In Defense of Henry Kissinger

Josef Joffe

THE Jeffersonian message is inscribed on the back of every one-dollar bill, right underneath the chopped-off pyramid: *novus ordo seclorum*, a totally new thing under the sun. America was to be the "beacon of light," the "shining city on the hill." America would ditch power politics once and for all; that was the corrupt game of Europe's royals. There would be but one morality for men and nations—none of that "reason-of-state" stuff, that cynical doctrine which recognizes no higher law than sheer necessity, and no higher interest than the safety and well-being of the state.

Why? Because *raison d'état* was the bane of liberty—a sheer pretense camouflaging the murderous follies of princes and potentates. By contrast, the new republic stood for "freedom and self-government," as Jefferson put it. Inevitably, such a lofty purpose would be contaminated by *Realpolitik* and its callous adjuncts which are secrecy, deceit, manipulation, and war.

The rejection of *Realpolitik* is deeply ingrained in the American mind. And no wonder. For more than a century after the Revolution (when the ex-colonists, desperately angling for allies, played diplomatic hardball as if coached by Richelieu), the American republic had great interests and ambitions, but—happily—no great-power neighbors. Expansion proceeded inward, and if you ignore Indians, Mexicans, and the exhausted Spaniards, conquest remained bloodless.

Indeed, "to conquer without war," reported the French diplomat Turreau to Paris in 1805, was "the first fact" of American diplomacy. Why engage in the sordid shenanigans of European-style aggrandizement if you could *buy* half a continent through the Louisiana Purchase or the Alaska fire sale? America was not so much different as lucky, and so the young republic could reap the prizes of power without having to play the game. All the while, from 1814 until the Kaiser's U-boats began prowling the Atlantic, Britain also provided plenty of security free of charge.

Inward expansion plus the British navy left an indelible imprint on the nation's outlook. For more than a century, Americans were free to believe that they could have their cake and eat it—that they could live in a world of states and yet remain unsullied by the normal ways of statecraft. Even two world wars, even the war in Korea, did not cloud this outlook. All of them were "good wars," fought not for self-interest but justice.

IT IS this subliminal moral yardstick that Walter Isaacson wields against Henry Kissinger, the European-born academic, who is indicted and convicted in *Kissinger: A Biography** for carrying a torch for those masterful deceivers and diplomatists, Metternich and Bismarck.

Isaacson, a *Time* editor with a Harvard and Oxford background, has taken a *People* magazine perspective of the high and mighty and enriched it with the sophisticated nastiness of a *Vanity Fair* piece. To this he has added a heavy dose of Harvard—what he learned there in the ways of quality research. He has read everything on and by Kissinger as well as a large chunk of contemporary history—even a smattering of Kant. (Hence also the term-paper-type *obiter dicta* sprinkled throughout the book.) Finally, he has put his training as a journalist to work, tracking down virtually everybody who has ever lived or worked with Kissinger and making them talk—from Richard Allen (National Security Council) via Kissinger *mère* to Elmo Zumwalt (Joint Chiefs of Staff). Most importantly, he has gotten Kissinger to grant him some two-dozen interviews as well as access to his private and public papers. As Theodore Draper put it in a meandering piece in the New York *Times Book Review*: "Cooperating with Mr. Isaacson may come to seem one of [Kissinger's] greatest miscalculations."

Kissinger is a great read, a real page-turner. Yet underneath the enormous research, the ingenious dramaturgy, and the generally elegant writing, this is a flawed book. The flaws are buried in the foundations, out of sight as it were, and thus hardly obvious to those readers (and that means most) who will be captured right on page 13 where the saga begins—and held captive till page 768 where it ends in the almost immediate present.

