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### Roundtable Review

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Introduction by Jussi M. Hanhimäki

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**Introduction by Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva**

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A new book on Henry Kissinger is hardly an unusual publishing event. For more than four decades scholars and journalists have examined, with varying degrees of sympathy or vitriol, the life and career of America's most admired and maligned statesman of the post-war era. As a consequence, a fresh tome on the life and times – or any part thereof – that deals with the former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State will have difficulty in distinguishing itself from the noise and chatter that, for lack of a better term, can be called Kissingerology.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with its provocative title, Niall Ferguson's first volume on Kissinger's life rises to the occasion. Anyone even vaguely familiar with the reputation of the 93-year-old former statesman will find it virtually irresistible to wonder on what basis Ferguson calls Kissinger "the idealist." The general perception, after all, tends to be that Kissinger's unique contribution to the making of American foreign policy was to insert a measure of realism and an emphasis on the national interest. This, it seems, is what his defenders and detractors have tended to agree upon; it certainly continues to characterize the public perception of the man whose blessing is being sought, as of this writing, by the 2016 Republican Party presidential nominee. In contrast, Ferguson's central thesis is that the pre-1968 Kissinger was an idealist, albeit of the Kantian variety.

If the purpose of Ferguson's title was to provoke debate then it certainly worked. Only Philip Zelikow finds Ferguson's wholesale rebuttal of the Kissinger-as-modern-Machiavelli/Metternich caricature "convincing." By contrast, in an otherwise laudatory summation, Colin Dueck contends that "any bald statement that Kissinger was not a realist will fail to convince." Thomas Schwartz maintains that Kissinger's apparent "idealism" before 1968 is "best understood as a political position to help in winning power." Mario del Pero agrees that Ferguson has a point in rejecting the idea that Kissinger fits the classical realist archetype. But he also finds Ferguson's use of the very term 'idealist' vague and all-too flexible.

As his reaction to the use of the term idealist hints, Zelikow finds Ferguson's book to be a mouth-watering prelude to the second volume (that will presumably be titled 'The Realist'). Indeed, Zelikow's only criticism has nothing to do with the author's portrayal of Kissinger but the fact that Ferguson is too critical of the Kennedy administration. In a similar fashion and despite his doubts about the use of the I-word, Dueck praises Ferguson's book as a "magisterial" work of biography that gives the reader an account of "the real Henry Kissinger."

For more critical perspectives one needs to turn to the two other reviewers. Thomas Schwartz, himself at work of yet another biography of Kissinger, praises Ferguson for his treatment of the former Secretary of State's early life. But Schwartz finds the portrayal of Kissinger as essentially out of touch with American domestic politics overtly simplistic. He also regrets Ferguson's virtual silence on some aspects of Kissinger's personal life.

The most scathing criticism of *The Idealist* comes from Mario Del Pero. To be sure, Del Pero praises Ferguson's treatment, based on painstaking research, of Kissinger's early life. But the Cold War years are

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<sup>1</sup> For a much outdated survey see Jussi M. Hanhimäki, "Dr. Kissinger' or 'Mr. Henry'? Kissingerology, Thirty Years and Counting." *Diplomatic History* 27:5 (November 2003), 637-676.

another story. What other reviewers call “masterful” Del Pero finds filled with “flaws” and bordering on “the hagiographic.” He particularly criticizes Ferguson’s (in Del Pero’s judgment) overemphasis on Kissinger as an original thinker.

So is Ferguson’s book a magisterial treatment of its subject or a disappointing hagiographical treatise? Or, perhaps, a bit of both? Many readers will make up their own minds; others will be unwilling to reconsider – no matter how much ‘painstaking research’ and engaging prose is presented – their long-established views of America’s most admired and hated diplomat. But if the reviews that follow are an indication, the opinions will be as wide-ranging regarding *The Idealist* as they have been and remain about Henry Kissinger.

After more than four decades, Kissingerology is only getting started.

**Participants:**

**Niall Ferguson** is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, a visiting professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing, and the Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation Distinguished Scholar at the Kissinger Center of the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC. He has written fourteen books, including *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West*, *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*, *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die*, and *Kissinger, 1923-1968: The Idealist*. His many prizes and awards include the Benjamin Franklin Prize for Public Service (2010), the Hayek Prize for Lifetime Achievement (2012) and the Ludwig Erhard Prize for Economic Journalism (2013).

