

Books

Kissinger: From the Bull Pen, on the Mound

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In 1969, when Henry Kissinger entered White House service, the book publisher W.W. Norton collected three of his recent essays on international politics under the title *American Foreign Policy*. Five years later an expanded version appeared (Norton; 304 pp.; \$6.95). Its additional comments—excerpts from Congressional testimony and public addresses given between June, 1972, and December, 1973—reflect the prominence and the exalted position the author achieved in the interim. It is an interesting volume, for its hybrid character gives it a Janus-like perspective. The original three essays, written perhaps with the hope of influence but not with the certainty of power, foretell with some precision three of the principal developments in the conduct of foreign relations of the United States during the first five years when Kissinger had some responsibility for it. The pronouncements in the second part of the book, delivered from the seat of authority, are part of a deliberate attempt to set out the primary themes for the next five years, and beyond. And although they differ in tone and perspective, the two parts of the new edition are closely related. Secretary Kissinger's hopes for the 1970's and 1980's, and the obstacles to realizing them, are connected with Professor Kissinger's observations in the 1960's.

The essay on "The Vietnam Negotiations," first published in the Winter, 1969, issue of *Foreign Affairs*, foreshadowed the Nixon Indochina policy. The Tet Offensive of February, 1968, had made it clear, Kissinger wrote, that the United States could not win a military victory "in a period or with force levels politically acceptable to the American people." But neither could we simply abandon the government of South Vietnam to its fate. "The commitment of five hundred thousand Americans has settled the issue of the importance of Vietnam. For what is involved now is confidence in American promises. However fashionable it is to ridicule the terms 'credibility' or 'prestige,' they are not empty phrases; other nations can gear their actions to ours only if they can count on our steadiness." If we could not, strictly speaking, win in

Vietnam, neither could we afford to lose. Kissinger defined losing as "a military defeat, or a change in the political structure of South Vietnam brought about by external military force." Sound foreign policy required either a negotiated settlement in which control of South Vietnam remained at least partly in the hands of forces favorable to the United States; or, if that couldn't be arranged, the extrication of the U.S. from the war in a way that did not precipitate the collapse of those forces. We had to abandon ship, yet make sure it didn't sink forthwith.

Kissinger identified two advantages the United States could employ in pursuit of this goal: superior material resources and North Vietnam's heavy reliance on other countries, notably the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Ultimately the Nixon Administration did call upon both. It lobbied the two great Communist powers to pressure Hanoi to agree to American terms, and, when this proved insufficient, it carried on a fierce campaign of aerial bombardment against North Vietnam.

Kissinger also made two tactical recommendations that had, in the end, to be abandoned. He hoped that the U.S. and North Vietnam would stage a mutual withdrawal of troops from South Vietnam, but Hanoi's stubbornness and the exigencies of American public opinion forced the Administration to undertake a steady, unilateral reduction in the level of American combat participants. And his warning that the American government should abjure the bramble of South Vietnamese politics was partly violated by the settlement that he himself helped to craft. Despite these departures, however, the Administration he served seemed, for two years, to have achieved the end he had prescribed: what Mr. Nixon called an "honorable end to the Vietnam war," and what certainly amounted to the end of direct American participation in combat without the immediate demise of the Thieu regime. Whether the contribution that those two years of grace made to the integrity of American commitments the world over justified the bloodshed in Indochina and the bitterness in this country they cost is, of course, debatable.

But the Secretary of State never wavered in his conviction that they were and that his calculations of 1969 had been correct. As the American-sponsored government in Saigon collapsed in the spring of 1975 he urged that a large dose of military hardware be rushed to the scene to try to rescue the crumbling South Vietnamese Army, and berated the Congress for refusing to authorize it. At a press conference called after the last, frantic evacuation of Americans and Vietnamese from the besieged capital had been completed he reaffirmed the premise of the Indochina policy he had helped to direct for six years: "Peace and

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progress in the world has [*sic*] depended importantly on American commitment and American conviction." And he defended the policy itself: "We wanted what was considered peace with honor—was [*sic*] that the United States would not end a war by overthrowing a government with which it had been associated. That still seems an objective that was correct."

