Book Review by Patrick J. Garrity

**Regarding Henry**

Penguin Press, 1,008 pages, $39.95

Henry Kissinger, now almost four decades out of office, continues to fascinate, for various reasons. The setbacks to American foreign policy over the past 15 years, often attributed to the hubris of neoconservatives and liberal humanitarians, have apparently given new currency to his realist world views. At the same time, many on the Left regard Kissinger as a war criminal and search for evidence that will convict him before the bar of history, if not the International Court of Justice. Then there is the old joke about the space race with the Soviets—the United States was bound to win “because our German scientists are better than their German scientists.” Americans have sometimes had an inferiority complex about our diplomatic skills; we often seem to win the war but lose the peace to the machinations of foreigners skilled in the dark arts of negotiation. Hence, we conjure up our own Doctor of Diplomacy, Super K, with a suitably thick German accent.

Whatever the case, the new authorized biography by Niall Ferguson made all the bestseller lists, even though, at over one thousand pages, it covers the subject’s life only up to his appointment as president-elect Richard Nixon’s national security advisor in late 1968. To that point, Kissinger had merely been an academic and an occasional government consultant; influential in those arenas, but hardly the stuff of such a lengthy tome.

Authorized biographies are a mixed bag. They provide access to the subject (if alive) and to others who might not otherwise be willing to speak out. The biographer is presumably granted access to private papers not available to other researchers. On the downside, the subject (or his heirs) is predisposed to select a biographer who will be sympathetic, or at the very least not hostile. So one must certainly examine the credentials and views of the author.

Ferguson is an Oxford-educated historian with wide-ranging interests who, like so many of his colleagues, ventured to greener scholarly pastures across the pond—in his case, to Kissinger’s old stomping grounds, Harvard. He has written extensively about imperialism (or hegemony, in politer terms), and much more sympathetically than is the general academic norm.

He came to public prominence with his book *The Pity of War* (1999), which argues that Britain should have stayed out of the conflict with Germany in 1914, at least at the outset, on the grounds that this course would have allowed London to retain its empire and global financial leadership over the long term. He has authored *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (2003), *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011), *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the Modern World* (2008), and a two-volume history of the Rothschild family (1998-99). He has been supportive of an activist—one might frankly say, imperial—American foreign policy, criticizing President Obama for bringing about an unwise American strategic retreat. He has quarreled over economic theory with Paul Krugman, opposed Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union, and vehemently criticized Donald Trump’s
proposed foreign policy. Ferguson acknowledges that he was not Kissinger’s first choice; that apparently was Andrew Roberts, another prolific British historian, who has a good reputation among American conservatives. Kissinger told Ferguson that he had been impressed by one of his books. One wonders which one.

For those not familiar with the early years of the subject: Heinz Alfred Kissinger, age 15, and his German-Jewish family emigrated to the United States (New York City) in 1938. He was drafted into the U.S. Army and became a naturalized citizen in 1943; Sergeant Kissinger served in the European theater and, after the war ended, in a high-level administrative post in occupied Germany. (He was later commissioned in the Army Reserve as an intelligence officer and served until the late 1950s.) He received his undergraduate and graduate degrees at Harvard and obtained a teaching position at the university, during which time he became a mainstay in the Cold War intellectual establishment, serving as Nelson Rockefeller’s principal foreign policy advisor and also as a consultant to the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations.

Ferguson attempts to clarify or rebut many common judgments of the young Kissinger advanced by previous writers. Did his experience as a Jew in the chaotic Weimar Republic, and as a refugee from Nazi persecution, lead to his later pessimistic worldview and supposed affinity for authoritarianism? No: if anything, Kissinger’s personal reflections were shaped by his role as an American soldier, liberating Europe and occupying Germany. Was he simply a shameless political opportunist, willing to serve any administration or candidate that would get him closer to power? No: Kissinger was a Rockefeller loyalist despite every indication that the New York governor would never be elected president; his association with Nixon was very late and rather accidental. Did Kissinger pass on secret information to the Nixon campaign in 1968 that effectively derailed the prospects for peace with North Vietnam? No: Kissinger did no such thing; and even if he had, it was no more than Nixon could have learned from reading the newspapers.