Isaacson uses a honed reportorial technique that suggests judicious evenhandedness, with everybody being allowed to have his say. But it is justice in the style of the old West: "Give him a fair trial and hang him." Isaacson reminds one of the prosecutor who slips in the occasional good word for the culprit to damn him all the more effectively—and to impress the jury as a dispassionate servant of nothing but the truth. It is one step backward, two steps forward—an insinuating attack on the man and his career which, in the end, leaves no sanctuaries. Though the book is copiously footnoted and documented, it is death by anecdote and one-liner, a search-and-destroy mission in language that wraps even the most vicious target-buster in soothing, "objectivizing" magazine prose. Anyone who hates Kissinger will love this book.

But the serious student of American diplomacy should take a closer look at the cracks in the foundation of Isaacson's work. Although he makes an occasional bow to the brutal dilemmas of all statecraft—between *Realpolitik* and *Idealpolitik*, between the ways of democracy and those of power politics—he refuses to understand that statesmen can never do more than straddle these two worlds.

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"Look here, Henry," Isaacson's book fairly seems to scream, "you are an American now, and we Americans bolted from Europe precisely because we wanted Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson instead of Metternich and Bismarck."

But there is an answer to the question, why not Jefferson and Wilson? It was because America after 1945 was irrevocably chained to the rest of the world, because there was a mortal threat (the Soviet Union), and because there was no longer a friendly neighborhood policeman patrolling the Atlantic, that America now had to balance and to contain, conclude alliances with the good, the bad, and the ugly, take care of its own and of allied security, play at least in part by rules set not by Jefferson but by Ho Chi Minh and Leonid Brezhnev—in short, define and obey a "reason of state."

THERE is an irreducible difference between the realms of domestic and foreign policy. It is the difference between the rule of law and the rule of power. At home, you go to jail for perjury, theft, and murder; there is a state that creates the conditions for a moral life, above all by assuring physical safety. Abroad, security is not a given but a quest; morality is not joined to law, and law is not enforced by a disinterested, all-powerful sovereign. The game is about advantage, power, and survival—and there is no umpire to call a foul or to protect you against the consequences of misplaced credulity.

Isaacson does occasionally doff his cap to such considerations—but only to conceal the punch to come. Thus he intones in the Introduction:

> Kissinger had an instinctive feel . . . for power and for creating a new global balance that could help America cope with its withdrawal syndrome after Vietnam.

But then he goes on to insist throughout the book that

> real power derives from the tendency to act based on moral principles and ideals. One reason for American influence throughout the 20th century has been that it does not slavishly pursue realism when higher principles are at stake; instead it fancies itself a beacon for freedom and individual rights.

If these statements were not so nicely hedged, they would be poppycock. In international politics, goodness is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of clout. If it were, Sweden—a country holier than thou in the 1970's—would have ruled the roost. If sheer moral output were the crux, then high-minded Thomas Jefferson could have stopped the Napoleonic Wars by sermonizing; instead, the perfidious British burned down his capital. Did Woodrow Wilson, the greatest moralist since Jefferson, win at Versailles because he wowed them with his democratic fervor? No: it was because France, Britain, Germany, Russia, and Austria were either defeated or exhausted that America's word became the writ of the world—for a while at least. Ditto, though for a good deal longer, after World War II. Power comes from power, and only very rarely from the pulpit.

Nor did the U.S., before or after Kissinger, ever disdain a good power play for the sake of "higher principles." Franklin D. Roosevelt did not hesitate to sup with the devil Stalin in order to crush Hitler and Hirohito. No American President intervened more often in Central America than Wilson himself; though he purported to "teach them how to elect good men," the objective was power and profit, and the tool was not the Declaration of Independence but the U.S. Marine Corps. And let us not forget those despots and dictators—Franco, Salazar, Syngman Rhee, Chiang Kai-shek, the Faisals and Fahds, lately even Assad—whom the U.S. embraced because strategic purpose so demanded.

