OBSERVATIONS

Was Kissinger Right?

Gabriel Schoenfeld

SERVING AS National Security Adviser and Secretary of State to Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Henry Kissinger dazzled the world for eight years with his masterful performance on the diplomatic stage. Over the course of his term in office, every instrument of modern statecraft—shuttle diplomacy, crisis management, square- and round-table negotiations, global nuclear alerts—was employed to stunning effect, if not to approbation, in the world media and press.

Yet when American voters ejected the hapless Gerald Ford from office in 1976 and returned Kissinger to private life, many were left wondering whether what they had just witnessed was nothing more than a botched circus performance, a high-wire act conducted without a net. In every direction one looked, America's standing had plummeted to a new postwar low and the prospect was one of further disarray, chaos, and retreat.

Though the United States had entered the 1970's as the strongest industrial power in the world, beginning with the OPEC embargo of October 1973 a handful of oil-rich but militarily insignificant states had managed to put the economies of the United States and its allies on the rack. Though Kissinger and Nixon had bent every effort to extricate the United States with honor from the war in Southeast Asia, in 1975 came ignominious and agonizing defeat. And though Kissinger, Nixon, and Ford had striven to forge a more constructive relationship with America's most dangerous adversary, by 1976 détente was in ruins as the USSR recklessly ignited brushfires in distant corners of the globe and raced ahead in a menacing arms build-up.

Victory, it is said, has a hundred fathers but defeat is an orphan. In *Years of Renewal*, the third volume of his monumental trilogy of memoirs,* Kissinger does not rush to claim paternity for the cascade of disasters that came to a culmination in the Ford presidency. In part, as his very title suggests, Kissinger denies that the period was a disaster at all: the Ford administration, he writes, "could take pride in a long list of foreign-policy accomplishments." Yet at the same time he hardly ignores the inescapable facts. Instead, while accepting responsibility for a number of misjudgments and missteps, he freely points a finger of blame: at the terrible cards the two administrations he served had been dealt by the presidencies of Lyndon B. Johnson and John F. Kennedy; at the malignant political legacy left by Richard Nixon's personal flaws; at the isolationism that seized the American Left and Congress as Vietnam dragged on; at the betrayal of national security by the leadership of the CIA and its congressional overseers; at the ineptitude and weakness of key players on Ford's White House staff; and at the failure of American conservatives, especially including the neoconservatives around COMMENTARY, to rally to the flag of his embattled policies.

Some of the finger-pointing that one finds throughout Kissinger's book appears to be transparently self-serving, the wily Machiavellian now skillfully manipulating the past

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in order to secure his own place in it. As his account is buttressed, however, by a wealth of documentation, one would do well to consider that much of it may be justified.

SORTING OUT the issues is no easy task. *Years of Renewal* ranges widely, stepping back to traverse ground already covered in the preceding volumes of the series while presenting in close but immensely readable detail every aspect of the Ford administration's diplomacy from its maneuvering through the labyrinth of the Cyprus crisis to its fumbling in the dark comedy of the *Mayaguez* affair.* Undoubtedly, however, two of the most important issues it takes up revolve around the war in Indochina and U.S. relations with the USSR.

Consider, to begin with, Kissinger's account of American policy toward Cambodia and Vietnam. When Gerald Ford assumed office following Richard Nixon's resignation on August 9, 1974, the Paris Peace Accords had already been on the books for a year and a half. Kissinger contends that he and Nixon had been clear from the start about the flaws in this settlement between North and South Vietnam. He never harbored any "illusions," he writes, that Hanoi's "dour, fanatical leaders had abandoned their lifetime struggle." As he warned Nixon in a memo at the time, only an American readiness to intervene could uphold the precarious cease-fire. But he also expected—"naively," he notes here—that the antiwar movement in the United States "would be able to find satisfaction in the ending of hostilities" and that its agitations against American assistance to Saigon would cease.

As Kissinger predicted, the North Vietnamese did flagrantly violate the 1973 agreement from day one. But as he failed to predict, the "peace movement" in the United States did not die out; as quickly became evident, it would settle for nothing less than a complete rout of America's allies in Indochina. And by the time that rout did in fact begin, America's capacity to answer Hanoi with military power had been stripped away by events well beyond Kissinger's control.