**Jussi M. Hanhimäki** is Professor of International History at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. He is the author, among other works, of *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York, 2004). His latest book is *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Washington DC, 2014). He is currently working on a “People’s History” of the Cold War (to be published in 2017) and on a comparative biography of Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

**Mario Del Pero** is Professor of International History at Sciences Po, Paris. Among his most recent publications are “Libertà e Impero. Gli Stati Uniti e il Mondo, 1776-2011” (Rome, 2011), “Democrazie. L’Europa meridionale e la fine delle dittature,” with Víctor Gavín, Fernando Guirao and Antonio Varsori (Rome, 2010) and *The Eccentric Realist. Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY, 2009). He is currently working on a history of post-1970s U.S. foreign policy.

**Colin Dueck** is an Associate Professor in George Mason University's School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs. He studied politics at Princeton University, and international relations at Oxford under a Rhodes scholarship. He has published three books on American foreign and national security policies, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), and *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.) His current research focus is on the relationship between party politics, presidential leadership, American conservatism, and U.S. foreign policy strategies.

**Thomas Alan Schwartz** is a Professor of History and Political Science at Vanderbilt University. Most recently he is the co-editor with Matthias Schulz, *The Strained Alliance: US-European Relations in the 1970s*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009). He is currently working on a study of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger entitled *Henry Kissinger and the Dilemmas of American Power*.

**Philip Zelikow** is the White Burkett Miller Professor of History at the University of Virginia. He has held several posts in the U.S. government.

Review by Mario Del Pero, SciencesPo, Paris

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Divided into five 'books' and approaching 1000 pages in length, "The Idealist" is the first installment of this new two-volume biography of Henry Kissinger. It covers the period from Kissinger's birth in 1923 to his selection as Nixon's national security adviser in 1968. It stops, in other words, when the real action gets going. For that we will have to wait a few more years.

In this volume Ferguson, whom Kissinger selected for the task, wants to offer a *Bildungsroman*: "the story of an education that was both philosophical and sentimental" (31).

To achieve this goal, Ferguson embarked on what he defines as "a decade of painstaking archival research" (xvi): a *tour de force* in "111 archives around the world" (xiii), where, we are duly informed, "8,380 documents, consisting of 37,645 pages" (xiii) were just those worth inclusion in the digital database set up for the book and many, many more were consulted. Some of these documents are truly interesting, although the bulk of the sources comes primarily from the Kissinger papers, at Yale University and the Library of Congress, to which Ferguson was granted unprecedented and mostly uncensored access with the exception of those containing sensitive personal information.

This 'painstaking' research pays off well in the first part, or 'book I', particularly in the intimate, biographical description of Kissinger's experience after his arrival in the United States in 1938. Kissinger's fast-forward Americanization by way of New York public schools and army training is engaging and vividly narrated. Ferguson convincingly juxtaposes the orthodox world of Henry Kissinger's religious community and the progressive, secular and diverse environment into which he soon immersed himself, at school and in the armed forces. At first, Kissinger struggled with his country of adoption: "My personal impression of America is two-sided," he wrote to a friend in 1939, "in some regards I admire it, in others I despise the approach to life here. I admire American technology, the American tempo of work, American freedom," but "the greater the light, the greater the shadow. Alongside the most beautiful houses in the world you see the most wretched, alongside excessive wealth, unspeakable poverty." (106) Particularly unsettling for the young German émigré, and something to which he often returned in latter cogitations, was what he considered Americans' "casual approach to life...No one thinks ahead further than the next minute, no one has the courage to look life squarely in the eyes." He argued in the same letter that "no youth of my age has any kind of spiritual problem that he seriously concerns himself with" (106-7). But most of this skepticism, and certain the original social sensibility this letter revealed, was brushed aside by conscription, naturalization, army training and, finally, war on that very German soil from which Kissinger had flown just a few years earlier.

Ferguson highlights, and more than once magnifies, Kissinger's feats during the war, particularly after he was reassigned to the army's counterintelligence corps in charge of anti-sabotage and, with the end of the war, orderly denazification.

When the narrative moves to the Cold War, however, it becomes flatter and weaker. Ferguson's approach is severely marred by conceptual and historiographical flaws, while the biographical frequently slips into the hagiographic. This is despite the author's oft-stated disagreements with Kissinger and the absolute freedom he enjoyed in writing what still is, in many ways, an official biography.