Historians and biographers have challenged Ferguson on these points. The more startling revelation, according to Ferguson, is that Kissinger—at least the pre-1969 Kissinger—was an idealist (hence the book’s subtitle). This challenges the near-universal view that Kissinger was and is the quintessential “realist.” But what is realism? A crude might-makes-right Machiavellianism? A sophisticated European-style Realpolitik? Or the assumption, beloved of modern academics, that all regime types seek to maximize their security in an anarchic international system?

By “idealists,” Ferguson doesn’t mean that Kissinger was a reincarnation of Woodrow Wilson, a crusader for democracy, or a believer in the inevitability of perpetual peace. “I am using the term ‘idealism’ in its philosophical sense,” Ferguson writes, “meaning that strand of Western philosophy, extending back to Anaxagoras and Plato, that holds that (in Kant’s formulation) ‘we can never be certain whether our putative outer experience is not mere imagining’ because ‘the reality of external objects does not admit of strict proof.’” Kissinger first tried to come to grips with this in his nearly 400-page senior honors thesis at Harvard, “The Meaning of History: Reflections on Spengler, Toynbee, and Kant”—which famously led Harvard to put a strict limit on the length of future senior theses. According to Ferguson’s reading of the thesis, and some associated works, Kissinger, in the name of “idealism,” rejected materialism as he understood it, which meant particularly economic determinism, whether of the Marxist variety or of those Western developmental theories later beloved by the Kennedy Administration. Kissinger therefore realized from a very early stage in his career, according to Ferguson, that the Cold War was a battle about ideals.

There is considerable disagreement among scholars influenced by Kissinger, and those who study political theory, about his understanding of philosophical idealism, particularly that of Immanuel Kant, and his application of it to his theory of international order and diplomacy. The most one can say with some confidence is that Kissinger believed that nations (reflected above all by their statesmen) seek to fulfill particular “moral” aspirations, or “ideals,” which are determined by their unique historical experience, geography, political and religious culture, and the like. The pursuit of these aspirations inevitably involves the accumulation and use of power, especially military power, but power itself—or any other purely material objective, such as economic prosperity—is insufficient to fulfill the psychological needs of the human condition. Which condition, to repeat, is decisively shaped by particular national experiences, not by nature, and there doesn’t appear to be a trans-historical standard by which one can judge the value of national aspirations. Or refute the argument that a “moral” aspiration is another expression for will to power.

Ferguson summarizes the conclusions that Kissinger drew from his idealism, or at least his reflections on idealism, in light of his personal experiences and scholarship, and from the mentoring he received from teachers such as Harvard Professor William Yandell Elliott: (1) “most strategic choices are between lesser and greater evils”; (2) “history [is] the mother lode of both analogies and insights into the self-understanding of other actors”; (3) “any decision is essentially conjectural and...the political payoffs to some courses of action may be lower than the payoffs of inaction and retaliation, even though the ultimate costs of the latter course may be higher”; and (4) “realism in foreign policy, as exemplified by Otto von Bismarck, is fraught with perils, not least the alienation of the public and the slippage of the statesman into regarding power as an end in itself.”

Think one can formulate Kissinger’s intellectual framework a bit differently. First, the creation of order in international affairs is the highest object of the statesman. Second, order can be maintained only if there is an equilibrium of power among the most important powers. Equilibrium is not an end in itself, but a means by which nations can seek their historical aspirations in relative safety. The fundamental condition for order is that those members must share a common sense of legitimacy—an accepted standard of conduct and a mutual recognition of the limits that standard places on their behavior. Conflict may still occur within an ordered system, as one power or a coalition of powers seeks to reinforce the equilibrium or achieve certain marginal advantages through war, but the system remains stable as long as the basic understanding of legitimacy remains intact. This is the model of the classical European state system, which Kissinger explored most fully in his doctoral dissertation, later published in 1957 as A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812–1822. (In recent years, Kissinger has written about hegemonial models of global or at least regional order, particularly that of imperial China, with some degree of sympathy.)

