

# KISSINGER AND THE LIMITS OF POWER

by Ralph Buultjens

In the early 1970s the international relationships that had been frozen since soon after World War II showed signs of decongealing. Sensing the historical moment, the Nixon administration aspired to be both the catalyst and the beneficiary of this time of rare opportunity. As national security assistant and then secretary of state, Henry Kissinger was uniquely situated to participate in, shape, and observe these efforts. The first volume of his memoirs, *White House Years*, detailed his part in the early Nixon period, January, 1969, to January, 1973. Now he continues the story in a weighty second volume. *Years of Upheaval* (Little, Brown; 1,283 pp.; \$24.95) takes us from 1973 to the Nixon resignation in August, 1974.

The opening is triumphal. Nixon and those around him have just engineered a massive electoral victory—one that the president mistakenly perceives as wiping the slate clean of all his prior misdeeds, known and unknown to the American electorate. Less than two years later it is all over. During this period Kissinger emerges from presidential assistant to virtually assistant president and principal director of foreign affairs. The impact of foreign affairs on domestic events, and vice versa, and the impact of America on the world at large make him an international figure with considerable influence at home.

*Years of Upheaval* is essentially two, though interconnected, works. The first provides a record of happenings; the second, a record of ideas about foreign policy. The person of Kissinger links the offices of state that he occupied and the policies that he helped to create.

## PREPARING THE HISTORICAL RECORD

As a record of doings, a chronology of international politics from Kissinger's perspective, *Years of Upheaval* is complete and comprehensive. It shows how Nixon and Kissinger, and later largely Kissinger alone, sought to influence the unfolding drama of

world affairs. Endless meetings, negotiations, and conferences are reported, often verbatim. Almost five hundred pages are required to describe events in the Middle East alone during the Yom Kippur war and its aftermath. Scattered through these extensive narratives are the best portions of the book—brilliantly etched portraits of world leaders and occasional stunning vignettes about what motivated them or about some unknown and unrealized facet of events.

Thus, for example, we learn a great deal about the personality of Anwar el-Sadat and the roots of his mental and psychological composition. The ways in which Sadat handled four American presidents transformed suspicion into admiration, and one wonders whether this talent for personal relations was not worked on Kissinger himself. Yet, somewhat unexplained in this beautifully crafted portrait is why this particular genius finally failed with his own people.

We learn more about Mao Zedong and Chou Enlai than from almost any other public source, except perhaps André Malraux. There is a fascinating speculation, supported by elliptical evidence from conversations with other Chinese political figures, that the infirmities of Chou's last year may have been more political than physical. And the Chinese concern with the containment of North Vietnam, as early as 1973, foreshadows the Sino-Vietnam war in 1979.

We are on hand to witness the decline of fraternal communism. The Chinese Revolution is an example of moral degeneracy, Brezhnev tells Nixon in 1973. The Chinese are perfidious and sly. A few months later the Chinese leadership are voicing a mixture of contempt and fear in warning the United States against the Soviet Union. "They bully the weak and are afraid of the tough," says Mao. The aged revolutionary, surprisingly proclaiming that "God has sent me an invitation," goes on to affirm that in foreign policy national interests precede ideology.

The reportorial panorama covers much more and makes for highly informative reading. Inevitably, though, agendas and reports must be interpreted, and here Kissinger's objectivity frequently deserts him. His analysis, heavily nuanced, betrays, among other things, a strange insensitivity to the legitimate needs of opponents. The Vietnamese negotiators are casti-

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gated for their insolence, implacability, deception, and palpable suspiciousness. Yet, when visiting Hanoi, Kissinger himself remarks that large portions of the countryside are "heavily cratered by our bombing, resembling photographs of a lunar landscape." Enduring years of bombing is not likely to create a spirit of cooperation in diplomacy. To expect otherwise surely is an act of self-aggrandizement and self-deception.

The Chinese, on the other hand, and Chou Enlai in particular, are handled with a warmth approaching affection. Perhaps this treatment tells us something about Kissinger. Did the euphoria of one of his diplomatic successes—the opening to China—influence his perception of the People's Republic? And, once again, had the rulers of the Middle Kingdom charmed the visiting barbarians with their traditional weapons of culture and smooth sophistry that Westerners find so flattering? To "become a partner in transforming old enmity into new cooperation" and to be recognized as such by the leaders of "a country that had made its mark by cultural preeminence and majesty of conduct" is heady stuff. The concept of "shared interests" in world affairs, advanced by both Kissinger and the Chinese leadership, could well be as ephemeral as the interests India and China claimed to share in the '50s.