One such event was Watergate, which by the autumn of 1973 had thoroughly undermined executive authority and poisoned the American body politic, destroying in the process the last vestiges of political will for further American exertions in Southeast Asia. Only six months after the Paris Accords were concluded, Congress barred the further use of American force "in or over Indochina," rendering the agreement impossible to uphold. Despite Ford and Kissinger's intensive lobbying, the provision of supplies that might have given South Vietnam a chance to defend itself on its own was progressively slashed by Congress, from $2.1 billion in 1973 to $1 billion in 1974 to a paltry $700 million in 1975 (not all of which was actually disbursed).

AS SOUTH VIETNAM, deprived of sustenance and support, began to crumble, even longtime congressional supporters of the war turned their backs. Although Kissinger finds villains across the political spectrum, he singles out for special censure the late Democratic Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, "scourge of détente and Ford administration critic for its alleged softness on Communism," who in early 1975 abandoned his perduring support for the war and, to "our immense surprise and huge disappointment," voted to throw South Vietnam to the wolves just as it entered a last desperate struggle to survive.

With the United States reduced to the role of bystander, the fall came swiftly. Cambodia succumbed first. As he does also with Vietnam, Kissinger retells the riveting tale, recounting how, as the Khmer Rouge closed in on the capital city of Phnom Penh in early April 1975, the United States offered a number of Cambodian officials a chance to escape. The reply addressed to the U.S. ambassador by Sirik Matak, a former Cambodian prime minister, and reprinted by Kissinger in full, is one of the more important documents of the entire Vietnam-war era.

> Dear Excellency and Friend:
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> I thank you very sincerely for your letter and for your offer to transport me towards freedom. I cannot, alas, leave in such a cowardly fashion. As for you, and in particular for your great country, I never believed for a moment that you would have this sentiment of abandoning a people which has chosen liberty. You have refused us your protection, and we can do nothing about it.
>
> You leave, and my wish is that you and your country will find happiness under this sky. But, mark it well, that if I shall die here on the spot and in my country that I love, it is no matter, because we are all born and must die. I have only committed this mistake of believing in you [the Americans].
>
> Please accept, Excellency and dear friend, my faithful and friendly sentiments.

Immediately after the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh, writes Kissinger, Sirik Matak was shot in the stomach and left to die over the course of three days from his untreated wounds.

In the beginning, middle, and end of this episode, Kissinger shows to telling effect, the barbaric nature of the Communist Khmer Rouge was painted over in soothing tones

* This latest volume is well supplemented by another new book, *The Kissinger Transcripts* (New Press, 515 pp., $30.00). Though marred by the tendentious commentary of its editor, William Burr, it provides the official memoranda of Kissinger's highly classified conversations with Leonid Brezhnev, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and other Communist leaders, offering an indelible picture of the virtuoso at work and an eye-opening glimpse of how diplomacy was actually carried out at the highest levels during some of the most dramatic moments of the nuclear age.

by much of the American press. The *New York Times* was the most flagrant offender. In one dispatch, its correspondent Sydney Schanberg described a ranking Khmer Rouge leader as a "French-educated intellectual" who wanted nothing more than "to fight against feudal privileges and social inequities." A bloodbath was unlikely, Schanberg reported: "since all are Cambodians, an accommodation will be found." As the last Americans were withdrawn, another upbeat article by Schanberg appeared under the headline, "Indochina Without Americans: For Most, a Better Life." In short order, the Khmer Rouge proceeded to march nearly two million of their fellow Cambodians to their deaths in the killing fields. Also in short order, Schanberg went on to greater glory and a Pulitzer prize.*

KISSINGER IS at his most bitter when judging those who contributed to the tragedy of Southeast Asia, writing that the period "still evokes a sinking feeling in me, composed in equal parts of sadness for the victims and shame for how they were abandoned." But if his most poignant regrets concern Vietnam, he also does not spare the lash when it comes to those whom he deems at fault for the collapse of détente, his grand strategic edifice aimed at a relaxation of tensions with the USSR and thus at easing the American burden not only in Vietnam but in the East-West struggle as a whole.

By the time Nixon took office in 1969, Kissinger maintains, the American public had been "drained by twenty years of cold-war exertions and the increasing frustrations with Vietnam." Under these circumstances, the challenge was to find a middle ground between two dangers: on the one hand, an abdication of the American responsibility for containing the Soviet bear and, on the other hand, a no less reckless decision to challenge it frontally. Instead, by means of a mixture of carrots and sticks, "we intended," writes Kissinger, "to nudge the Soviet colossus into transforming itself from a cause into a state capable of being influenced by traditional calculations of reward and punishment, thereby at first easing the cold war and ultimately transcending it."