Far too often, Ferguson's "Idealist" appears to be just another, updated and on archival steroids, version of the "Super-K" we have long been familiar with.<sup>1</sup> A thinker of extraordinary erudition and sagacity, this 'Super-K' – we are informed – was also the envy of his contemporaries (and of many later scholars) because of his matchless wit and "self-deprecating humor" (12), where one could clearly recognize the influence of the good Marx, Groucho. ["But it was a characteristic feature of the 'counterculture' generation of the 1960s and 1970s," Ferguson erroneously maintains, "that it did not find the Marx Brothers funny" (12).] Describing Kissinger's daring, if not reckless, decision in early 1945 to leave a heavily shelled cellar where U.S. soldiers had been dancing with Belgian girls, in order "to see what was going on," Ferguson sees traits that "would reappear more than once in Kissinger's postwar life:" the inability to passively "await his fate," the "readiness to take a risk," and the "ability to conceal his fear with nonchalance" (152). A letter the twenty-two-year-old Kissinger wrote in 1946 to the aunt of a concentration camp survivor, in which he reflects on the camps as "testing grounds" that required victims to "disregard ordinary standards of morality" in order to survive, is described as "offering insights that in some ways anticipated the later writings" of no less than Primo Levi (173). No trace of opportunism or even self-interest is identified in the young Kissinger's academic hyper activism and the propensity to incessantly flatter his seniors. His most notorious self-promotional initiatives at Harvard – the organization of the International Seminar attended by young future world elites and the management of the quarterly journal *Confluence* – are, on the contrary, presented as burdensome activities that had little or nothing to do with Kissinger's self-interest: to claim otherwise, as most historians do, is simply "unfair," declares Ferguson (281).<sup>2</sup> Ferguson asserts, despite limited documentary evidence, that, already in 1953, a visionary and far-sighted 'Super-K' was envisioning a split between the Soviet Union and China: "the seed of another strategic concept that would come to fruition fully two decades later" (322). On page 465, Kissinger is paired with Robert Zimmerman, alias Bob Dylan, articulating "in prose rather than poetry ... the same basic idea" of the latter: "how many years can some people exist / Before they're allowed to be free?" As an advisor in the Kennedy administration, Richard Nixon's future National Security Advisor could give lessons to the State Department "in the art of diplomacy" and to the National Security Council (NSC) in "strategic thought" (533). The description of a second assessment mission of Kissinger in war-torn South Vietnam offers further examples of 'Super-K' unchained. "Never one to shirk the front line," Ferguson writes, "Kissinger set off to see for himself ... the truth was that Vietnam had awakened the man of action long dormant inside the professor" (682-3).

These are just some illustrations of Ferguson's penchant for hagiography; many others could be added. For this Kissinger, despite occasional missteps and a quasi-congenital and very idealistic naiveté, is a man of unique coherence, sophistication, and intellectual might: someone unafraid to swim against the currents of the time, whether the strategic passivity of President Dwight Eisenhower's strategy of deterrence, the technocratic reductionism of President John F. Kennedy and his court of the best and brightest, or the ineffectual and incoherent muscle-flexing of President Lyndon Baines Johnson in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> In June 1974, at the peak of his fame, Kissinger was depicted on the cover of *Newsweek* as "super-K", a comic hero clearly inspired by Superman.

<sup>2</sup> Even sympathetic biographers have often stressed the ambitiousness of the young Kissinger. For two illustrative examples see Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: a Biography*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1992 and Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 2007.

But is it really so? No, it is not, and one has to stretch things a fair bit, and remove far too much from the historical record, to transform Kissinger into the erudite Idealist of this biography. Many of the examples and quotations used by Ferguson reveal in fact how conventional and orthodox Kissinger often was in his analyses and in the ensuing policy prescriptions he tried, on numerous occasions and often with limited success, to convey to the world of policymaking that he incessantly courted. Idealist or not (a point to which I will return later), Ferguson's Kissinger is often undistinguishable from a conventional Cold-Warrior of his era. His criticism of Eisenhower was not particularly original or bold, since a vast majority of foreign-policy pundits at the time believed massive retaliation to be impractical, rigid and self-defeating. Kissinger shared the use (and abuse) of the alleged lesson of the 1930s, crying appeasement from time to time – as many would later do against him and his *détente*. He believed in a non-existent, but politically very convenient, missile gap in favor of the Soviets and constantly over-played the strength of Moscow. Hysterical over-reactions regularly ensued. After the launch of the *Sputnik*, Kissinger wrote that the Soviets had “out-stripped” the US: “we’re really in trouble now,” he continued, “we’ve been pushed back gradually, position by position ... if things continue as they are our expulsion from Eurasia is a mathematical certainty ... we like to smile now at Baldwin and Chamberlain, but they thought of themselves as tough realists” (382-3). In 1958, criticizing what he considered the feeble and compromising attitude of the Eisenhower administration towards a possible ban of nuclear testing, Kissinger argued that the United States was “losing the Cold War” while “people all over the world” were “turning to Communism” (427). A few months later, writing to his new patron Governor Nelson Rockefeller, he claimed that the U.S. was “heading for a desperate situation not dissimilar to that of Britain after Dunkirk” (427).

