: Castlereagh, Metternich and the Restoration of Peace, 1812–22* (1957), *The Necessity for Choice: Prospects of American Foreign Policy* (1961), *The Troubled Partnership: A Reappraisal of the Atlantic Alliance* (1965), *White House Years* (1979), *For the Record* (1981), *Years of Upheaval* (1982), *Observations: Selected Speeches and Essays* (1984), *Diplomacy* (1994), and *China in the New World Order* (1994).

This article reproduced Dr. Kissinger's Admiral Raymond A. Spruance Lecture of 8 March 1978, at which time he was a university professor of diplomacy at Georgetown University.

suggested that I might do so, relatively briefly. I don't know whether that is because he had read Admiral [Elmo] Zumwalt's book [*On Watch: A Memoir* (1976)] or because he really wanted to leave time for questions. Probably he is also unaware that somebody with a German background will find it difficult to place the requisite number of verbs in a brief period of time. But I will make a few general observations. Then in the question period you can raise any topic that is of concern to you.

If I have learned any lesson in my eight years of government service, it is that the United States, when it applies its power, has only two choices: it can apply it, or not apply it! If it applies it, it will get no rewards for losing with moderation. If power is used, then we have to win. And if we are not prepared to win, then we should not ask people to sacrifice themselves. I think that is the fundamental lesson from which everything else *must* flow.

The second is that, in the crises in which I was involved, the use of naval power—particularly of carrier power—turned out to be almost invariably the crucial element. As the number of our bases around the world is diminishing, the capacity to move our power quickly and without political inhibitions, to signal our determination, is most frequently represented by the deployment of naval ships. Whether this was in the Jordan crisis of 1970, in Cienfuegos in 1970, in October 1973 during the Middle East war, or in several situations in the Indian Ocean, I found that a crucial element.

I feel *very strongly*, and I will have occasion to say so publicly, that I cannot imagine reducing the number of our carriers. If anything, I think we should increase it. Whether they should all be of the super-carrier size is a technical question into which I do not want to delve.

The third point that I would like to make, of a more general nature, is that the most difficult lesson for the United States to learn is the continuing relationship between power and foreign policy. Our founding fathers were sophisticated men who used the European balance of power with extraordinary skill to establish the independence of this country, and then to maintain it for the delicate first generation of our national independence. After that period we were protected by two great oceans and the existence of the British navy, and for over a century we came to believe that we were immune from the experiences of other nations. The balance of power is an invidious term still in many universities. We like to believe that we can prevail through the superiority of our maxims, and of course our moral convictions are of great importance. But there can be no security without equilibrium. There can be no foreign policy without the ability to pose risks and to provide incentives for other nations to conduct themselves with restraint.

Outsiders, academics, and journalists can contemplate events, but statesmen have to assess the risks to their country—the alternatives that the country faces.

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Foreign statesmen have to make their judgments on the basis of the performance of the United States, or of any other country with which they have a relationship.

Among the free countries today only the United States possesses the military capabilities and the domestic cohesion to maintain the world balance of power. Without our commitment there can be no security. Without our dedication there can be no progress.

This has confronted us with a novel experience. In the past all the challenges that the United States recognized as such proved to be manageable. We could wait until a threat became overwhelming before we dealt with it, and we could then deal with it through a massive deployment of resources. We forget that at the beginning of both world wars, if the security of the world had depended on the American understanding of the nature of the danger, the aggressors would have won. We were lucky that there were other countries willing to commit themselves before we did. That gave us the margin of time to wait to assess the danger.

I say this because the most difficult problem for any national leader is this: when the scope for action is great, the knowledge on which to base such action is at a minimum. When the knowledge is greatest, the scope for action has very often disappeared.