But as Kissinger also recounts, such a happy transcendence of the conflict was not to occur, at least not on his watch. Although in Nixon's first term relations with the USSR had been relatively smooth, starting in 1972, the year that marked the apogee of détente, things began to unravel. The problem, in Kissinger's retelling, was not so much the conduct of Leonid Brezhnev and company but the unholy alliance between the American Left and Right that impeded the administration's best efforts to keep the Soviet Union restrained.

Liberals, their program of propitiating the USSR having been stolen and embraced by their nemesis Richard Nixon, now began embracing causes like human rights and initiatives on arms control that were more radical than those the administration itself was advancing—with the aim, in Kissinger's words, of going "where they thought Nixon could not follow them." After their triumph at the polls in the first post-Watergate elections of 1974, congressional Democrats proceeded systematically to deprive the administration of the implements it needed to punish the Soviet Union for misbehavior. The defense budget was progressively slashed, and the administration was forbidden by law from aiding anti-Soviet forces in pivot points like Angola where the USSR was demonstrating unprecedented global reach.

Conservatives, for their part, perceived Nixon's conciliatory rhetoric toward the USSR as both a betrayal of the anti-Communist cause and an opportunistic effort to expand his domestic political base, and they undertook to check his Soviet policy at every turn. On the Center-Right, Senator Jackson and his highly influential aide Richard Perle, in part out of an honest disagreement with policy and in part for crass political gain—Jackson planned to seek the presidential nomination of the Democratic party in 1976—appeared determined to throw one wrench after another into the works. In public and behind the scenes, these two men worked skillfully to deprive the administration of carrots, blocking the expansion of trade, derailing arms control through spurious and arcane objections to administration proposals, and demanding ever greater levels of Jewish emigration from the USSR (even as the Nixon and Ford administrations were making progress in this area behind the scenes).†

Particularly baneful, in Kissinger's telling, was the unrelenting hawkishness of Jackson's intellectual allies, the neoconservatives—here he singles out by name Irving Kristol, Midge Decter, and Norman Podhoretz. These figures, he writes, were zealots, whose own "defining"

* Although tucking them away in a footnote, Kissinger also provides the later and second thoughts of the journalist William Shawcross, whose highly influential book, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*, had placed the blame for the Cambodian tragedy squarely on the United States. Wrote a repentant Shawcross in 1994: "[T]hose of us who opposed the American war in Indochina should be extremely humble in the face of the appalling aftermath: a form of genocide in Cambodia and horrific tyranny in both Vietnam and Laos. Looking back on my own coverage for the [London] *Sunday Times* of the South Vietnamese war effort of 1970-75, I think I concentrated too easily on the corruption and incompetence of the South Vietnamese and their American allies, was too ignorant of the inhuman Hanoi regime, and far too willing to believe that a victory by the Communists would provide a better future."

† As *The Kissinger Transcripts* make clear, Jackson also served as a useful foil to Kissinger in carrying out his negotiations with the Kremlin. He was constantly warning the Soviet leaders not to engage in behavior that Jackson might exploit for political gain.

experience of moving from Left to Right had colored their thinking in destructive ways:

> Tactics bored them; they discerned no worthy goals for American foreign policy short of total and immediate victory. Their historical memory did not include the battles they had refused to join or the domestic traumas to which they so often contributed from the radical Left side of the barricades.

To this reproach, Kissinger adds the rueful observation that it was a "pity" the neoconservatives cast themselves in opposition to his Soviet policies, since in many respects his own analysis paralleled theirs:

> I shared their distrust of Communism and their apparent determination to thwart its aims. I thought once they realized that our goal was not to placate but to outmaneuver the Soviet Union, we would be able to join forces in a common cause.

Alas, it was not to be.

WHAT ARE we to make of this lengthy and eloquent *apologia pro vita sua* with its accompanying *tua culpa*?

On some matters, Kissinger's account is not easily disposed of. His description of President Ford's efforts to save South Vietnam, for example, efforts that continued right up to the horrific end, is a portrait of heroic perseverance unappreciated and unremarked. Upon assuming office in August 1974, Ford could easily have declared that America was done with the Indochina conflict and let the chips fall where they may; given the atmosphere at the time, in most quarters he would have been not blamed but praised. In this and other matters, Ford's image as a bumbler out of his depth is dispelled by Kissinger's account of a decent man, a straightshooter, "a Ford not a Lincoln" in Ford's own self-deprecating phrase, who chose the honorable course and paid a great personal and political price for his pains.

