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Kissinger, Metternich, and Realism

Henry Kissinger's first book, on the Napoleonic Wars, explains Kissinger's foreign policy better than any of his memoirs, and is striking as an early display of brilliance and authority

by [Robert D. Kaplan](#)

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TIME changes reputations. The current favorable reconsideration of Henry Kissinger may have less to do with the recent publication of his final volume of memoirs than with the lackluster quality of his successors at the State Department. Cyrus Vance, Edmund Muskie, Alexander Haig, Lawrence Eagleburger, and Warren Christopher are footnotes to history. George Shultz and James Baker were more substantial presences, but their substance had much more to do with their common sense than with their intellectual creativity (of which Shultz had some and Baker less). Then there is Madeleine Albright, who was hailed at first as having the perfect combination of gutsiness, idealism, and policy savvy, but who is turning out to be ineffectual. In fact, as Albright's star has waned, Kissinger's has risen.



Two years ago, still optimistic about Secretary of State Albright, one journalist wrote in *The Economist*, "Unlike Henry Kissinger (a refugee whose thinking owes more to the Napoleonic wars than to the 20th century), Mrs. Albright has a geopolitical view still shaped by that searing time" of the West's appeasement of Hitler at Munich. Nonsense. If there is any diplomat whose ideas were shaped early, immutably, and meticulously by the

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policy in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Atlantic Unbound*.

From the archives:

"The Thread of Time," by Kitty La Perriere (February, 1998)

"Let us assume that Albright's parents took full advantage of the American freedom to reinvent oneself. Like many others, they let go of the past and lived in the present. For their daughter they created a consistent, stable, supportive home environment. She took their version of the truth as her own."

"Proportionalism," by Robert D. Kaplan (August, 1996)

As it contemplates the most troubled areas of the Third World, America must seek a path between apathy and optimism.

"Foreign Policy and Christian Conscience," by George F. Kennan (May, 1959)

"Speaking as a Presbyterian in the series of lectures arranged by President Mackay of the Princeton Theological Seminary, speaking also as a diplomat who has served this country in responsible posts in Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Riga, Lisbon, Moscow, and Washington, George F. Kennan in these pages addresses himself to the Christian

experience of Nazism and Munich, it is Kissinger. The problem is that many intellectuals are uncomfortable with what Kissinger seems to have learned as a Jewish teenager in Hitler's Germany. For a long time they believed that he learned little.

Kissinger's first book, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822* (1957), covers not the Nazi era but the latter part of the Napoleonic Wars and the efforts of European statesmen to build a durable peace afterward. The book's principal character, the Austrian diplomat Prince Clemens von Metternich -- secretive, manipulative, and tragic in his world view -- is often seen as the figure Kissinger took as a model, though Kissinger has denied it. Nevertheless, Munich and the Holocaust are ever-present in *A World Restored*. Kissinger, who fled Nazi Germany in 1938, was in the early 1950s trying to claw his way into the stuffy, Protestant-dominated sanctums of the East Coast foreign-policy establishment. He was not about to wear his trauma and his Jewishness on his sleeve, as it is fashionable to do now. Rather, he elegantly camouflaged them. In *A World Restored*, Napoleon plays the Hitlerite role, and Kissinger's answer to the problem of mass evil is contrary to the instincts of liberal humanists. His argument is thus subtle, original, and, I believe, brave.

KISSINGER first achieved fame as a political scientist with the publication of *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957), in which he opposed Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's policy of massive nuclear retaliation against a Soviet attack, arguing instead for a flexible response of conventional forces and smaller, tactical nuclear weapons. *A World Restored* -- Kissinger's doctoral thesis, which he completed in 1954 -- is evidence of how the Holocaust, along with the larger record of modern European history, made Kissinger a "realist." The meaning of the term is less clear than it seems.