The key to the day-to-day working of the ordered system is diplomacy, which is not merely the formal process of negotiations, but the appreciation and manipulation of the psychological climate in which nations formulate their practical policy objectives. Great statesmen appeal to—or take advantage of—those aspirations, their own and others, in the ser-
vice of international order. The use or threatened use of force must therefore be viewed primarily in terms of its psychological effect.

Order is placed at risk if one power refuses to abide by the rules and seeks to overthrow the existing system and replace it with a new order which it dominates—especially by imposing its sense of domestic justice on other states and extinguishing their historical aspirations. Napoleon's France and Hitler's Germany are notable, if not identical, examples of such revolutionary powers. These would-be emperors could not be negotiated with by status quo powers—except as a tactic—because their ambitions admitted no limitations. They would either succeed, or be conquered and deposed by a countervailing coalition, usually after a terrible war.

Kissinger also suggests that there are different, and potentially less apocalyptic, scenarios, which a statesman wedded to order might confront. A nation, because of circumstances and temporary impulse, might threaten to become a revolutionary power, even if that was not its original intent. The defeat of Napoleon brought Russian armies to Paris and whetted Czar Alexander's appetite for territorial advantages in central Europe, along with his ambitions to create a world order defined by a strange Christian mysticism. Alexander did not think of himself as a European hegemon in the way that Napoleon did, but the effect of his policies, if realized, would have made an equilibrium of power impossible. The other powers of the victorious coalition, as well as defeated France, could not ignore that possibility. Here, diplomacy mattered greatly. The genius of Austria's Klemens von Metternich and Britain's Lord Castlereagh was to arrange a peace settlement, and a way forward (a post-war concert of the great powers), which would co-opt Russia into a new international order without unsettling the balance of power or leading to a new great war.

There is also the special case of a statesman, such as Bismarck, who sought to grasp the hem of history and make a domestic revolution—to push beyond the bounds of his people's experience and create a somewhat different set of national aspirations, perhaps in order to head off another, more dangerous revolutionary path. This often required challenging the stability of international order, but, ultimately, with a conservative intent and limited foreign policy ambitions. Such statesmen need international partners, or at least sympathetic bystanders, who grasp their purpose, and who in turn might use the white revolutionary to their own advantage. In modern times, Charles de Gaulle seemed to fit this model, in the sense that he sought to revive great French national aspirations, which seemed to have been extinguished, by threatening to become a third force between East and West. Kissinger ultimately seems to have concluded that Chairman Mao's revolutionary ambitions, however red on the outside, should also be understood in these terms.

For Kissinger, one of the principal tasks of a statesman is to discern correctly which of these conditions applies to his own and other nations, and to act appropriately to preserve or create international order under the existing circumstances. Depending on one's judgment, that course might involve waging war to eliminate an incorrigible revolutionary threat; or some combination of coercion, deterrence, co-option, appeasement, and psychological operations, under the rubric of diplomacy, to bring a potential revolutionary power back into the established or reformed order; or recognizing and exploiting a limited (white) revolutionary, if not becoming a white revolutionary oneself. Unfortunately, Kissinger argued, there can be no a priori certainty as to the nature of the threat or the viability of a strategic opportu-
nity. If Hitler had died in 1938, he might well be viewed today as a great German nationalist, along the lines of Bismarck, who merely wanted to unify his people and who had no further territorial ambitions in Europe; while Winston Churchill would doubtless be dismissed as a paranoid warmonger.

