

The Master of Malarkey

Every charlatan knows that the easiest swindles are always put over on the stupidly corrupt, the dull riffraff of the world. That is why it is so difficult to admire the attainments of Henry Kissinger, Ph.D. He has spent nearly eight years duping the most willing marks in the Republic, to wit, the congenital gulls who populate the Washington press corps, the halls of Congress, and the intellectual salons of that incomparable city. Had he spent his life selling aphrodisiacs to high school boys or tracts of Marxian mumbo-jumbo to college students, I could have warmed up a little admiration for him. But Dr. Kissinger practiced his arts in Washington, a city whose population thrives on really idiotic delusions. Poor Washingtonians patronize palmists. In fact Washington has more professional palmists than any other city of its-size in the country, a phenomenon little noted by local pundits but plainly observable to astonished visitors from more civilized parts. Rich Washingtonians patronize a much wider assortment of outlets for fantasy, starting with hundreds of units of the federal government and ending with spurious French restaurants that have more in common with the late Stork Club than with the Tour d'Argent. Dr. Kissinger's molting career can be explained solely in terms of Washington's delusions.

I can think of no other city in either hemisphere where pretense is so lofty and talent so scrawny. It is the domain of the fourth-rater, abounding with fourth-rate chiselers, fourth-rate liars, fourth-rate thieves, and more lawyers per square foot than Lompoc, California. Architecturally and culturally it is somewhat suggestive of Little Rock. Intellectually it is at one with Yellow Springs, Ohio, the location of Antioch College. And socially it is a vast stew of ravening ambition, imbecilic values, and prehensile behavior. Its sole indigenous industry is the production of empty rhetoric and costly confusion. After the most exacting contemplations, I can think of no more than eight useful and dignified individuals living within its bounds, and I am loath to divulge their names for fear that by doing so I may expose them to imminent bodily injury, perhaps even harassment by a Congressional committee.

Into such a sink no truly self-respecting swindler would ever venture, yet late in 1968 Dr. Kissinger set up his concession and he was soon able to congratulate himself upon becoming the town's number one attraction—a Barnum amongst Naders, a Bailey amongst Kennedys. He had hoodwinked everyone from the villainous Richard Milhous Nixon to the pants pressers at the *Washington Post*, reporters whose very careers depend on crank calls from the bureaucracy. Still it

is my melancholy burden to observe that his is not a glorious achievement. As swindles go his bamboozling of the Washingtonians is about on a par with peddling a bogus biography of Howard Hughes to McGraw-Hill. All he did was beguile eager chumps; facile deceptions were not always his profession.

Mr. Kissinger began as an intellectual of genuine promise. His scholarly writings distinguished him as learned, perspicacious, and committed to sound values. Lamentably, after nearly eight years in Washington he has violated practically every wise line he ever wrote. Serious scholarship apparently made him restless. He journeyed to the lurid haze of Washington, and what has become of him? After becoming a personage of the first water, he fell to his present dubious eminence: just another Washington pretender, a dutiful believer in the unbelievable, a devotee of conspiracies and sham. Soon he will be hunkering out of town—a charlatan debauched by his own act, addicted to his own horse hairs, undone by the mores and the folkways of the vulgarians he manipulated so smoothly. Sadness wells up within me.

Washington has never in this century been estimable for its advanced level of civilization. It has had its worthy citizens, of course, and there have been noble experiments—the opening of Saint Elizabeth's Hospital comes to mind, and Coolidge's attempt to govern the United States between late breakfasts and early lunches. Nevertheless, it is only in recent years that the entire city has given itself over to a single-minded and prehensile pursuit of delusion that has about it an aura of the metaphysically colossal. All through Europe people speak of it in hushed tones. Its extravagances are quietly admired in many Latin American capitals. I have it from learned anthropologists that legends from the fabulous city have even found their way into spiritual exercises practiced in the dank of aboriginal rain forests. It all began on January 20, 1961, when a wealthy young swell was inaugurated President of these United States.

Attractive, hollow, and about as silly as Red Skelton, John F. Kennedy could not stand to be alone, and so he brought to Washington an entourage that made Harding's poker cronies look like the Founding Fathers by comparison. The mob was laced with politicians of every cut, but it also contained burnt-out artists, intellectualoid speech writers, and—most pernicious of all—equal parts of Hollywood and Cambridge. Overnight the District of Columbia was transformed from a drab seat of government enveloped in a vaguely Southern drowse into an Eastern Seaboard version of Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Almost every-

thing the Kennedy crowd produced was illusory, from its election-year "missile gap" to its jihad against Communism abroad and social injustice at home. In truth, not all of its accomplishments were vaporous. The Kennedys did leave America in the Indochinese war, and, with their Cuban missile crisis, they managed to set off a costly and ominous arms race. But for the most part all they bequeathed to American government was a set of problems, a style of politics, and a public philosophy of immense hypocrisy and delusion. In a whirl of rhetoric, problems were set up that were not problems. Ideals were celebrated that were beyond fulfillment. Fame was bestowed on mediocrities, and fortunes were amassed. "Audacity" was what Arthur Schlesinger thought characterized the Kennedy Administration; when the villainous Nixon attempted to emulate it, Mr. Schlesinger and his kin put it down as "abuse of Presidential power." Mr. Nixon was banished to California, yet Washington still celebrates the extravagant style and the specious values. The streets remain aswarm with clever operators pursuing preposterous dreams of power, glory, and boodle.