The very subject of Kissinger's doctoral thesis raised eyebrows at Harvard, as one biographer, Walter Isaacson, has observed. At a time when the threat of thermonuclear extinction obsessed political scientists, the court diplomacy of early-nineteenth-century Europe seemed quaint and irrelevant. Even if the technology of war had changed, Kissinger implied, the task of statesmen remained the same: to construct a balance of fear among great powers as part of the maintenance of an orderly international system -- a system that, while not necessarily just or fair, was accepted by the principal players as legitimate. As long as the system was maintained, no one would challenge it through revolution -- the way Hitler in the 1930s, categorized by the thirty-year-old Kissinger as a

responsibility in international life."

"Mr. Kennan and Reappraisal in Europe," by Walter Lippman (April, 1958)

"In the reappraisal which is now under way, it is widely agreed that for an indefinite number of years to come, the United States and its allies in NATO will be hard put to it to restore and to maintain an equal balance of power."

From Atlantic Unbound:

"Caricature of Henry Kissinger as Narcissus," by Edward Sorel

From Unauthorized Portraits, a collection of caricatures by Sorel.

"revolutionary chieftain," did.

It seemed to Kissinger that a world threatened by nuclear disaster could learn much from Metternich. With the British Foreign Secretary, Viscount Robert Stewart Castlereagh, Metternich built an order so ingenious that from 1815, the year of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, to the outbreak of the First World War, a hundred years later, Europe knew no major conflicts, with the exception of the ten-month-long Franco-Prussian War, in 1870-1871. Thanks in significant measure to Metternich, who did everything in his power to forestall the advent of democracy and freedom in the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires, Europe in 1914 saw peace and steady economic growth as natural and permanent conditions. Europe had thus lost that vital, tragic sensibility without which disaster is hard to avoid, and troops rushed onto the battlefields of Flanders in a fit of romanticism.

When Kissinger wrote, nuclear weapons had altered statesmanship less than we thought -- just as new threats such as disease, terrorism, and the breakdown of unstable governments change world politics less than we think. The challenge for diplomats will always be how to maintain a semblance of order through a balance of fear, cooperation, and defensive mechanisms, whether diplomatic, military, or, as in the case of disease, scientific. In an age when borders are weakening and a messier, more cosmopolitan (that is, medieval) world is re-emerging, the story of how Metternich, born in the Rhineland and more comfortable in French than in German, sought security for a still-feudal Austrian-administered polyglot empire through alliances based on philosophical values rather than ethnic identification is a relevant medicinal.

IN the first pages of *A World Restored*, Kissinger confronted abstractly the 1938 debacle at Munich, in which the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, a progressive reformer who sought peace in order to concentrate on Britain's domestic problems, allowed Hitler to occupy the Bohemian borderlands of Czechoslovakia.

Those ages which in retrospect seem most peaceful were least in search of peace....

Whenever peace -- conceived as the avoidance of war -- has been the primary objective of a power or a group of powers, the international system has been at the mercy of the most ruthless member of the international community.

Kissinger declared, "It is a mistake to assume that diplomacy can always settle international disputes if there

is 'good faith' and 'willingness to come to an agreement'; in a revolutionary situation "each power will seem to its opponent to lack precisely these qualities." In such circumstances many will see the early demands of a revolutionary power as "merely tactical" and will delude themselves that the revolutionary power would actually accept the status quo with a few modifications. Meanwhile, "Those who warn against the danger in time are considered alarmists."

"Appeasement," Kissinger concluded, "is the result of an inability to come to grips with a policy of unlimited objectives." A few pages later, for good measure, he added,

Coalitions against revolutions have usually come about only at the end of a long series of betrayals ... for the powers which represent legitimacy ... cannot "know" that their antagonist is not amenable to "reason" until he has demonstrated [that he is not].... And he will not have demonstrated it until the international system is already overturned.

That, of course, is a pitch-perfect description of the late 1930s in Europe. Thus begins a book about how Metternich confronted and undermined the unlimited objectives of Napoleon. In 354 pages there are only three exceedingly brief passing references to Hitler, even as the diplomatic challenge he presented is comprehensively explored.