The best guidepost for statecraft is history. Beyond that, Kissinger argued, the statesman must rely on intuition, knowing that one’s judgment about events can only be verified after the fact, if at all. Further, the statesman must recognize the limits of his ability to influence events. Even if his assessment is correct, the power of his own nation is limited, and the leaders of potential allies may not concur. He faces obstacles posed by domestic structures, whether bureaucratic or political. Finally, he faces his own political as well as physical mortality (a new monarch dropped Bismarck, a weary electorate discarded Churchill). His successors may not, and probably will not, be as wise. Tragedy follows success, and sometimes the greater the success, the greater the tragedy. The unification of Germany, a tour de force by Bismarck, was intended to preserve a conservative domestic order and provide a stable security environment for the new nation. It led instead to two great wars that devastated Germany and Europe. Kissinger’s worldview is suffused with such tragedies. In life, there is not only right and wrong but many shades in between. Ideals themselves offer no dispositive guide to action.

What did this line of analysis say, practically, when it came to Kissinger’s giving advice to his adopted country, at least to the point when he became Nixon’s national security advisor? To start with, he believed that Americans lacked a real sense of history, not only other people’s but even their own. They had never faced or experienced national extinction, as had all the European powers. Hence Americans did not appreciate the reality of tragedy and limits, of the many shades between right and wrong. They were strongly attached to their sense of “justice” and judged the world according to their own supposedly universal but in reality idiosyncratic moral and political yardsticks. Which is not to say that Kissinger necessarily disparaged those yardsticks, but he believed that trying to apply them to the world without discretion, much less seeking to impose them, would naturally run up against the historical aspirations of others, and thus make international order much more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

When confronted by the limits of such crusades, Kissinger argued, frustrated Americans typically had turned to the other extreme, isolationism, which itself was a threat to international order, because in the 20th century American power had become a necessary factor in achieving a global equilibrium. Certainly his account is an oversimplification, at best, of the history of American foreign policy (though Kissinger does have nice words to say about the realism of the founders) and an inadequate reflection on the American regime itself. This is not to accuse him, as some liberal and conservative critics have, of being particularly un- or anti-American. Many native-born American scholars and politicians harbor these or other misunderstandings about the foundations of American politics. And Kissinger’s views are similar to those of such doyens of foreign policy commentary as Walter Lippmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, and George Kennan.

It is reasonable to assume that Kissinger thought of America as a quasi-revolutionary state, not in the sense that it aspired to world conquest, but as an objectively disruptive force in international relations, whether crusading or sulking. He saw himself, in the years before obtaining power, as a critic who would provide, at least indirectly, some ballast to
America’s wildly oscillating course in foreign affairs. Ferguson writes: “Kissinger’s ideal, then, is an American Castlereagh: a conservative statesman who must struggle at one and the same time to educate a parochially idealistic public and to galvanize an inert and risk-averse bureaucracy in pursuit of a legitimate, self-reinforcing international order based on the balance of power between domestically heterogeneous states.”

The United States, according to Kissinger, had properly rejected isolationism after World War II, and its moral idealism energized the use of national power, which had been essential to stabilize a world in chaos, one threatened by Soviet expansionism and radicalism in the Third World. Some Third World radical movements were directly Soviet-inspired and -supported, but even those of an indigenous and nationalist character could threaten world order, and thus they had a natural propensity to align with Moscow. (He also doubted Germany’s commitment to democracy and feared that Germany might reemerge as a revisionist, revolutionary power; he believed that the United States erred in seeking unconditional surrender and the partitioning of Germany.) But in adopting a policy of containing the Communist bloc, the United States made several major errors that had compounded over time. In Kissinger’s view, containment, at least as it was practiced, was excessively militarized and gave the strategic initiative to the Communists. (George Kennan, the putative father of containment, also objected to its practice, for much the same reasons—although Kennan also thought Kissinger himself fell victim to the same tendencies when he was in office.)

