

Détente Defended

By JOSEF JOFFE

"Why so short?" quipped a reporter, when Henry Kissinger introduced "Diplomacy" in 1994, a brilliant disquisition on the nature and history of statecraft. How could he squeeze four centuries into 900 pages when "Years of Upheaval," his book covering Richard Nixon's last 18 months in office, had ballooned to almost 1,300? "Easy," Henry replied, "I took out all the I's."

The I's are back—in the third and last volume of his memoirs, "Years of Renewal" (Simon & Schuster, \$35), which spans the 2 1/5 years of the Ford presidency and weighs in at 1,151 pages. Why should we read it now, almost a quarter-century after the facts?

First, because this transplant from Bavaria (with a little help from Harvard) writes so well. Not "hip" or "breezy" well; indeed, the prose can become quite professorial when Mr. Kissinger delivers one of his many obiter dicta, like: "A nation's for-



Bookshelf

"Years of Renewal"
By Henry Kissinger

eign policy inevitably reflects an amalgam of the convictions of its leaders and the pressures of the environment."

"Well" attaches to a style that simply outclasses the normal fare served up by former people of power. With Mr. Kissinger, we return to an almost dead tradition, to Churchill, Disraeli and Bismarck, who wrote on a broad canvas of learnedness—and with a literary sensibility for the drama of men and nations.

With a few economical strokes, Mr. Kissinger paints people, policies and constellations—Brezhnev, Zhou, Rabin, Hussein, Giscard, Schmidt. Sometimes, a single sentence can say it all, as after an encounter with Mao: "He would fix upon me a smile both penetrating and mocking as if to warn that it would be futile to attempt to deceive this specialist in human duplicity."

"Years of Renewal" is an engrossing book, truly hard to put down, at least for aficionados of U.S. foreign policy. That is one excellent reason for reading it. The second is precisely the 25-year hiatus. Time has improved the product in subtle ways. Mr. Kissinger has resisted settling scores, especially with his neoconservative tormentors, who hounded him relentlessly for being too soft on the Soviets. At worst, he waxes ironical or tart when he reconstructs the 1970s battles over détente or arms control.

Maybe all memoirs ought to obey a 25-year rule. For time makes the heart grow wiser. Undoubtedly, Richard Nixon was a major preoccupation for Mr. Kissinger. And though the book is about the Ford presidency, a whole chapter belongs to Nixon,

who keeps haunting the rest of the book like a revenant.

How these two needed and disdained, attracted and repelled, each other is an almost Shakespearian plot, and Mr. Kissinger renders it with compassion for Nixon and insight into himself. "As an erstwhile refugee who was for decades self-conscious about my German accent," Mr. Kissinger confesses, "I had some understanding of Nixon's fear of rejection." The most moving part of Mr. Kissinger's eulogy (Nixon died in 1994) is reprinted here: "I felt a deep loss and a profound void. . . . He stood on pinnacles that dissolved into precipices. He achieved greatly and suffered deeply."

How much has Mr. Kissinger achieved? May the historians decide after yet another quarter-century. It is at least clear that he wanted to teach America a version of Realpolitik appropriate for his greatest of powers. "American policymakers," he proclaims, "oscillate between the pragmatic and the missionary, between the practical and the idealistic." And, we might add, between Wilsonianism and power politics, isolationism and interventionism.

Mr. Kissinger wanted something more stable and predictable for the world's anchor power. It is captured in his 1974 Senate testimony. While the neocons were pushing for an ideological crusade, and the liberals for *more* arms control, Mr. Kissinger preached a nicely balanced realism: "We seek, regardless of Soviet intentions, to serve peace through a systematic resistance to pressure and conciliatory responses to moderate behavior."

An obvious combination, isn't it? But not to Americans, whose founding faith is not balance and containment but the theology of transcendence, a story of evil overcome and salvation gained. Kissingerism has no place in that teleology, and this is why Harvard's liberals hated him with as much passion as New York's neocons. (The latter have made peace with Henry, but his former colleagues on the Charles are still doing their worst to deny him an honorary degree.)

The endless struggle to find a policy befitting an America that is No. 1 but not an empire is the leitmotiv of these memoirs. Mr. Kissinger's is a compelling argument. Has he actually brought a bit of Talleyrand and Bismarck to the land of Jefferson and Madison? Not really, but there is an ironical twist. As Europe has become more democratic, it has become more like America. The Continent that invented Realpolitik now debates human rights, international tribunals, humanitarian intervention—remaking rather than restraining the world—with the same passionate intensity as America has done ever since the Federalists. The problem, it turns out, is not America but democracy.

Mr. Joffe is editorial-page editor of the Süddeutsche Zeitung in Munich and associate of the Olin Center for Strategic Studies at Harvard.

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