Kissinger has always been influenced by Munich, if not always directly or humanely. His and President Richard Nixon's opening to China in order to undermine the Soviet Union while they sought détente with Moscow; their unwillingness to quit Vietnam without first wreaking havoc and spilling blood; their support of odious yet pro-American regimes in Greece and Chile; and their brilliantly executed face-off with Syria and the Soviet Union in 1970, at the time of the terrorist challenge to Jordan's pro-Western regime -- all flowed to a significant extent from Kissinger's determination to avoid the slightest show of weakness, for which read "appeasement." Kissinger regularly mixed violence and the threat of it with diplomacy, so that the diplomacy had credibility. He preserved what he saw as the legitimate order, in which the Soviet Union was both contained and accepted, so that revolutionary chaos was confined to the edges of the superpower battlefield, in the Third World. (In perceiving the Soviet Union as permanent, orderly, and legitimate, Kissinger shared a failure of analysis with the rest of the foreign-policy elite -- notably excepting the scholar and former head of the State Department's policy-planning staff

George Kennan, the Harvard historian Richard Pipes, the British scholar and journalist Bernard Levin, and the Eureka College graduate Ronald Reagan.) When, in 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, Kissinger argued for military force against Saddam Hussein. The legitimate order in the Gulf had been disrupted by a revolutionary chieftain; to react merely with sanctions would constitute appeasement, and Kissinger said as much.

Kissinger's response to Munich and Nazism in *A World Restored* is pellucid. The key word is "revolution," something that Kissinger's experience as a youth, augmented by scholarship, taught him to fear. Rapid social and political transformation leads to violence, whether throughout the Europe of the early 1800s, owing to Napoleon's aggression -- itself a direct result of the French Revolution -- or in the Germany of the 1930s. Although the word "revolution" is applied to the America of the 1770s and sometimes to the Zionist movement, the cultural and philosophical awakenings among English settlers in America and Jewish settlers in Palestine took place over decades and were, in truth, evolutions. Iran did experience a revolution in the late 1970s, as did Cambodia in 1975, China in the late 1940s, and Russia in 1917. From his dread of revolutions Kissinger extracted the following principles, which I summarize:

- Disorder is worse than injustice. Injustice merely means the world is imperfect, but disorder implies that there is no justice for anyone, since it makes even the mundane details of daily existence (walking to school, for instance) risky. Obviously, great injustice is worse than a little disorder. In the 1980s Iraq was orderly, so much so that it was like a vast prison, while Iran was in revolutionary chaos. Yet I always felt safer in Iran than in Iraq. I suspect that in Kissinger's fear of disorder there is something deeply personal. In the 1930s he saw Nazism, often in the form of thuggery, overwhelm his seemingly secure physical surroundings. The Nazi thugs he observed were the riffraff cast up first by the civil violence resulting from Germany's defeat in the First World War, and then by the Depression. Kissinger's experience was thus different from that of the humanist Elie Wiesel. Wiesel, who grew up in a secluded Hasidic community in Romania in the 1930s and is five years younger than Kissinger, experienced the Holocaust itself: he spent 1944 and 1945 in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. By then Kissinger was already in the U.S. Army.
- The "most fundamental problem of politics ... is not the control of wickedness but the limitation of righteousness." The Nazis, the Jacobins, the ayatollahs, and the others who have made revolutions have all been self-righteous.

Kissinger suggested that nothing is more dangerous than people convinced of their moral superiority, since they deny their political opponents that very attribute. Tyranny, a form of disorder posing as order, is the result. This was one of Edward Gibbon's arguments against early Christianity. Gibbon represented the Enlightenment in full flower, just as Metternich, Kissinger reminded us, represented its dying breath before the onset of modernism, with its righteous causes. In any event, Kissinger observed wryly, punishing the wicked is "a relatively easy matter, because it is a simple expression" of public decency, and thus not a crucial task of statesmanship.

