

October 5, 2006

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Ghost of the Oval Office

By **JAMES MANN**

Washington

ON the surface, it sounds implausible: why would former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, the world's best-known proponent of balance-of-power diplomacy, give advice to the Bush administration, whose professed strategy and ideals run contrary to his philosophy?

And, conversely, why would the president and his aides consult Mr. Kissinger? After all, their National Security Strategy of 2006 dropped the idea that America should even pursue a balance of power. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared last year that the United States has abandoned 60 years of trying to "buy stability at the expense of democracy" in the Middle East. What could possibly be more un-Kissingerian? Mr. Kissinger has warned for decades against placing too much emphasis on democracy, human rights or moral values in foreign policy.

Yet Bob Woodward's new book, "State of Denial," describes how Vice President Dick Cheney has met with Mr. Kissinger at least once a month, and President Bush has talked to Mr. Kissinger frequently. The book portrays the 83-year-old Mr. Kissinger as the single most frequent outside adviser to Mr. Bush on foreign policy. The meetings are not some recent innovation; previous news reports have indicated Mr. Kissinger advised the administration back in Mr. Bush's first term, too.

One might at first be tempted to attribute this curious relationship to the simple notion of elitism — the idea that there are only a handful of officials who have actually run American foreign policy and therefore only a few people for Messrs. Bush and Cheney to consult.

But this explanation doesn't hold up. Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski, who served as national security advisers for Mr. Bush's father and for Jimmy Carter, respectively, are among the same foreign-policy elite (and Mr. Scowcroft, in particular, has long shared Mr. Kissinger's philosophical commitment to realism in foreign policy). Yet the Bush administration has consulted with neither of these men to the same extent as it has Mr. Kissinger, perhaps because both have openly challenged current foreign policy more than he has.

So Mr. Kissinger's role seems to be unique. Yet it is not all that surprising, when you look at his own history and that of previous administrations. Since Mr. Kissinger left government in 1977, he and several presidents have subtly made use of each other in similar fashion.

Differences in ideology have rarely been obstacles to the mutual seductions of the Kissinger Schmooze. Mr. Kissinger maintains his access to the White House and insider status, while administrations obtain a sense of validation for their policies.

It also helps for a president to know that he is keeping Mr. Kissinger on board — that even if Mr. Kissinger were to conclude that an administration's policies were dead wrong, or stupid, or directly contrary to his own philosophy, he wouldn't say so in public. (In 2002, Mr. Kissinger was reported in newspaper articles to have broken ranks with the Bush administration on Iraq; but Mr. Kissinger, quickly made plain that his views had been misinterpreted.)

Ronald Reagan campaigned against Mr. Kissinger in 1976 when he challenged President Gerald Ford in the Republican primaries, not only condemning Mr. Kissinger's policies but promising that if elected, he would replace him as secretary of state. But once Mr. Reagan won the Republican nomination in 1980 and went on to the White House, Mr. Kissinger's relationship to the Reagan administration was not an adversarial one.

When President Reagan branded the Soviet Union an "evil empire," thus seeming to contradict both Mr. Kissinger's past policies and his views of foreign policy, Mr. Kissinger minimized the significance of the speech; he wrote that it was up to Soviet officials to choose when to be insulted. Mr. Reagan appointed Mr. Kissinger to head a bipartisan commission on Central America in an effort to build a consensus for his administration's policy.

Mr. Kissinger's advisory role has not been not confined to Republican administrations. When Bill Clinton, campaigning for the presidency in 1992, denounced the deadly 1989 crackdown on the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in Beijing, he took aim at the underpinnings of the China policy that Mr. Kissinger had established. Yet two years later, when President Clinton announced he was abandoning efforts to link China's trade benefits to improvements in human rights, aides reported that Mr. Kissinger had been one of Mr. Clinton's leading outside advisers.

Some might hypothesize that Mr. Kissinger's perpetual re-emergence as *éminence grise* reflects the tendency of presidents to change their views after taking office and gradually move in Mr. Kissinger's direction. That explanation would apply to Mr. Clinton's turnabout on China policy, for example. But the theory doesn't work so well for Mr. Reagan, who even late in his administration was out of tune with Mr. Kissinger. In 1987, Mr. Kissinger complained that the Reagan administration was moving unwisely towards an arms-control agreement with Mikhail Gorbachev; it was one of the few instances where Mr. Kissinger has taken on a president in public, and in that instance Mr. Kissinger did so in the role of a hawk.

The current Bush administration does not appear to have gone through any evolution towards Kissingerian realism, at least not if you look at the president's public remarks. Although Mr. Bush gave one speech invoking democratic ideals on the eve of the Iraq war, it was not until his second inaugural address, in January 2005, that he really made democratic freedom the centerpiece of his foreign policy. He has done so ever since. So rhetorically, at least, Mr. Bush has been moving further and further away from a Kissingerian foreign policy.

There remains the possibility that Mr. Bush's actual views may differ from his pro-democracy rhetoric. Perhaps he talks about democracy in public but not in private. If so, that would help explain why he has been so quiet about the regular meetings with Mr. Kissinger.

More likely, however, the president and Mr. Kissinger do not see any need to try to reconcile the chasm between the administration's avowed commitment to spreading democracy and Mr. Kissinger's career-long admonitions against any such efforts. Mr. Kissinger is like the Oval Office furniture; for presidents, he is always in the background. Advising the White House is what he does. And presidents usually seem to think that a part of

conducting foreign policy is to talk to Mr. Kissinger, even if it goes nowhere.

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