Obsessed, like many Cold War experts, with the need to constantly reassert the credibility of the United States' foreign-policy commitments and its inflexible anti-Soviet posture, he saw dominoes falling in every corner of the world. Reflecting on Berlin, in 1961, he defined the fate of the city as “the touchstone for the future of the North Atlantic community”. Indeed, a defeat over Berlin would decisively demoralize the Federal Republic and its NATO allies: “for other parts of the world, the irresistible nature of the Communist movement would be underlined” (487). The same obsession for credibility informed Kissinger's attitude towards Vietnam. Ferguson argues that that Kissinger precociously understood how unwinnable that war was and tried to devise an imaginative strategy for dealing with this. The evidence is not particularly compelling, one must say. But even if that were the case, credibility seemed to have trumped whatever misgivings he had about deploying military force in Southeast Asia. In September 1963, urging Rockefeller to condemn Kennedy's decision to undermine the Diem government, Kissinger explicitly supported an escalation of the U.S. intervention: “A public announcement by Secretary McNamara that we would withdraw 1,000 troops by the end of the year,” he wrote, “and the remainder by 1965 must give comfort to the Viet Cong. It must have proved to the Communists that if they hold out long enough, they are bound to prevail” (592). A few years later, during a public forum in Boston, Kissinger reaffirmed the common rationale of war in Vietnam: the failure to defend South Vietnam, he maintained, “would be considered by other nations as symbolic of our inability to protect them from this kind of Communist attack” (670).

Again, these are just a few samples of Kissinger's fairly conventional Cold Warriorism. His peculiar prose – convoluted or brilliant, depending on one's perspective – has often obfuscated this, but Kissinger was not an iconoclastic or bold thinker. On the contrary, he rarely challenged conventional wisdom, although Ferguson is correct in stressing the significant differences between Kissinger's essentialist and particularist view of international relations and the teleological universalism of many Cold War liberal modernizers.

How do we explain, then, the book's exaggeration of the originality and eccentricity of Kissinger as a Cold-War thinker? The answer, I think, lies in the historiographical vacuity of this book. From the very first pages, Ferguson offers a definition of the Cold War that would appear simplistic and Manichean even to an orthodox Cold War historian of, say, the mid-1950s. "At its root," Ferguson writes, "the Cold War was a struggle between two rival ideologies: the theories of Enlightenment as encapsulated in the American Constitution, and the theories of Marx and Lenin as articulated by successive Soviet leaders. Only one of these ideologies was intent, as a matter of theoretical principle, on struggle. And only one of these states was wholly unconstrained by the rule of law ... in the global Cold War, inextricably entangled with the fall of the European empires, the Soviet Union nearly always made the first move, leaving the United States to retaliate where it could. The retaliation took many ugly forms, no doubt," but "we need to consider not only what American governments did during the Cold War, but also the probable consequences of the different foreign policies that might have been adopted" (23). This binary caricature of the Cold War frequently cascades on the many issues and periods discussed in the book. Ferguson, for example, lauds Kissinger's "prescient" (710) coeval reading of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* as a policy that would only benefit the Soviets by enhancing the status and legitimacy of East Germany and pushing Germany in the direction of nationalism and neutrality. Some fifty pages later he writes approvingly of Kissinger's comparison between the radicalism of anti-war protesters and the rise of Nazism: "to the eyes of a man who had been a teenager in Nazi Germany, the self-proclaimed New Left looked familiar in a number of disturbing ways" (789).