- Because the real task of statesmen is to forestall revolutions, the real heroes of history are enlightened conservatives such as Metternich and the eighteenth-century Briton Edmund Burke, who fought discrimination against Catholics and opposed the French Revolution for its immoderation. Burke hated revolutions, Kissinger explained, because they violate the average person's sense of morality and well-being; Metternich saw them as contrary to reason. "The true conservative," Kissinger wrote, "is not at home in social struggle. He will attempt to avoid unbridgeable schism, because he knows that a stable social structure thrives not on triumphs but on reconciliations." (The Republican majority in Congress and the "religious right" are thus not true conservatives.) A true conservative is in fact a hesitant progressive: he or she seeks to slow change when society is reforming too fast and to instigate moderate change when society is not reforming at all. Burke's writings are the epitome of this search for pacing. I imagine that Kissinger's tolerance of the late Chinese ruler Deng Xiaoping and his successor, Jiang Zemin, can be explained by the fact that the two Chinese dictators represented enlightened conservatism within their own cultural and historical limits. Both fostered gradual but unmistakable reform that has bettered the material lives of tens of millions of people. At the same time, they averted the kind of revolutionary upheaval that might result from instituting democracy across a vast and geographically riven landscape in which less than 10 percent of the population is middle-class. The Chinese leadership is attempting to treat the dour effects of its decades-old revolution just as Metternich treated Europe after Napoleon's -- by doling out moderate doses of change.

The dangers inherent in fast social transformation are so great, Kissinger wrote, that demands for universal justice are ill informed.

Every statesman must attempt to reconcile
what is considered just with what is

considered possible. What is considered just depends on the domestic structure of his state; what is possible depends on its resources, geographic position and determination, and on the resources, determination and domestic structure of other states.

THE young Kissinger here allied himself with other foreign-policy realists of the time, including Kennan, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Hans Morgenthau. All of them doubted that America, however overarching its power, would ever be able to affect the internal evolution of many other societies at once: the world is too vast, and the expense and stamina required are prohibitive, at least with regard to winning public acceptance. Morgenthau wrote in *Vietnam and the United States* (1965) that because the resources of even a superpower are limited, morality alone can never be a basis for foreign policy. These men saw the missionary idealism of America's ruling elite as naive. Kissinger believed that idealism had clearly failed throughout America's diplomatic history -- that it led to an inefficient cycle of intense hope and activity abroad followed by morose withdrawal once it became apparent that hope and activity were unlikely to remake the world. The clearest example is President Woodrow Wilson's failed attempt to advance democracy and self-determination in the Muslim Middle East after the First World War, and the isolationism that followed.

Kissinger identified the foundations of such idealism when he took up Castlereagh's position on the Greek struggle for independence in 1821, which Metternich opposed. Castlereagh's open-mindedness, Kissinger wrote, reflected not "a superior morality" but rather "the consciousness of safety conferred by an insular position." Because Castlereagh's England was surrounded by seas, it did not have to consider the implications of the breakup of Turkish rule in the Balkans -- implications that a Continental power like Metternich's Austria had no choice but to consider. Without America's insular position, guarded by two oceans and reinforced by plentiful natural resources, idealism might never have taken root here. Realism is in part the ability to see the truth behind moral pretensions. Our insular position also explains our failure to see war for what it is: an extension of politics.

I suspect, however, that our much-vaunted foreign-policy idealism is mainly confined to the media and academia, and particularly to the intellectual journals of opinion. Those who sit behind the important desks at the National Security Council, the Departments of Defense and State, and the Pentagon are usually realists. (This is a broad definition, given how often realists disagree: witness

Morgenthau's and Kissinger's differing positions over Vietnam.) Even the rare Administrations that were associated with foreign-policy idealism converted to realism sooner or later. It was President Jimmy Carter who began what would later be called the "Reagan arms buildup." Traditional Republicans like George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger, and the bipartisan realist Frank Carlucci, became far more influential in the Reagan White House than neoconservative idealists like Elliott Abrams and Jeane Kirkpatrick. For her part, Albright has followed Kissinger's playbook in not overemphasizing human rights in China and in tolerating dictatorships that serve our interests. Realists almost always run foreign policy; idealists, I have found, attend academic conferences and write books and articles from the sidelines.