THIS is not to bad-mouth American foreign policy, but merely to point out the obvious: the world is not Supreme Court country. Yet Isaacson is not alone in believing that America's mission in the world is goodness. Indeed, the problem is one of "false consciousness" on a large scale. Looking at the U.S. from the outside in, one is struck by a perplexing paradox. Compared to France, Britain, or Germany, American society is *obsessed* with power. Public and private vernacular is the language of power. Who is up, who is down? Who has outmaneuvered, trapped, and sunk whom? Somebody is always "upping the ante" to "rout" or "take over" somebody else who is "dug in" and "willing to fight to the last." "End runs," "curve balls," "full-court presses," "knockout blows" are the continuation of war by other metaphors—whether for power, precedence, or profit.

"Empowerment" is the battle cry of the 1990's, and ranking is the national pastime—for children, colleges, teams, and politicos. Mastering football and baseball is better than attending Sandhurst or St. Cyr; raising deception and maneuver to a high art, these games reduce the European favorite, soccer, to clumsy child's play. At home, America seems to be a nation of warriors and strategists imprisoned in a Hobbesian universe, and compared to America's quadrennial civil wars—a/k/a presidential campaigns—European electoral battles are patty-cake. Yet when it comes to the world at large, Americans, however they act, insist on talking like Jeffersonians.

ENTER Henry Kissinger, he of the heavy German accent and the Spenglerian language. It is hard to explain the loathing Kissinger has attracted on both the Left and the Right unless one resorts to a bit of collective psychoanalysis, or more precisely, to use a Teutonic term: *Ideologiekritik.** For Heinz Kissinger, as he was known in his native town of Fürth, committed the ultimate sin of not only conducting *Realpolitik* but also talking about it. Maybe he had spent too much time in academia where, at least in the old pre-PC days, there were no prizes for puffery and sanctimony.

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* Literally: "critique of ideology," a Marxian term designating the analysis of the familiar gap between ideal and interest, pretension and reality, self-portrayal and actual motivation. The academic term is "sociology of knowledge," as pioneered by Karl Mannheim in *Ideology and Utopia.*

Maybe he was too much of an intellectual and thus too tempted to render theoretically explicit what was better left unsaid. ("It has no bite; it is not conceptual," he would berate his speech writers.) Maybe, then, what really riled Left and Right alike was Kissinger's penchant for orating against the very grain of American foreign-policy ideology.

On the first page of his dissertation as a graduate student at Harvard, Kissinger had already set up the realist's first commandment: thou shalt seek "stability based on an equilibrium of forces." He would repeat that idea endlessly in the White House and at State. In one of his last speeches in office, for instance, he kept stressing the necessity of "furthering American interests in a world where power remains the ultimate arbiter." That is not the American style. America likes to picture itself withdrawn from the world, pristine and unsullied—or, as in 1917 and 1941, going to war like Captain America, as righteous avenger. And even then, the object is not to discipline a foe, but to crush him in preparation for his moral-political rehabilitation. The target of ire is not the enemy's potential but his personality—the nature of his domestic system. Hence, World War I was to "make the world safe for democracy," and not to squelch the Kaiser's imperial ambitions. Nor has this been confined to the distant past. When George Bush went after Saddam Hussein, he could not bring himself to justify the war in terms of interest and strategic necessity. And when he did talk about jobs or oil, he was chastised and ridiculed from Cambridge to Orange County.

So when Kissinger lectured on the tension between *Idealpolitik* and *Realpolitik*, he was bound to upset the oldest of ideological applecarts. In his 1974 congressional testimony on the purpose of détente, he said:

> Where the age-old antagonism between freedom and tyranny is concerned, we are not neutral. But other imperatives impose limits on our ability to produce internal changes in foreign countries. Consciousness of our limits is a recognition of the necessity of peace—not moral callousness.

Translated, that read: "We can no longer play the Wilsonian game when the ultimate risk is nuclear incineration." That did not please the Right. Crusading against the Communists was the thing to do. "Containing" them already smacked of wimpishness, and actually treating with them in Moscow and Peking was, in the eyes of some on the Right, tantamount to treason.