In 1936 one French division could have stopped the German reoccupation of the Rhineland. Professors would still be arguing today whether Hitler was a misunderstood nationalist or a maniac bent on world domination. Five years later everybody knew that he was a maniac bent on world domination, but it was a knowledge acquired at the cost of millions of lives. If you want moral assurance, you must be willing to pay a tremendous physical price. If you want to reduce suffering, you have to be prepared to act on an assessment which you cannot prove at the time it is made.

In 1975 I was one of those in our government who believed that the massive commitment of Soviet military equipment and Cuban combat troops in Angola represented a potential threat to the United States. I believed that, if the Soviet Union could operate at the farthest conceivable point from its territory, and if it could introduce a proxy army from a small Caribbean country thousands of miles away, this would create massive problems later on. Again, we were prevented from achieving our aims by our domestic disputes—and are paying the price for it today in the Horn of Africa. I daresay that in the Horn of Africa the precedent is being created for even more complex challenges, maybe in southern Africa and maybe in the Middle East.

It is not possible to have stability if there is one country or a group of countries that is free to upset any local equilibrium it chooses by introducing any amount of arms and any degree of foreign troops. Of course we must stand for aspirations of humanity and principles of human dignity. However, these aspirations and

such principles will not be decisive for leaders who are confronted by opponents of those principles, backed by the Soviet Union and by Cuban troops with Soviet arms.

Therefore, any nation, and particularly the leading nation in the free world, has to decide what it will resist and by what means. What force is relevant, and in what proportion? In this respect, we face a situation which is not only unprecedented in our history, but in human history. Never before have there been weapons capable of destroying humanity. Never before has there been a situation in which additions to the military arsenal, in some categories of power, do not automatically produce a political benefit.

Before World War II it would have seemed preposterous that any country could possess too much power for effective political use. But today, in the field of strategic weapons, the problem is to establish some relationship between the weapons and the objectives that a nation can want to achieve. Therefore, depending upon the kind of weapons that a nation builds, determining one's ability to use them and the type of situation that is most likely have become matters of extraordinary difficulty.

For the greater part of the postwar period this was obscured, because American nuclear superiority was so overwhelming that it could act as a restraint on aggressiveness—at least by major powers. But the moment is clearly approaching—it probably is already here—when, while strategic forces are crucial to prevent a strategic attack, the international equilibrium will be importantly shaped by the capacity for regional defense. As one looks ahead to the next five to ten years, we are heading into a period of grave peril. It is not possible to be behind in every significant weapons category without paying some political price, somewhere down the road. This is independent of the issue of whether the Soviet Union has a design for world domination. Even if they do not have such a design, crises will arise—not necessarily planned—in which the capacity for local intervention will be decisive. If we are ever made to back down in the face of a Soviet challenge, then the whole pattern of international relations in Nato, in the Middle East, and in East Asia will change.

Let me say a few additional words in this connection about our relations with the Soviet Union. We have never, in our history, confronted a country of roughly comparable strength over an extended period of time. We have never before been the guardians of the international balance of power. When one is the guardian of the international balance of power, one has to be prepared to prevent changes which, if permitted to go unchecked, could get out of control. A great deal then depends on one's sophisticated understanding of the requirements of equilibrium. We have never faced a challenge that is ideologically and militarily as complicated for us as that from the communist societies. Finally,

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we have never had to act under conditions in which the survival of mankind depends on our ability to prevent a general war.

How to maintain peace and justice at the same time; how to prevent the desire for peace from turning into a unilateral disarmament; and how, at the same time, to prevent conflict from getting out of hand—those impose enormous challenges to our contemporary statesmanship.

Our problem derives in part from the fact that communist ideology has a great faith in what the communists call “objective factors.” They believe that decisions of statesmen do not derive from what they call “subjective views” but from the industrial processes, the class structure, and the objective balance of forces. The attitude, therefore, of Soviet and other communist diplomats towards American diplomats is that of American psychiatrists towards their patients: no matter what we tell them, they believe that they understand us better than we understand ourselves.