From the archives:**"The Conceptual Poverty of U.S. Foreign Policy," by Jonathan Clarke (September, 1993)**

We have heard it now from two

Administrations, two parties, in a row: yes, the Cold War is over, but the world is more dangerous, because less predictable, than it was while the Cold War was still on. The world is indeed dangerous, the author argues, but not more dangerous to the United States.

Take Bosnia. I supported intervention in Bosnia, for strategic and moral reasons. Andrew Kohut, the former president of the Gallup Organization, who is now the director of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, told me recently that the polls on Bosnia have, however, been firm and undeniable: at no point in the 1990s, despite all the emotional media coverage and revelations of war crimes, have more than half of the American people thought that U.S. intervention there was warranted. Interventions in Vietnam, Korea, Panama, Grenada, and Iraq were all more popular than our limited and belated one in Bosnia, in late 1995; only the intervention in Haiti, supported mainly by liberal Democrats, was less popular. A former British diplomat, Jonathan Clarke, wrote in his essay "Searching for the Soul of American Foreign Policy" (1995), for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, that Americans "have in fact ... a rather consistent, well-developed, and finely-calibrated feeling for what does not make sense for their nation's foreign engagements," which in Clarke's view only the illuminati mistake for isolationism. Despite his grave German accent, his dire view of humanity, and his preoccupation with European history, Kissinger -- who negotiated with rather than confronted the Soviet Union, who helped Nixon to withdraw from Vietnam 550,000 soldiers in three years under combat conditions, and who generally supported interventions that were popular while expressing skepticism about those that weren't -- may have understood his adopted nation better than most people think he did. Indeed, before the March bombing campaign Kissinger implied in an article that forcing Serbia to implement the Kosovo peace agreement might precipitate what the Clinton Administration sought to avert: the destabilization of the southern Balkans. Even those of us who believe that the Administration had no choice but to use force must admit that Kissinger's analysis was shrewd.

Robert Musil, the Austrian writer, defined realism in *The Man Without Qualities*, his seminal twentieth-century novel, as a political sensibility driven by needs rather than by ideas. Kissinger's description of Metternich's diplomatic achievement in controlling Napoleon adds another layer: "It had not produced any great conceptions; nor had it used the noble dreams of an impatient [revolutionary] generation. Its skill did not lie in creativity but in proportion, in its ability to combine elements it treated as given." Realism is thus about deftly playing the hand that has been dealt you. It is not exciting or inspiring. Journalistic careers are rarely built on embracing realism, though policymaking careers often are.

Metternich, Kissinger wrote, "represented eternal principles not a system." By that Kissinger meant that

Metternich was subtle enough to know that systems like autocracy and democracy are indifferent elements; their worth depends on the circumstances under which they operate. Metternich opposed the democratic revolutions in Europe in 1848 not because they were democratic but because they were provoked by ethnic nationalism. Metternich's ultimate achievement was to help postpone (until 1866) the eclipse of a semi-feudal, polyglot Austria by the fiercely modernizing, ethnically nationalist German state to the north. In defending Metternich, Kissinger was at odds with the conventional view of historians, who regard modernism and the independence struggles of 1848 as progressive. Since the end of the Cold War and the unleashing of ethnic nationalism in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans, the Hapsburg monarchy that Metternich served has appeared in a better light.

Continued...

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Robert D. Kaplan is a correspondent for *The Atlantic* and the author of six books, including *Balkan Ghosts* (1993), *The Arabists* (1993), and *The Ends of the Earth* (1996).

Portrait by Marvin Mattelson.

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