Kissinger argued that containment was flawed because Moscow and its allies could probe the American defense perimeter at its weakest, forcing the United States to respond in the most unfavorable circumstances. To worsen matters, the United States, under the Eisenhower Administration, adopted a doctrine of massive retaliation, in which such probes theoretically would lead to an all-out American nuclear response. Eisenhower expected such threats to deter war, in a cost-effective fashion. Kissinger believed that American leaders would also come to doubt whether it was even worth the risk of sacrificing Washington in order to defend our most vital allies in London, Bonn, and Paris. The West Europeans would naturally assume that the United States would not do so if push came to shove with the Soviets; and this realization would naturally lead to a fundamental and probably fatal crisis of confidence in the Atlantic alliance.

Kissinger’s solution, in his book Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy (1957)—which he quickly downplayed, under criticism, but, as Ferguson notes, never entirely rejected—was the development and use of tactical (battlefield) nuclear weapons, which presumably could offset local Communist conventional superiority without triggering Armageddon through a strategic nuclear exchange. Kissinger was not enamored with the Kennedy Administration’s subsequent shift to flexible response, with its emphasis on conventional forces and counterinsurgency. The initiative still lay with the superior Communist numbers and their advantages of interior lines of communication, and with the post-colonial wave of anti-Western sentiment.

The point here is not that Kissinger wanted to get into tactical nuclear wars but rather that the United States failed to realize that the use or threatened use of force had a critical psychological component (much more so in the nuclear age). That is, military action, if it must be undertaken, should be designed to create the proper political and psychological conditions for the application of diplomacy. Americans, with their limited historical experience, acted as if force and diplomacy were opposites; that peace and war were two distinct conditions. Thus our penchant for demanding unconditional surrender on the battlefield; only then could serious negotiations begin.

In Kissinger’s view, containment gave the strategic initiative to the Communists.

Kissinger thought that such conditions, certainly in the nuclear age, were impossible (and unnecessary) to achieve. America had never been stronger than in the late 1940s, when it possessed a monopoly on nuclear weapons and unparalleled economic domination. If ever there had been a time to negotiate with the Soviets to create a stable world order on terms favorable to the West, Kissinger argued (citing Churchill), it was then. Instead, the United States set aside the instruments of diplomacy with the Soviets while it engaged in a fruitless effort to develop a preponderance of power (the functional equivalent of defeating the enemy on the battlefield). Fruitless because the American and allied publics would not support such an effort over the long term, and because power, naturally, was bound to diffuse in the international system, as other nations, friendly and hostile, recovered economically from World War II and obtained nuclear weapons themselves.

Such a diffusion of power, Kissinger argued, was not necessarily a bad thing, however. Multipolarity in the international system created diplomatic flexibility, which, if exploited properly, would reduce the burden on the United States, allowing it to return to a more favorable geopolitical position. His historically informed instinct, according to Ferguson, was that the natural position of the United States was analogous to that of Britain, as an offshore balancer, not as an active participant in the ordinary continental struggles for power. America should oppose overt aggression in Eurasia aimed to bring about hegemony, to be sure, but it should not seek to forestall upheavals, especially those over domestic structures. Being forced to operate in a multipolar environment would also dampen America’s instincts to crusade, which had been stimulated by operating in a bipolar world, or to withdraw entirely in a fit of pique.

Kissinger acknowledged that the United States had little choice but to become engaged directly throughout Eurasia immediately after World War II, especially in Europe, given the enormous power vacuum that had developed. The trick now was to disengage carefully where possible, especially in Asia—what became the Nixon Doctrine—and to encourage the emergence of independent centers of power (Kissinger, unlike most Americans, was sympathetic to France’s Charles de Gaulle) that would become pillars of a stable world order, which America, in an offshore position, might help orchestrate, but not dominate.