In such a black and white frame, each little shadow of gray can appear intensely chromatic. And over the years, Kissinger offered from time to time some (tenuous) shadows of gray, on which his biographer builds an interpretation that certainly inflates Kissinger's ingenuity and unorthodoxy. There is a clear relationship, in other words, between hagiography and historiography, the substantial absence of the latter fuelling and explaining the former. (This is notwithstanding a very rich and exhaustive bibliography, of which, however, there is little trace in the footnotes).

Finally, this historiographical deficiency is matched by a conceptual and terminological fuzziness, already well on display in the title. Again, Ferguson has a point when he objects to the common representation of Kissinger as the no-nonsense archetypal classical realist (one could add that true realists – as political scientist Hans Morgenthau and diplomat and historian George Kennan proved – could hardly be orthodox and dogmatic Cold Warriors). While certainly making for a provocative and marketing-smart title, just saying so doesn't automatically render Kissinger an Idealist, of whatever breed we choose him to be: Kantian, Hegelian, Fichtian, even Wilsonian. The problem is compounded by a certain vagueness in the use of the label itself. At first, it is explained that Kissinger's was a form of anti-materialist Kantian idealism, centered on the assumption (in Kant's words) that "we can never be certain whether all of our putative outer experience is not mere imagining" given that "the reality of external objects does not admit of strict proof" (28). Then, this idealism assumes primarily a negative and derivative character: it is something else from (and in fact antithetical to) the empirically-driven economic determinism of Kennedy's whiz-kids or, in another formulation, the "technocratic reductionism" (569) of Robert McNamara's Defense Department. To this hyper-pragmatism Kissinger opposed what seems to be a form of hyper-subjectivism that hardly qualifies as "idealistic" ("dogmatic", 803, is a more appropriate characterization that Ferguson occasionally uses). In other passages, the alleged idealism of Kissinger appears to refer only to the fact that he believed the Cold War to be primarily a war of ideas, and not one to be decided by productivity indexes, GDP growth, households' consumption or aggregate stockpiles of nuclear warheads. On a few occasions, finally, Kissinger the idealist seems to be simply someone who was wary of those amoral realists who, Ferguson writes, "would quietly

surrender Cuba, East Berlin, Laos, and South Vietnam to Communist control rather than risk a confrontation with Moscow or Beijing” (870).

Often pleonastic and redundant, this book offers some interesting biographical vignettes and several useful anecdotes that are bound to enrich the ever-expanding area-study of Kissingerology (unbeknownst to most scholars, for example, is how much Smoky, the first cocker spaniel owned by Kissinger, meant to him, 211-2). But 111 archives and ten years of “painstaking” research could, and should, have produced something more original, balanced and coherent than this disappointing volume.

Review by Colin Dueck, George Mason University

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A good biography accomplishes a specific task. It taps the inner motivations of its subject, while retaining a certain objective distance. Niall Ferguson, in his new biography of Henry Kissinger, claims to have located his subject's taproot motivation: at least until his appointment to high office, Kissinger was in fact an idealist.

Since 'idealism' in American foreign policy is commonly taken to mean adherence to conventional liberal views, whereby the United States promotes democracy, human rights, and multilateral institutions overseas in pursuit of a more liberal global order, Ferguson's claim requires considerable evidence and clarification, which he provides in this massively documented new work.<sup>1</sup> Kissinger's idealism was of another variety.<sup>2</sup>

As a German-Jewish refugee escaping the persecution of the Nazi regime, and resettling in New York with his family, the young Henry Kissinger could not help but appreciate the moral significance of the United States in world affairs. Ferguson notes that Kissinger's childhood experience of Weimar's collapse did not make him anti-democratic, but it did instill in him a keen appreciation for the dangers of demagoguery, the fragility of civilized order, and the powerlessness of moral objections in the absence of supporting physical force.

During World War Two, Kissinger served as a soldier in the U.S. Army against the land of his birth, followed by a very effective stint as a Nazi-hunter in the counter-intelligence corps. On his return to America, he entered Harvard, where he began to lay out his percolating, earnest worldview. Kissinger's lengthy undergraduate thesis, modestly entitled "The Meaning of History," represented a defense of Immanuel Kant's idealism against the apparent determinism of the historians Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. As Ferguson points out, the undergraduate Kissinger argued that whether or not historical events are determined by great structural forces, they can only be experienced by human beings as a series of individual choices.<sup>3</sup> While written in a sometimes turgid fashion, Kissinger's Harvard thesis was nothing if not sincere, and it captured a lifelong conviction that true statesmen are those able to rescue choice from circumstance in pursuit of higher worthwhile goals.