On the Left, a close Harvard colleague, Stanley Hoffmann, wrote of Kissinger: "His was a quest for a *Realpolitik* devoid of moral homilies." Note that Hoffmann did not say "devoid of moral *content.*" But others were less respectful, as was Jimmy Carter when he ran against Gerald Ford. Kissinger's foreign policy, declared Carter, was "covert, manipulative, and deceptive"—which "runs against the basic principles of this country, because Kissinger is obsessed with power blocs, with spheres of influence." This is Isaacson's battle cry, too, and when he is not telling (with quiet relish) yet another story about Kissinger *qua* power-crazed, vanity-driven maniac, he clobbers him as a transplanted Metternich who should have gone to reeducation camp before coming to Washington.

Not surprisingly, Isaacson devotes half-a-dozen chapters to Vietnam—the Christmas Bombing, Cambodia, and all the rest. The moral of the tale as he tells it is well-known: in the end, the U.S. emerged from this war with neither peace nor honor, with 58,000 dead and nothing to show, with a shell-shocked society that remains traumatized to this day. In these chapters, Isaacson depicts Kissinger as betraying both President Thieu and America's best traditions in one fell swoop. But as John Podhoretz has pointed out in his review of this book in the *Wall Street Journal*, it is "most troubling" that

> Isaacson simply asserts that in his negotiations with the North Vietnamese Mr. Kissinger was [merely] seeking a "decent interval" between an American withdrawal and the collapse of . . . South Vietnam.

What should have been proven remains a "cavalierly" argued indictment.

With a bit more charity, the argument could (and should) have gone the other way around. What does a diplomat do when he must bargain empty-handed? America had fought imperial wars—wars of interest, not justice—before: against Mexicans, Indians, Spaniards, and in diverse Latin American locales. In each case, the engagements were brief and decisive. And if you ignore Custer's Last Stand, the enemy was easily outgunned and outmaneuvered. Consequently, the folks back home did not carp but cheered. In Vietnam, however, America was stuck—in a contest where the traditional American way of war ("there is no substitute for victory") could not work because the enemy was sheltered by two nuclear-armed great powers. As Israel found out in Lebanon in 1982, democratic electorates do not like indecisive wars, whatever the moral impetus behind them.

So Nixon and Kissinger were stuck, too. With hindsight, it is easy to claim that they should have called it quits in 1969. South Vietnam would have fallen sooner, but some 20,000 Americans would have lived. Statesmen, however, do not have the gift of foresight; they must act in the here and now. And so Nixon and Kissinger acted—yes, with secrecy, deception, and manipulation—to snatch a settlement out of the jaws of defeat. Up against Peking, Moscow, and Hanoi, should they have called a daily town meeting to discuss strategy and tactics? This is not how the thirteen colonies won the Revolutionary War, this is not how *any* nation wins wars. To depict tragedy as treachery, and to confound the ways of statecraft with those of democracy, as Isaacson does, makes for a good morality tale but not for a dispassionate assessment of America's debilitating dilemmas in those years.

Isaacson is far more charitable

where secrecy, deception, etc. led to outcomes he likes—which is a backhanded way of paying tribute to the very *Realpolitik* he purports to disdain. The only halfway sympathetic billing Kissinger gets may be found in the two chapters dealing with the Yom Kippur War and Middle East shuttle diplomacy. On the great question of whether Kissinger, himself a Jew, held back on the resupply in order to make Israel properly receptive to American cues, Isaacson is at his journalistic best: he unearths documents, lets the protagonists speak for themselves, and ends on a properly agnostic note. The reader learns a few new things and is otherwise left to make up his own mind.

The shuttle chapter almost ends up as a paean to Kissinger as latter-day Talleyrand. Isaacson quotes Abba Eban:

> I felt that if [Kissinger] wanted to sell a car with a wheel missing, he would achieve his purpose by an eloquent and cogent eulogy of the wheels that remained.

