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Philip Geyelin Kissinger Sees The Confusion

As Jeane Kirkpatrick might put it, the Reagan Republicans always blame the U.S. Congress first. When it's not President Reagan pounding the table for the benefit of the president of Honduras, it's Secretary of State George Shultz lambasting the lawmakers for paralyzing U.S. policy in Nicaragua.

The administration has a point. "Micro-management by a committee of 535 independent-minded individuals," as Shultz once said, "is a grossly inefficient and ineffective way to run any important enterprise." "Surely," the secretary went on, "there is a better way." Indeed, there is. Try this: "We have to make a fundamental decision with respect to Nicaragua. First, what is it we actually want to achieve? . . . We have to make sure that we know what our objective is and that we then select the means that are appropriate to that objective."

That's Henry Kissinger talking, in a recently published interview that deserved more attention than it got, the more so since Kissinger was Ronald Reagan's hand-picked choice to head up the bipartisan commission on Central America.

True to form, Kissinger held Congress "largely responsible" for whatever's wrong. But consider his next, pregnant sentence: "I think the administration is also partly to blame in its inability to make up its mind on its objectives and on its views and to put its objectives to the American public in a manner that the American public can grasp." He adds: "I think there is no precise relationship between

the rhetoric we put forward and the measures we are taking." He accepts the rhetoric, but he can't figure out what objectives it is supposed to achieve.

He is baffled by whether the administration wants "a reduction of the Sandinistas' military and intelligence capability and elimination of the Cuban forces" or "a transformation of the government." If it's the latter, he is still less clear in his mind about whether it is "enough for us that the Sandinistas maintaining power permit some democratic opposition, or do we actually want the Sandinistas to be overthrown?"

He is downright scornful of the administration's program for supposedly covert aid to the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionary forces (the so-called contras). If the administration is serious about the "vital interest" it sees in Nicaragua, Kissinger argues, "it is absolutely unclear to me how a vital interest can be served by a \$14 million project. If that were all there is to it, you could go to a foundation and get the money." So what would he do? "Absolutely nothing for about four weeks." He would then "design a strategy and explain it to the American public, and then take a comprehensive series of steps, not stopping until we have achieved them."

When Henry Kissinger is saying that the administration "has to make up its mind because if it does not, it may wind up with the worst of all worlds," you have to have some sympathy with congressional critics, including some Republicans, who are saying much the same thing. This is all the more the case when Kissinger goes on to question whether the administration and the president are even capable of making "long-range strategic decisions that relate various aspects to each other."

If they aren't, then the question is not whether Congress is a poor practitioner of foreign policy but whether Congress should be castigated for not giving the administration what it wants when the administration is unable or unwilling to say clearly what it wants it for.