As for those whom Kissinger holds directly accountable for the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia, his reckoning of their moral failure is in many ways the most affecting portion of this book. One comes away with a distinct sense of the agony involved in losing a war that one had not chosen to start while being hammered at home from all sides. In this connection, though, the fury Kissinger directs at Henry Jackson seems seriously misplaced. Jackson, after all, had been virtually alone among Democrats in sticking with an unpopular war for as long as he did. Whatever sins he committed in the quest for the presidential nomination of a party that was turning leftward and away from Democrats like himself, he cannot fairly be compared with the liberals who led the United States into the Vietnam fiasco in the 1960's and who then spent the 70's attacking those bent on getting the U.S. out without sacrificing every shred of self-respect.

But neither can Jackson's role be fairly compared to that of a player like Richard Nixon, whose conduct of foreign policy Kissinger here continues to honor and defend. One can debate endlessly whether or not the entire Nixon policy from 1969 to 1974 represented an unnecessary strategic retreat, or whether or not the Paris Accords were irredeemably flawed from the outset, designed only to secure a "decent interval" between the U.S. departure and South Vietnamese collapse. Some of Kissinger's arguments in refutation of this latter point, and in particular the statement of this supreme realist that he had "naively" failed to grasp the true aims of the peace movement, are difficult to credit. But wherever one comes down on these matters, the issue of Nixon's part in the tragic course of events cannot be blinked.

However great his grasp of global affairs, however sound or unsound his geostrategic approach, it cannot be emphasized enough that, as Kissinger acknowledges only in passing in this volume, any chance the United States had to ensure the survival of Cambodia and South Vietnam was destroyed by the Watergate burglary and the subsequent efforts to cover it up. Nixon's petty decisions in the Watergate affair not only lost him his own tenure in office and divided our own country but ended up costing the lives of millions in faraway lands, men and women like Sirik Matak whose only mistake had been to take America at its word. Nixon may subsequently have been rehabilitated in the eyes of some, but if one is to take seriously Kissinger's own vivid description of the far-flung and terrible consequences of the President's abdication of his basic responsibility to observe the law, this rehabilitation has come too soon.

NEXT, DÉTENTE. Kissinger makes a very strong case for the proposition that his policies were not, in fact, the accommodationist sellout to the USSR that they seemed to many on the Right at the time. It cannot be denied that Kissinger and Nixon's diplomacy in those years did reap dividends in some regions of the world, by, for example, entering the U.S. variable into the Sino-Soviet equation at a time when the risk of a nuclear shooting war between the two Communist rivals was curving upward; shutting out Soviet influence in the Middle East after the October 1973 Yom Kippur war; and going some distance toward defanging the European Left at a moment when it was infused with maximum energy from its campaign against the American presence in Vietnam.

Kissinger also argues cogently that, given the tremulous nature of the times, with America embroiled in a losing war, executive authority in a state of collapse, and the American defense budget being axed even

as Moscow built up its forces, there was no realistic alternative to the attempt to establish some sort of *modus vivendi* with the Kremlin. Considering the utter irresponsibility of Congress in that period—one has only to recall the passage of the Tunney amendment barring U.S. aid to Angola just as the USSR and Cuba were pouring munitions and troops into that country, or the Church Committee hearings that effectively crippled the CIA—the notion that the U.S. could have mustered the political will to compete successfully with the USSR in an arms race, even given the growing constraints on the Soviet economy, seems dubious in the extreme.

In this light, there is a measure of merit in Kissinger's complaint that the neoconservatives exhibited little "understanding of or sympathy for the problems before a nonelected President taking over in the aftermath of Watergate and facing a hostile McGovernite Congress." Yet even as he lambastes neoconservatives for failing to grasp the essence of the times, Kissinger concedes a great deal to them.

For one thing, he concedes the force of their critique: these targets of his ire, after all, were merely private citizens whose efforts to shape policy were confined to the opinion columns of newspapers and magazines, something one might find it difficult to remember in light of the many pages Kissinger devotes to refuting their ideas and complaining about their influence. Then, too, his final appraisal of his neoconservative adversaries is remarkably generous: they made, he notes, "significant contributions to American thinking on foreign policy," especially in bringing "a much needed intellectual rigor and energy to the debate, which helped to overcome the dominance of the liberal conventional wisdom."