Nixon, *soi-disant* used-car salesman, would have lapped that up as the ultimate compliment.

But in this particular context Isaacson does realize that "the line between diplomacy and duplicity . . . is a fine one." If you want to play the "honest broker," as Bismarck claimed for himself, you cannot read everything into the *Congressional Record*. You have to create, as Yitzhak Rabin recalled, the "kind of personal . . . intensive relationship that forced people in a way to be committed to him." Kissinger did so, Isaacson notes benevolently, by "phrasing his remarks carefully so as not to contradict directly what he was telling someone else." And lo and behold, "duplicity" paid off, entangling all the players in a tightening web by which they could be dragged off into a separation-of-forces agreement. Notes Isaacson with grudging respect:

> By personalizing his diplomacy in the Middle East [read: by cajolery, flattery, and manipulation], Kissinger was able to make use of the intangible good will that comes from what passes for friendships among statesmen.

By contrast, Isaacson concedes, "[t]he Rogers Plan of 1969 . . . was straightforward and unambiguous; it did not get far." Indeed, without detracting in any way from Carter's Camp David negotiations, it should be noted and recorded that Kissinger's backbreaking shuttle diplomacy prepared the way for one of the greatest triumphs of American diplomacy: peace between Israel and Egypt.

Kissinger also gets good grades (plus the routine slaps in the face) for his triangular diplomacy with Peking and Moscow—which was just as secretive, vainglorious, and headline-hogging as everything else this Bismarck transplant from Bavaria is said to have done in Isaacson's indictment. But why invoke Jefferson when the fruits of *Realpolitik* are sweet? And so Isaacson comments approvingly:

> The triangular global balance that Kissinger had helped construct was paying off: due to America's success in forging realistic [*sic!*] relationships with China and Russia, the North Vietnamese found themselves feeling isolated from their primary patrons.

In the conclusion, Isaacson even drags out the Hapsburg Beelzebub in praise of his Harvard-bred disciple. The new "three-dimensional chess game" was a "triumph of hard-edged realism worthy of a Metternich."

MAYBE these compliments were just put in as cover-your-backside afterthought—to pretend even-handedness and to blunt the vicious point of the rapier that Isaacson so relentlessly wields to slash and pierce. But one would like to think otherwise. It is impossible to write an 893-page book about a man like Henry Kissinger without understanding the critical difference between the person and his policies. Bismarck and Talleyrand were not nice guys. Yet one managed to unify Germany by hook and by crook, by "blood and iron," while managing to keep the peace for the next twenty years. The other, club-footed and cynical to the nth degree, succeeded in returning the most hated nation in Europe—post-Napoleonic France—to the community of the great powers by the time that it took the Congress of Vienna to finish the last waltz.

Kissinger made the best of a bad hand of cards dealt to him during America's first defeat in war—and more. He handled a President who ended up like King Lear wandering crazedly about the heath. He built the foundation of peace in the Middle East. He turned a dispirited America into the apex of the triangle that continued to shape world politics until the Soviet Union collapsed, leaving the U.S. on top of a "unipolar" international system. For all this, Isaacson does give ample credit—it would have been impossible to do otherwise.

ONE of the best lines recounted by Isaacson was uttered by Kissinger, then Secretary of State, during the bar mitzvah in Washington of the son of the Israeli ambassador Simcha Dinitz. Was the ceremony much different from Heinz's own back in Germany? a reporter wanted to know. Deadpanned Kissinger: "Ribbentrop did not come to my bar mitzvah." Call it self-deprecating or self-inflating, it beats anything James Baker or Cyrus Vance might have said at the cotillion. And funnily enough, sixteen years out of office, "Henry" continues to be the single most fascinating player on the American stage. For somebody who is supposedly the ranting, raving, and self-serving Spenglerian depicted by Isaacson, that is quite a feat. Perhaps Kissinger, he of the professorial mien and the Teutonic accent, is not such an un-American character after all.