There was perhaps little else he could have said. The fall of Saigon was not the most auspicious occasion for confessing a colossal error of judgment, even if Kissinger had felt inclined to do so. And he showed, at least, that he was not a devout and unreconstructed Bourbon. He had learned something. The reluctance of the American people to participate forever in the domestic politics of Vietnam had persuaded him that, since "foreign policy must be sustained over decades if it is to be effective," in the future the American role in the world would have to be "tailored to what is sustainable." Most of the critics of the Nixon-Ford Indochina policy would agree with that judgment. And they would agree, too, however harsh their views of his tenure in office, with his rueful response to the question of what all the fighting had accomplished: "I think it will be a long time before Americans will be able to talk or write about the war with some dispassion."

In "Domestic Structure and Foreign Policy" Kissinger singled out for consideration, among all the aspects of "domestic structure" that bear on the conduct of foreign relations, two things: the psychology of leaders and the governmental machinery through which important decisions are made and carried out. The choices proved propitious, for he rose to power, to eminence, through his shrewd understanding and adroit handling of the two. He vaulted onto the covers of national magazines because of his personal dealings with leaders as diverse—and as unlikely connoisseurs of his charm—as Le Duc Tho and King Faisal. But he was in a position to deal with them in the first place because he had come to occupy a commanding position in the American foreign policy machinery.

The essay betrays a strong sense of the practice, as well as the theory, of diplomacy. It decries the sterility that a bureaucracy's intrinsic preference for safety and familiarity, and the difficulty it experiences in arriving at any sort of consensus, can impose upon a foreign policy. The bureaucratic syndrome, Kissinger wrote, "drives the executive in the direction of extra-bureaucratic means of decision. The practice of relying on special emissaries or personal envoys is an example...." To infuse the foreign policy of the United States with creativity and freshness Nixon and Kissinger took most of the responsibility for designing it, and much of the power to implement it, out of the hands of the officers of the State and Defense departments, and assigned it to the National Security Council, whose director and dominating spirit was (and

remains) Henry Kissinger. Virtually all foreign policy matters of importance flowed to the President through his office. And he himself represented the United States in crucial discussions about the Vietnam settlement, the inauguration of political relations with the People's Republic of China, the limitation of strategic armaments, and later, as Secretary of State, the conflict in the Middle East.

The cost of controlling and circumventing the professional bureaucracy has been a degree of demoralization in its ranks and public disquiet at the secrecy in which the affairs of state are conducted. Kissinger has said that one of his chief tasks at the State Department will be to bring its members into the process of devising and executing policy from which the Nixon Administration largely excluded them, so that the foreign relations of the United States will not have to depend upon the virtuosity of one individual. But he leaves the impression that the period of consolidation, over which he hopes to preside, could have come only as a sequel to a season of sharp new departures, for which the diplomatic methods of his first five years in Washington were necessary.

In the third piece in the original collection, "Central Issues in American Foreign Policy," he criticized the American reluctance to "think in terms of power and equilibrium," which, he reckoned, had led to overly grand ambitions and consequent frustration at the failure to fulfill them. He called for a new approach to international politics that would take them into account. The Nixon Administration adopted one. Phrases like "balance of power" and "stable structure of peace" popped up in official discourse. More important, the nation's foreign policy in the last five years has seemed to be rooted in a less expansive view of America's proper role in the world, and a less Manichean vision of international politics, than had been the case for almost three decades. The "Nixon Doctrine" denoted the intention, at least, to bear fewer burdens abroad. And Kissinger's frequent journeys to Moscow and Peking expressed a new willingness to traffic with governments previously considered unclean, and hence unsuitable partners for serious international business.

This third development, like the first two, has also come under challenge. Kissinger has stood accused of violating, in pursuit of policies attuned to the realities of power, the human rights of Ibos, Bengalis, and Cypriotes, among other peoples. An expression of concern for such rights has become a standard feature of his addresses since being posted to the State Department, but he has indicated no plans for a reversal of the course, set by the lodestars of power and equilibrium, the Nixon Administration charted.

Between the first and second parts of *American Foreign Policy* a change in tone occurs. The language of speechmaking takes

over, hortatory, and often rather trite, ringing like a slightly off-key bugle call in contrast to the softer, more subtle, and altogether more continental sounds of the violin preceding it. This is due in part to the inevitable difference between academic and public pronouncements, the first usually aimed at elucidating, the second often concerned to blur, the one intended to criticize, the other to inspire or pacify. Moreover, the office of Secretary of State, which the author assumes in the second section of part two, imposes upon its occupant the obligation to make certain ritual incantations—the editors have seen fit to reprint. In his confirmation hearings the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee take Kissinger on a “tour d’horizon” of the globe, and he allows that China, India, Africa, the developing countries, and the United Nations are all important and deserve sympathetic attention.