Most importantly, however, Kissinger implicitly admits the justice of a key element of the neoconservative case when he suggests that the rhetoric in which the Nixon and Ford administrations couched their policies was flawed. This flaw, indeed, would not be remedied until the advent of Ronald Reagan, who "proved to have a better instinct for America's emotions by justifying his course in the name of American idealism." Even as the Reagan administration (Kissinger writes) continued quietly to follow some of the détente-inspired policies set by Nixon and Ford—adhering, for example, to the limits imposed by the strategic-arms agreements, forging closer ties with Communist China at the expense of Taiwan—Reagan himself

> made sure that his policy declarations resonated with what was, in effect, classic Wilsonianism based on democratic virtue. As a result, he won broader support for the defense budget and geopolitical reengagement than Nixon was able to achieve or could have achieved in his time.

How to assess this last claim? By ringing the bell of freedom, Reagan unquestionably did sway the public in a way that neither of his Republican predecessors in the 1970's ever learned to do. And, as Kissinger is quick to point out, the Great Communicator also enjoyed certain other advantages over Nixon and Ford: by 1980, Vietnam and Watergate had receded into the background, and four years of unpleasant surprises under the profoundly inept Jimmy Carter had created a groundswell of support for a more demonstrative American posture.

Nevertheless, the undermining of détente is traceable to far more than what Kissinger suggests was a mere rhetoric deficit. The real problem, visible throughout the entire duration of the policy, was rooted not, as Kissinger would have it, in inadequate oratory or in any other insufficiency in Nixon and Ford's political temperament or skills but in the essence of the strategy itself. This was illuminated most strikingly in 1974 when Ford provoked an uproar by declining to receive the Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the White House. Though only a minor skirmish in the long domestic battle over Soviet-American relations, the episode disclosed a fundamental contradiction of détente.

In *Years of Renewal*, Kissinger offers an entirely plausible and even a persuasive explanation of how and why the decision not to receive Solzhenitsyn was made. He asserts that if he could do things over again, he would have attempted to arrange a "low-key" meeting with Ford. But the striking fact remains that, in pursuing the policy of détente, the United States had maneuvered itself into a corner from which it *could not* openly or enthusiastically hail a man like Solzhenitsyn, whose spoken and written truths struck fear in the mind of our country's most implacable adversary. The reason for this was that our government, out of the weaknesses Kissinger himself describes, was treating that adversary as a confrère whose hideous character flaws could not be discussed.

As Kissinger's memoirs make utterly clear, there is no easy way to untangle this knot. Given the circumstances the United States faced in those years, a forthright ideological assault of the sort Ronald Reagan launched when he called the USSR "the focus of evil in the modern world" might well have generated risks that the country was far from prepared to run. Ford, argues Kissinger, simply could not

> announce a crusade against a nuclear superpower two months after the collapse of Indochina, in the midst of a delicate negotiation in the still-explosive Middle East, and while Angola was erupting, investigations were paralyzing our intelligence services, and Congress was urging reduction of our forces overseas and legislating a military embargo against Turkey, an indispensable NATO ally.

There is a high quotient of logic in

this position. But there is an equally high quotient on the other side. The Soviet Union, after all, never for a moment ceased to wage ideological warfare against the American "imperialists"; by failing to answer this warfare with our most formidable weapon—the truth—we were, along with everything else, practicing a form of unilateral disarmament in the political sphere.

More than anything else, this was the sum and substance of the neoconservative critique of détente. There were truths about the Soviet Union, and about the United States, that desperately needed to be told if there were to be any chance of curing our country of its weaknesses or putting into practice a morally honest and aggressive stance. In this sense, neoconservatism unquestionably paved the way for the more robust American policy—a policy of deeds, not merely of "rhetoric"—that followed in the 1980's and that contributed mightily to genuinely transcending the cold war by winning it.

Needless to say, Kissinger applauds that policy, finally put into place by Ronald Reagan four years after he himself had left office. Indeed, he claims to have prepared the ground for it. In this, finally, even a critic of his policies has to acknowledge that he is in a basic sense right. Under his stewardship, the country survived a perilous period to fight another day. American foreign policy may have been a shambles when Ford left office in 1976, and things were to get even worse under Carter over the next four years, but in recalling the frightening downward spiral of the 1970's one cannot simply point a finger of blame at Henry Kissinger, an astonishingly brilliant and agile American diplomat who, whatever his misconceptions and mistakes along the way, engaged in a desperate struggle to right the ship of state as it was foundering upon the rocks.

In reconstructing his own very large part in this long saga in a spirit of both critical and self-critical inquiry, and in extensive and endlessly fascinating detail, he has given us in this volume, as in the previous two, the benefit of his undeniable lucidity and wisdom as well as one of the most majestically intelligent books about statecraft to have been written in this century.