Dr. Kissinger was familiar with Washington's ways before he arrived. He had carefully calculated the potential power to be realized by a plump, middle-aged professor waddling hither and yon with Hollywood *artistes*. He realized that Washingtonians would be defenseless when he brought his wit to the Georgetown cocktail circuit. He understood the cachet stamped upon the man who lunches at Sans Souci with the ambiguously talented celebrities of that singular vicinage. And he had developed a facility with sonorous evasions that was to surpass the artistry of even the most seasoned local eminentoes. The tactics performed as expected, but Dr. Kissinger's greatest con still awaited the grand breakthrough.

Sometime early in the first Nixon Administration—I leave it to historians to fix the precise date—Dr. Kissinger hit upon a discovery so stupendous that within months he was spoken of throughout Washington as "Super Henry," "Super K.," etc., etc. The pundits were in thrall. Soon they were crying for his appointment as Secretary of State. The Brothers Kalb even dreamt of higher office. What Dr. Kissinger had discovered was the mysterious influence to be conferred upon a government official who remains airborne in a Presidential Boeing 707. Henceforth Dr. Kissinger hardly landed for a change of toothbrush. He flew to Rome, to Paris, and to London. He became a terrible nuisance in Saigon. At

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Vic Gold

Precisely Twelve Minutes with Silent Cal

Readers of *The Alternative* need no reminder that July 4, 1976 marks a historic date in the development of Western political thought and the conservative ideal of a free society. For on that day—one would hope—millions of discerning Americans in all parts of the world will pause a moment in their Bicentennial celebrations to commemorate the 104th anniversary of the birth of Calvin Coolidge.

Coolidge: there was an American President both of, and ahead of, his time. A political leader whose essential political philosophy—"Promises and good intentions are not enough. We cannot afford rash experiments"—was as contemporary as a paragraph from one of Jerry Brown's better speeches. And Jerry Brown, as we know, is nothing less than the avant garde of the New Politics of 1976, a young American politician admired by most, if not all, of the selfsame critics who put Cal Coolidge down as a Presidential joke.

Indeed, 43 years after his death, the real Coolidge is as much an enigma to his countrymen as he was the day he took office as President, August 3, 1923, following the passing of Warren G. Harding from a mixed diet of rotten crabmeat and political associates. The Coolidge "image"—to use a term the man himself would disdain—remains a rippled distortion in the circus mirror of twentieth-century history.

Thus, despite a latter-day nostalgia binge that finds stage and television audiences held in thrall by historical recreations of the down-home characters of Mark Twain, Will Rogers, and Harry Tru-

man, the suggestion of *An Evening with Calvin Coolidge* falls on deaf theatrical ears.

To be sure, we may charge off the unlikelihood of a *Keep 'em Cool, Calvin!* production to the undoubted liberal Democratic bias of producers like David Susskind and actors like Hal Holbrook and James Whitmore. Yet, in fairness, the most ardent Coolidge buff must concede that to a large extent our hero, by assiduously cultivating the myth of Yankee laconism during his years in the White House, brought many of his troubles on himself.

What was Calvin Coolidge *really* like? Anticipating that question this landmark anniversary year, *The Alternative* in mid-1975 launched a search for an answer; not a conventional search either, but an unprecedented quest for a definitive answer, beyond the limited biographical data that cover the complex career and character of our thirtieth President, beyond, that is, William Allen White's *A Puritan in Babylon*, beyond Duff Gilfond's *The Rise of St. Calvin*, beyond John Hiram McKee's *Coolidge Wit & Wisdom*.

Specifically, the editors assigned Vic Gold, a pioneer practitioner of the art of occult journalism, to track down the spirit of Silent Cal and get him to talk, on-the-record. Gold's credentials for this assignment are impressive. Possessed of a hyperactive imagination, a large measure of impressionability, and a willingness, if not zeal, to put words into other people's mouths, he has in recent times conducted successful occult interviews with such luminous spirits as Niccolo Machiavelli, El Cid, Clyde Barrow, Madame de Staël,

and, only six months ago, Jerry Brown himself.

After the usual false leads—Buenos Aires; the spot where Amelia Earhart's plane was last sighted; the Tibetan Himalayas—Gold finally located Coolidge at, of all predictable sites, the late President's beloved summer White House in the Black Hills of South Dakota. There ensued weeks of negotiations regarding interview groundrules; but all was happily resolved, and we present the following question-and-answer session as transcribed, in line with Mr. Coolidge's wishes, by his trusted Presidential aide, C. Bascom Slemph.

U.S. News & World Report, eat your heart out...

Q: Mr. Coolidge, you succeeded a Republican President whose Administration had gone down in disgrace. Some contemporary viewers of the political scene compare Gerald Ford's 1976 problems to your own when you ran for a full term in 1924. Do you see such a parallel?

C: None whatever.

Q: Would you care to elaborate on that subject a bit?

C: I'd prefer not. But seeing I agreed to talk to you 12 minutes—keep track of your timepiece, Slemph—I allow I am obliged to. You want to know if I see a parallel, as you call it, between Teapot and Watergate? I say, none. Teapot came out of a corruption of the flesh. I don't condone it, but I comprehend it. Fall, Daugherty, Doheny, Sinclair. All those birds were out for money. Pure and sim-