On the other hand, we are constantly under pressure to demonstrate our good will, to make a concession. When I was secretary of state, how often did I receive papers that said, “Of course it isn’t such a good idea, but why don’t we probe it, to see what flexibility there is?”

Now, I do not believe that communist leaders negotiate this way. They do not feel any obligation to respond to demonstrations of good will. If the balance of forces is correctly calculated, then of course one should make a reasonable proposal. But if it is not correctly calculated, good will is not a substitute.

During the Vietnam war, when I had the dubious privilege of negotiating with Mr. Le Duc Tho [chief North Vietnamese negotiator at the Geneva talks], he began every meeting with a 50-minute speech, which was word-for-word the same thing, in order to wear us down. The American newspapers presented the negotiations as if they were a detective story in which the Vietnamese were throwing out vague clues and it was our responsibility to guess at their answers. If we missed, and if one of these complicated statements was somehow overlooked, then we had missed what was called “a great chance for peace.”

On one occasion the North Vietnamese made a nine-point proposal publicly, and a seven-point proposal secretly; then they asked us to negotiate the seven-point proposal and beat us to death publicly for not responding to the nine-point proposal. Never in this four-year period did anybody even hint that *just maybe* it was statistically impossible that the United States was always wrong!

I am not saying that force determines the outcome of every negotiation. I am saying that for communists not to take advantage of a physical opportunity is theoretically impossible. On the other hand, for them not to settle when the balance of forces is unfavorable is also impossible. There is no sense in making a concession in the abstract, but there’s also no sense in turning everything into a test of manhood.

To understand this relationship between power and diplomacy, and to understand it in the context of building a structure of peace—that has been the most difficult task for the United States. I have believed—and I still do—that it is important to explore means of restraining the competition with the Soviet Union. But I also think that we can never do this successfully unless we are strong enough so that they know we have an alternative.

I have been in favor—not of any one particular proposal but in principle—of negotiating with the Soviet Union on strategic arms limitation. I also believe that we cannot possibly permit ourselves to fall behind in the strategic arms race while these negotiations are going on.

Above all, I believe that it is not possible to negotiate with the Soviet Union on isolated problems. I have believed, and I continue to believe, that linkage is not an invention of a particular administration but an inherent necessity of the contemporary period. We cannot permit the Soviet Union to negotiate with us selectively, to use the negotiations with us to lower the temperature in one area while they exploit difficulties in another. I do not believe that what is happening in the Horn of Africa is compatible with a relaxation of tensions. It is certain that if it is not brought to a stop, the process will continue until a confrontation becomes inevitable.

These are the general problems for the United States today. Only the United States is strong enough and cohesive enough to play the role of global leadership. Only the United States can conduct a foreign policy that gives hope to other peoples against military pressures, and enhances prospects to achieve their more positive aspirations. We have to learn that the fundamental national interest of the United States is not something that can be redefined every four or eight years. It is disquieting to other nations, regardless of what party comes into office, to pretend that we can constantly invent new doctrines and new answers. For the sake of international stability, at some point our fundamental objectives have to be seen as settled, and then pursued on an essentially bipartisan—and permanent—national basis.

As one looks around the world today at the potential for fundamental changes, the role of the United States becomes more and more decisive. We all are familiar with the situation in the Middle East. I have referred to the crisis in the Horn of Africa. Our fundamental relationship with China depends *decisively* on their assessment of whether we are capable of maintaining the international equilibrium. And certainly that is also the history of Japan.

I was in office for eight years while we tore ourselves to pieces in an orgy of national masochism. I have stated, with respect to my successors, that I am prepared to do whatever is in my power to bring about unity and cooperation. But this unity has to express itself in terms of concrete objectives, which maintain the United States as a relevant factor in international affairs.



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It is crucial for other societies to know that restraint must be mutual. I believe that it is essential that other nations understand that the United States is aware of its long-term interests, and that it has the means and the will to protect them!

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