Chile and Cambodia are perhaps the most controversial episodes of the later Nixon years. The role played by the United States in the fateful Allende regime, from 1970 to 1973, and by the administration in the concealment of the initial bombing of Cambodia and the subsequent expansion of the war in that country have received extensive analysis by a variety of investigators. Kissinger asserts flatly that "our government had nothing to do with planning [Allende's] overthrow and no involvement with the plotters." On Cambodia he vigorously defends both the bombings and the American involvement, which was finally halted by Congress. In Kissinger's view, "America contributed to the disaster in Cambodia not because it did too much but because it did too little." These are highly questionable statements. Further historical research and the declassification of state papers will eventually determine the veracity of Kissinger's statements and his explanation of events. However, the defensive nature of Kissinger's writing on these subjects suggests that he is preparing the historical record in anticipation of further critical examination.

In addition to matters of foreign policy, *Years of Upheaval* contains much on the atmosphere and operations of the White House, the State Department, and assorted domestic political institutions. The Executive Office appears, no doubt correctly, as a veritable snakepit of intrigue and manipulation. A variety of presidential aides jockey for power and position with a repellent and venomous intensity. Wiretaps and secret recordings abound.

From these memoirs Nixon emerges as a confused, often erratic, and posturing personality given to issuing orders that his closest subordinates frequently had to dilute, deflect, or deny. His abilities were drowned in a mixture of meandering rhetoric interspersed with outbursts of vulgar braggadocio. Suspicious and tense by personality, Nixon was both unforgiving of oppo-

nents and ready to suggest or endorse mean-spirited attacks on them. Some of his achievements were considerable, and yet much of the time of those who worked for him was absorbed in sanitizing the president for the press and public.

Kissinger constructs this sketch of Nixon in a masterly fashion. Layer after layer of Nixon's intellectual and psychological makeup are peeled away until the inner hollow is finally exposed. That this is done while expressing a genuine gratitude for Nixon's advancement of Kissinger makes the portrayal all the more devastating. However, the reaction of Kissinger to many of Nixon's outlandish suggestions is also revealing. Apparently, he frequently agreed or did not disagree, although in reality he strongly opposed many of these proposals. "Do you agree...that we should draw the wagons around the White House?" asks Nixon. Admitting a lack of "fortitude" to probe this further, Kissinger comments: "I mumbled something noncommittal that Nixon, not unreasonably, construed as assent."

### THE "SECOND BOOK"

Whatever views or emotions Henry Kissinger evokes, he is one of the few American statesmen who has presented a consistent and coherent philosophy of international relations. It is the infusion of these historical and diplomatic themes, intermingled with and underlying the perception of events, that makes *Years of Upheaval* a work of philosophy.

Kissinger articulates a concept of stability based on the balance of international power. In the nuclear age, stability is a primary value in world affairs and can be achieved by a kind of horsetrading among nations that matter: essentially the Soviet Union and the United States, with China as an emerging third coordinate. Each of these powers should have a clearly delineated sphere of influence and would, implicitly, have the freedom to police or maintain its influence within its sphere. Overlapping or contested mandates would be negotiated. The good international behavior of the Soviet Union would be guaranteed in three ways: by development of economic and technological relationships that could be extended or reduced by the United States; by management of the Sino-Soviet conflict now that the United States had enhanced its China connection; and by maintaining an adequate military force as a deterrent of last resort.

In the pursuit of this grand design Nixon and Kissinger engaged the Soviet Union in a series of negotiations covering arms control, trade, investment, and other exchanges. To enmesh this economically failing giant in a web of relationships that assured its own position but deterred it from political expansion was the longer term strategic goal. A revealing conversation with President Pompidou of France in May, 1973, discloses the philosophic heart of Kissinger's fundamentals:

There are changes in the international balance that can threaten our nation's security and have to be resisted however they come about....[The United States] had a duty to defend the security of free peoples if it wanted to preserve its own....We would maintain the world

balance of power at all costs....There were some changes we would not accept, however disguised the catalyst, even if it appeared as a "progressive tide."