Building on this theme, Kissinger's Ph.D. dissertation - later published in book form as *A World Restored* - examined the diplomatic statecraft of the Concert of Europe, focusing on Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh of

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<sup>1</sup> For a good survey and defense of the U.S. liberal idealist tradition, see Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012 edition.)

<sup>2</sup> Previous and leading works on Kissinger include Mario Del Poro, *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009,) Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004,) Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005 edition,) Harvey Starr, *Henry Kissinger: Perceptions of International Politics* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1984,) and Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.)

<sup>3</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger. Volume I. 1923-1968: The Idealist* (New York: Allen Lane, 2015,) 237-243.

Britain; Prince Klemens von Metternich of Austria; and Prince Charles Maurice de Talleyrand of France.<sup>4</sup> Kissinger described how these statesmen - each shaped and constrained by their particular national experiences - used diplomacy to find equilibrium, pursue order, restore peace, and check revolution throughout Europe. The book remains well worth reading to this day.

As Ferguson makes clear, Kissinger was by no means the golden boy of Harvard. He was too conservative, too methodologically traditional, and too 'foreign' - a feeling that doubtless included a casual widespread anti-Semitism at the time. But through sheer hard work, maneuver, and brainpower - together with a few crucial breaks of good fortune - he managed to secure first a Harvard professorship, and then surprising national renown as a leading foreign policy intellectual.

His 1957 book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, responded to the Eisenhower doctrine of massive retaliation by arguing for gradient military options in case of Cold War crises.<sup>5</sup> The most famous or infamous component of this book, as Ferguson notes, was in its case for thinking through the possibilities of limited nuclear war.<sup>6</sup> Kissinger himself later came to reconsider that argument. But the book was important in insisting that military weapons of any kind be subject to international political objectives, and in suggesting the need for intermediate alternatives between total war and surrender - a need more or less recognized and implemented under Dwight Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, through the doctrine of 'flexible response.'

During the Kennedy and Johnson years, Kissinger acted as an outside consultant, with no dramatic impact on the policies of either administration. Yet Ferguson shows how Kissinger's thinking on foreign policy issues had reached new subtlety and relevance by the late 1960s. He looked for a bolstering of the trans-Atlantic alliance, not in straight opposition to France's Charles De Gaulle, but out of a deep appreciation for the continuing centrality of both France and Germany in the defense of the Western world. Kissinger furthermore grew interested in new diplomatic feelers with Mao Zedong's China. He hoped for useful arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union, while continuing to support the containment of that Communist superpower. And in relation to Vietnam, while Kissinger opposed any rapid American retreat or humiliating surrender, he searched for diplomatic possibilities that might allow South Vietnam to stand on its own. Indeed, as Ferguson recounts in one fascinating chapter, Kissinger's eagerness for diplomacy was so great that he appears to have been hoodwinked by Hanoi into playing a role in 1967 negotiations meant to throw the U.S. off guard in preparation for the following year's Tet offensive. "So eager was Kissinger to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough," demonstrates Ferguson, "that he failed to discern how cynically, from the outset, the North Vietnamese were stringing him along."<sup>7</sup> An idealist, indeed.

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957.)

<sup>5</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957.)

<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 365-385.

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 733.

Apart from errors like that one, and looked at as a whole, Kissinger possessed by 1968 a well-developed set of foreign-policy prescriptions, and more than this, a worldview of unusual depth and relevance at that exact moment. It also bore a striking resemblance in many respects to the desired direction of the same year's Republican presidential nominee, Richard Nixon – a man for whom Kissinger professed dislike. As Ferguson demonstrates, Kissinger never really understood the electoral politics of the American heartland. Indeed, while deeply conservative philosophically, he was baffled by the rise of a postwar, Sunbelt, new Republican right, epitomized by figures like Arizona Republican Senator Barry Goldwater. Politically centrist within a U.S. context, Kissinger gravitated toward the repeated presidential candidacies of New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a relatively liberal Republican possessed of personal charisma but with ever-dwindling chances of attaining his party's presidential nomination. Ferguson notes that a more ruthless political operator, determined to attain office at all costs, would have perceived and then acted upon the recognition that Rockefeller's moment was over. Yet Kissinger persisted in his allegiance to the New York Governor, partly out of principled admiration, and partly because he simply did not understand the trajectory of modern Republican politics. Again, he was not exactly a master Machiavellian.