Ferguson places particular stress on Kissinger’s belief in psychological operations to help bolster the West’s (broadly defined) “moral” position as this process unfolded. His leadership of the Harvard International Seminar, which brought young foreigners to the United States for the summer, was designed, according to Ferguson, with this purpose in mind (not merely to buttress Kissinger’s rolodex). Ferguson also cites innumerable “winning the hearts and minds” exhortations from Kissinger’s public and private writings. How deeply he himself believed in such exhortations, as opposed to their be-
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American policymakers worried that the Soviet Union would feel compelled to compete with the Chinese for leadership of the world revolution, making the Kremlin even more dangerous. To head this off, it was widely argued, perhaps the United States ought to consider an alliance with the Soviets to deal with the Chinese madman. What did Kissinger’s intuition tell him? Ferguson is of the view, I think rightly, that Kissinger had not made up his mind at the time he entered office—China could go either way—but that neither he nor Nixon was necessarily prescient about what would happen next with the Chinese.

Architectonic theory aside, the 1960s were overshadowed by Vietnam. At the outset, Kissinger, along with most other Cold Warriors, reflexively supported U.S. involvement, on the grounds that (like the Korean War) every event has global consequences; that any show of American weakness would be transmitted to other, more important regions. Kissinger, however, after several visits to Vietnam as a government consultant, quickly concluded that the war was unwinnable militarily and that a diplomatic solution was necessary to extricate the United States through some sort of compromise settlement with Hanoi. Ferguson goes into great detail about Kissinger’s largely unsuccessful efforts to influence the Johnson Administration’s policy and to encourage negotiations with the North Vietnamese. Ferguson argues, persuasively, that Kissinger failed to realize that the regime in the North was behaving precisely as a revolutionary power: it was not interested in compromise but in total victory, defined as the unification of Vietnam under Communist rule. Hanoi viewed negotiations merely as a tactic, to be pursued, if at all, in a manner designed to improve its position or ensure success on the battlefield, which meant bringing about American withdrawal without compromising the North’s military ability to defeat the South.

Whatever other lessons Kissinger might have learned from the unfolding Vietnam debacle, he concluded that it was the result not merely of the folly of American policy, but of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations’ chronically dysfunctional foreign policymaking process. The U.S. governmental apparatus as constituted was incapable of absorbing the relevant data and bringing them to bear on immediate issues, much less on long-range planning. His solution—most importantly, that of centralizing policymaking in the White House, with a powerful national security advisor—proved highly attractive to President-elect Nixon.

We can see here, through a glass darkly, the outlines of Kissinger’s approach as national security advisor and secretary of state from 1969 to 1977—but it was hardly a fixed plan detailing how he would try to reshape American foreign policy and the world (indeed, a good case can be made that Nixon was the true architect, Kissinger only the implementer). It is ironic—or perhaps not ironic—that the impetus to win, not manage or domesticate, the Cold War came from those who in the 1970s rejected Kissinger’s policies as both insufficiently moral and insufficiently realistic. They were led by a candidate, later a president, who exercised what one might call a statesman’s intuition, against the common wisdom of his time, to see the possibility of another path to security. America, to the untutored mind at least, successfully developed a preponderance of power, resulting in the virtual surrender of Soviet Communism. The international order that emerged was, and in many ways still is, dominated by the United States, and not (yet) by the multipolarity that Kissinger insisted was inevitable.

Perhaps this outcome is one of history’s little jokes, having little to do with human agency, and with tragedy lurking over the horizon. But it does call for an explanation. Henry Kissinger’s later apologia was that he and Nixon had played a weak domestic hand as best they could, and if it were not for Watergate and the resulting Democratic Party tidal wave in 1974, things would have turned out all right in the end—perhaps even better than they did. As it was, so his argument goes, Kissinger’s diplomacy—particularly the opening to China, the expulsion of the Soviets from the Middle East, and the political defeat of forces on both sides of the Atlantic that would have separated the United States from Europe—created the foundations for Ronald Reagan’s triumph.

How does one address this reading of history? That will be Ferguson’s task in volume two, which perhaps will be titled, Kissinger: The Realist.

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