There are three curious and dangerous elements that give this worldview an illusory quality. First, there is the apparent commitment of the United States to "defend the security of free peoples." While this assumes that America will define the nature of freedom it seeks to defend, there is an absence of any serious element of partnership or consultation with the peoples concerned. Such a unilateral defense of others' freedoms, as defined by oneself, leads directly to the type of problem presented by the Vietnam war. Second, there is an implied belief that the methods used and the goals sought will be accepted and sustained by the USSR, China, and all other nations involved. The willingness to presuppose this compliance suggests a degree of self-delusion, or the excessive confidence contained in Kissinger's observation that "A nation and its leaders must choose...the willingness to act on unprovable assumptions to deal with challenges when they are manageable." What happens if the judgments of leaders are wrong, and who then bears the consequences?

Third, and most surprising, is the narrowness of philosophic focus inherent in Kissinger's vision. A few major nations play the game, the rest are mere spectators. What's good for the big powers is good for the world. This eliminates the vast majority of states and peoples, most of whom live in the Third World. Powerless they may be, but is power the only determinant in international politics? This approach also creates needless hostility among nations whose escalating impact and influence is one of the features of the contemporary world. Today the game has shifted to involve the audience. Earlier recognition of this change might have saved the U.S. much anguish in Central America, oil supply areas, and other Third World regions.

There is another dimension to the philosophic themes that permeate *Years of Upheaval*. It is evident that Kissinger, as do many with philosophic inclinations, sees events as clashes of ideas. This titanic struggle casts the forces of light, represented by the concepts and advocates of Kissinger, against the forces of darkness, represented by his intellectual and political opponents. Interestingly, the bad guys in this book are not the foreign adversaries of the United States but the domestic adversaries of the Nixon administration. It is they who use Watergate to assault Nixon and thus erode whatever domestic support sustains his foreign policy. It is they who bring pressure to wind down the war in Vietnam and end the involvement in Cambodia. It is they who abort SALT II. It is they who question and harry a secretary of state in the midst of delicate international negotiations. It is they who fail to understand strategic concepts and diplomatic designs.

Ultimately, it is these opponents, inside and outside of Congress, who are strengthened as the administration crumbles. And their battering ram was Watergate—an occurrence regarded by both Brezhnev

and Mao as inconsequential. Kissinger tends to concur. In his impatience with the prosecutors of Watergate, with a questioning Congress, and with unsupportive public opinion, Kissinger displays a peculiar insensitivity to the process of democratic politics. To him, these antagonists were saboteurs of the national interest. Here is the failure to recognize one of the centralities of American democracy—the limits of the power of appointed officials. This is a derivative power that must eventually give way before the power of directly elected representatives, especially when the source of appointive power (in this case the president of the United States) is castrated. Thus, a Kissinger tendency that earlier inhibited the creation of the public and congressional consensus so vital for a successful foreign policy became a major impediment to Kissinger's attempts to conduct a strong policy while presidential authority was melting. There was one demanding truth that Nixon and Kissinger realized too late: Ultimately, geopolitics depends on local politics.

What much of *Years of Upheaval* suggests is that foreign affairs is better conducted by statesmen in the chancelleries of mighty nations. Untidy and often petty domestic issues, smelly and shallow politicians, ignorant and unsympathetic masses get in the way. If this impression of Kissinger's attitude is correct, it is understandable. But he is also struggling against the realities of today's world. People *do* want to be involved. And this is the warp and woof of democracy; even splendid philosophic constructs have to be lodged in the context of the political system from which they emerge. In this sense, one begins to feel that by method and approach Henry Kissinger would have made an outstanding secretary of state of the Soviet Union.

## ROADS NOT TAKEN

The Nixon-Kissinger years in international affairs were a time of opportunity—opportunity to reshape America's world role. Nixon and Kissinger did indeed seize the moment, but did they utilize it in the best interest of the nation and the world? Did their power-oriented focus, their efforts at confining global management to a few big powers, their relatively belated recognition of economic and energy issues, their indifference to the aspirations of the Third World do the nation and world a longer term disservice? Why did official America largely ignore matters that were to arouse intense passion in the near future—global ecology, migration and refugee concerns, human rights, and the like? We do not know whether Kissinger grappled with these questions in charting the course he followed. And if he did not, why not? Historians may come to regard what he terms "years of upheaval" as wasted ones, the years the locusts ate.

Some write about history and others make it. Kissinger has done both with considerable style. *Years of Upheaval* is a valuable document to be read and discussed with great care. However, to recommend such scrutiny does not imply acceptance of its view of international politics or diplomatic happenings. That judgment will have to be made in the hearts and minds of each reader. [WV]