Still, out of the official rhetoric the Secretary’s notion of what the principal themes of American foreign policy for the next five years must be does emerge. The first of them is *détente*—the moderation of tensions and the extension of cooperation with the Soviet Union. In 1968 Kissinger had expressed some skepticism about improved relations with the Russians, or at least with American eagerness to believe they could be easily achieved. But he also noted that the two great powers had reached a crucial juncture in their competition in strategic armaments, and that a thorough review of national security policy should have a high place on the agenda of the next national administration. That review, which he supervised, led to the negotiations with the Soviet Union on limiting strategic arms that produced the SALT agreement in the summer of 1972.

His case rests on two propositions. The first is that the United States, as well as the Soviet Union, has an interest in curtailing the arms race. This has won broad support, although whether the most recent agreement, forged during the summit meeting between President Ford and General Secretary Brezhnev at Vladivostok, represents the best way of doing so remains a matter of some dispute. The second general proposition is that arms control accords form the hub of a whole network of ties between the two great powers, that they are “linked organically to a chain of agreements and to a broad understanding about international conduct appropriate to the dangers of the nuclear age.” This second contention has come under attack from two directions. It has been criticized as being both too broadly, and too narrowly, defined.

Some critics, taking as their text the Soviet role in the 1973 war in the Middle East, wonder whether the Russians have indeed resolved, as Kissinger asserts, “to avoid direct armed confrontation, to use restraint in local conflicts, to assert no special claims in derogation of the sovereign equality of all nations, to stress cooperation and negotiation at all times” in their relations with the United States. They doubt that *détente* has any real meaning beyond the specific provisions of

the arms control agreements that have been signed.

Others insist that whatever the potential for improvement in Soviet-American relations it must be accompanied by some liberal changes in the practices of the Soviet government. The vehicle for this conviction has been the Jackson Amendment, which made the extension of most-favored-nation trading status to the Soviet Union conditional upon a loosening of that country’s restrictions on emigration. Kissinger opposed the Jackson Amendment and the concept that lay behind it. He admits, in the second part of the book, that its goal is a worthy one. He acknowledges that where the aims of reducing the danger of war and of promoting human liberty conflict a “genuine moral dilemma” arises. But in the end, Kissinger argues, the influence that the United States can exercise over the domestic policies of other nations, especially the USSR, is bound to be minimal, and hence it is unwise to gear the conduct of foreign affairs to such domestic considerations. He stands squarely behind this position, even when Senator George McGovern presents him with the personally painful case of Nazi Germany.

The debate over *détente* illumines the second task Kissinger has set himself. It is exceedingly difficult for a nation to transcend the boundaries of its own historical experience, or controvert its most deeply cherished values. Especially for the United States, foreign policy has been “the expression of the collective spirit and the common aspirations of the entire nation.” But this leads to two related problems. First, it is precisely this spirit that threatens *détente*. For it is the Jackson Amendment, with its commitment to fundamental political liberties, that expresses the moral consensus on which the Republic is anchored. Kissinger’s injunction to ignore the Soviet government’s indifference to these liberties runs counter to one of the strongest currents of American life. And second, quite apart from the moral standards of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a foreign policy based on the cold calculation of the distribution of power around the globe and the perpetual quest for some sort of stability is not likely to arouse the enthusiasm necessary to make it work. For, as Kissinger pointed out as an academic commentator, “equilibrium is not a purpose with which we can respond to the travail of our world. A sense of mission is clearly a legacy of American history; to most Americans, America has always stood for something other than its own grandeur.” The American notion of world order requires “deeper purposes than stability.” But he was far from certain “whether such a leap of the imagination is possible in the modern bureaucratic state.”

The third goal the Secretary of State has set for the years ahead entails comparable difficulties. *Détente* is a necessary, but not a sufficient, response to the changes that have taken place in world politics in the last two decades. These changes—political, social, and

technological—have made the international system cobbled together after World War II creaky and fragile. In 1968 Kissinger wrote that “a new concept of international order is essential.”