Ferguson also very usefully and convincingly refutes one of the most persistent accusations against Kissinger, namely that he deliberately helped sink peace negotiations over Vietnam during the 1968 presidential election season in order to help Richard Nixon. As Ferguson shows, there is just no hard evidence for it, which surely ought to be of primary concern.<sup>8</sup> Moreover this supposed conspiracy is not consistent with the evidence that does exist. Kissinger did in fact look to play a role in the Vietnam peace negotiations, but to promote them, not to wreck them.

The bad-faith model of Henry Kissinger takes a powerful hit from Niall Ferguson, and deservedly so. But there still remain lingering doubts about Ferguson's distinctive, central assertion – that Kissinger was an idealist as opposed to a realist. In my view this thesis is strongly argued and insightful up to a point, given a generous interpretation of Ferguson's own terms, but still only partially accurate.

In the usual framing, foreign policy realism is taken to mean that international relations exist within an arena where there is no overarching power to enforce the law; that states therefore look out for their own survival; that fatal loss or defeat is possible within this arena, regardless of good intentions; and that statesmen should therefore pursue the national interest with considerable prudence and care for the shifting balance of power.

In his early writings, Kissinger made very clear his belief that a series of revolutionary states – from the first French republic, through Nazi Germany, to the Soviet Union – had reshaped the tenor of modern international relations. He fully recognized the threat posed by these states to Western civilization. Yet he also believed that in the nuclear era, some sort of competitive coexistence would need to be developed, to restrain the expansion of authoritarian revolutions, while at the same time avoiding world war. To that end, he really did find instructive the examples of Castlereagh, Metternich, Talleyrand, and German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck – leaders who in his opinion combined prudent force and diplomacy to promote the

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<sup>8</sup> Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 791-797, 810-833.

national interest while ultimately serving the cause of peace.<sup>9</sup> He plainly hoped to learn from their example, and to help reground American diplomatic practice on a steadier basis, so that the U.S. might gyrate less wildly between equally idealistic extremes of crusade and disillusion. This was Kissinger's perspective, long before 1968. Readers may agree or disagree with this perspective and its utility, but the usual term to describe it is 'realist.' So any bald statement that Kissinger was not a realist will fail to convince.

Where Ferguson's book is more persuasive is in showing how Kissinger's undoubted foreign policy realism was balanced, suffused, and informed by a humanistic concern for the possibilities of enlightened diplomatic statecraft - a concern he drew from a study of history and philosophy, together with painful personal experience fleeing Central Europe in the 1930s. Any form of realism completely devoid of historical understanding or moral seriousness finds no support from Kissinger.

Above all, Ferguson succeeds wonderfully in doing exactly what a fine biographer should do: providing us with a deep sense of his subject, as a human being, with distinct yet recognizably sympathetic motivations and concerns. This is the real Henry Kissinger, warts and all. Within these pages, he can be intellectually arrogant, overly ponderous, and prone to childish temper tantrums. Yet he can also be remarkably gracious, witty, and unpretentious. Most important, he emerges as a deeply serious, earnest, even high-minded thinker, with real touches of brilliance, wrestling with inescapable tensions in the arena of foreign policy, and determined to provide useful guidance in that direction. The fact that his recommended direction was never orthodox liberal idealism is hardly an indictment of his character.

Ferguson has written the first, magisterial volume in what will clearly be the definitive biography of Henry Kissinger. We look forward to volume two.

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969,) 27-58, "The Congress of Vienna: A Reappraisal," *World Politics* 8:2 (January 1956,) 264-280, and "The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck," *Daedalus* 97:3 (1968,) 888-924.

**Review by Thomas A. Schwartz, Vanderbilt University**

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When I first agreed to review this book I thought that one question I would have to answer is whether Henry Kissinger deserved to have an almost 900-page book about the first half of his life, chronicling his career before he even entered President Richard Nixon's Administration.

Whatever doubts I had were erased when Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders took the occasion of a recent presidential debate to denounce Kissinger as "one of the most destructive secretaries of state in the modern history of our country." The ensuing discussion between Sanders and Hillary Clinton, ending with Sanders curt dismissal of Kissinger as "Not my kind of guy," may have baffled some millennials, for whom Kissinger must be a distant historical character.<sup>1</sup> But it confirmed that Kissinger, some sixty years after he became a notable public intellectual, and some forty years since he left government, is still a figure of consequence, a controversial man whose life and career can still excite passionate disagreement.