But, as Machiavelli warned, nothing is so difficult as inaugurating a new order of things. The construction of one is, in the first instance, an intellectual project. In “Domestic Structure and Foreign Policy” Kissinger had observed that “it is characteristic of an age of turmoil that it produces so many immediate issues that little time is left to penetrate their deeper meaning. The most serious problem therefore becomes the need to acquire a sufficiently wide perspective so that the present does not overwhelm the future.” He had found this perspective missing in the American government. He arrived at the White House with the intention of supplying it, by turning his attention to broad problems and long-term issues. He had also observed, however, that even where the diplomatic equivalent of a better mousetrap exists, the government may not adopt it, because “the ‘operating’ elements may not take the plans seriously.” In politics ideas often wither for want of gardeners to tend them. Kissinger corralled a good deal of responsibility for carrying out the schemes his staff was concocting, and soon found himself immersed in the day-to-day operation of foreign policy, skipping from crisis to crisis. He thus risked falling victim to the conceptual myopia of which he had complained from the sidelines.

Still, the intellectual performance of the nation’s foreign policy machinery during the years when Kissinger has had a hand in running it has not been altogether discreditable. If no new “Atlantic Charter” has been written, the blame does not rest exclusively with the United States. And the American government has offered serious proposals for reforming the international monetary system, for insuring that the non-Communist industrial nations continue to have adequate supplies of energy, and for keeping the tidal wave of money suddenly at the disposal of a few oil-producing nations from overflowing the international financial channels that now exist and flooding the world economy. None has so far been enacted, because the political will to do so, the second precondition for the new order of international affairs the Secretary of State has summoned, has not been present. In the late 1960’s Kissinger had noted the renewed national assertiveness of our friends: “The United States,” he wrote, “could not expect to perpetuate the accident of Europe’s post-war exhaustion into a permanent pattern of international relations. Europe’s economic recovery inevitably led to a return to more traditional political pressures.” In the 1970’s American proposals he advanced for coping with the economic dislocations that have beset the Western world have run afoul of just these pressures, most conspicuously exerted by the French. “It is not ‘normal’ that Atlantic policies should be geared to American conceptions,” Kissinger asserted in the sixties.

But life would be easier for him in the seventies if it were.

Kissinger was also prescient about the growing complexity of international affairs. Since the end of the Second World War “several score of new states have come into being. In the nineteenth century the emergence of even a few new nations produced decades of adjustment, and after the First World War, the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were never assimilated.” Moreover, the new nations have vastly divergent domestic arrangements, and this further complicates world politics. For “when domestic structures—and the concept of legitimacy on which they are based—differ widely, statesmen can still meet, but their ability to persuade has been reduced, for they no longer speak the same language.” Alas, it is these polyglot statesmen who now have responsibility for resolving a host of tangled issues, ranging from political control of the former British mandate in Palestine to the proper human uses of the sea, upon which the future of the planet depends.

At several moments in its long and tumultuous history the system of nation-states has reconstituted itself, to adjust to changes in the character and composition of its members. The Concert of Europe formed after the Napoleonic wars of the nineteenth century, the subject of the Secretary of State’s first book, was one such episode. The organization of the West after the Second World War, about which he is now given to waxing nostalgic, was another. But both came in the aftermath of furious, destructive conflicts that enforced prudence and a spirit of cooperation upon those who survived it. Moreover, the first took place in a far simpler world than ours, and the second was made possible in part because one power, the United States, towered over the others and was able to exert undisputed leadership.

None of those conditions is present today. Whether, in their absence, the present head of the Department of State, or anybody else, can fashion a system of international relations adequate for the last quarter of the century remains very much to be seen. The bumptiousness of America’s erstwhile junior partners, the strong wills and shrill voices of formerly colonial peoples, the complexities of the problems of managing the earth’s national resources, which have recently arrived on the doorsteps of the world’s leaders, may thwart all attempts to find patterns and procedures by which the family of nations can run its affairs. Perhaps the world is too crowded and diverse to be orderly. The task of helping to arrange some sort of order, however, is the principal one that the Secretary of State confronts. It is the standard by which historians, in whose company Henry Kissinger has numbered himself, will judge him and his successors. And if he should fail, no one who has read—or written—*American Foreign Policy* will have to search far for the reasons why.