(Full disclosure – I am also writing a study of Kissinger, so I do have a vested interest in seeing that the market does not dry up. I do not think it will.)

The first volume of Niall Ferguson's *Kissinger* is an impressive achievement, a comprehensive life and times which helps a reader understand why Henry Kissinger had become an obvious choice for Nixon as National Security Adviser in 1969. It is, however, not the real red meat of the Kissinger story. If Henry Kissinger's plane had crashed when facing "hurricane-force winds" on his trip from Quin Nhon to Saigon in July 1966 (683), there would likely be no book about this part of his life. But that does not keep Ferguson from jumping ahead to the more famous Kissinger of the Nixon years. For example, in discussing Kissinger's unhappiness with his academic prospects after finishing his doctoral dissertation in 1954, Ferguson quotes a lengthy passage from the Nixon tapes in 1972, where Kissinger tries to explain to a frustrated Nixon why academics are so opposed to his Vietnam policies. This also explains the defensive tone which Ferguson displays in many passages. When he is describing Kissinger's choice of a doctoral dissertation topic, he begins with, "Those who represent Henry Kissinger as ruthlessly bent on ascending the greasy pole of the 'Cold War university' cannot easily explain ..." (290). Almost every event in Kissinger's life seems to be examined through the prism of the controversial celebrity he became. Nevertheless, it is well worth considering Kissinger's career before 1969 on its own merits, without constantly seeking connections to his actions when he got to the top of the "greasy pole," in this case not of academia, but of the American government.

The 'life-and-times' quality of Ferguson's manuscript is somewhat uneven. It is particularly strong in the first part of the book, when Ferguson examines the German roots of Kissinger, the family's journey to America, and Kissinger's wartime experiences. The book does succeed masterfully in portraying the environment into which Kissinger was born, especially the Jewish community of *Fürth* in upper Bavaria. Ferguson minimizes the claims of some historians for the importance of the Weimar and Nazi experience for Kissinger's later political ideas.<sup>2</sup> He puts much greater emphasis on the impact of Kissinger's military service and his return to Germany as part of the American occupation army. Ferguson's account of Kissinger's military experiences,

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<sup>1</sup> Democratic Presidential Debate, February 11, 2016, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=111520>

<sup>2</sup> His target is clearly Jeremi Suri's *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

including a period of particular danger during the December 1944 Battle of the Bulge, is both exciting and insightful. The essay Kissinger wrote about his experience in liberating the concentration camp at Ahlem is particularly moving, and Ferguson is wise to reproduce it without comment. Given how sympathetic the biography is, it is interesting the degree to which Ferguson deflates some of the ‘legends’ about Kissinger’s prowess as a military-occupation official, including his role in the “restoration of Krefeld,” building an effective civilian government within eight days and weeding out the obvious Nazis. (156) Indeed, Ferguson makes it clear that Kissinger’s experienced considerable frustration in his position within the Counter-Intelligence-Corps in rounding up suspected Nazis and Gestapo members. Kissinger was probably among the better American administrators in postwar Germany, but he was hardly the ‘Super-K’ of later accounts.<sup>3</sup>

The life-and-times approach is less successful in other parts of the book. Ferguson offers a strong and rather black-and-white view of the Cold War, especially in his attack on “so-called revisionist historians” who “assert a moral equivalence between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold war” (22). I have less trouble with this understanding of the Cold War than with Ferguson’s questionable reading of American political history. In describing the 1968 election Ferguson asserts that the “key was the forty-five Electoral College votes won by segregationist candidate George Wallace, most of which would surely have gone to the Democratic candidate had it not been for the civil rights split” (844). This would have come as news to Nixon, who launched his Southern strategy the following year. Four of these five states had voted for Senator Barry Goldwater previously, and it is highly unlikely – actually pretty much impossible – that without Wallace in the election they would have voted for a liberal Democrat like Hubert Humphrey. In a similar vein, Ferguson argues, in that defensive tone mentioned earlier, that Kissinger, often “portrayed as very ruthless and calculating in his pursuit of power,” suffered from poor political judgment in “committing himself again and again to Nelson Rockefeller...a man who would never be president of the United States” (565). Technically true, but Ferguson does not mention that Rockefeller did become Vice President in 1974. Two assassination attempts on Gerald Ford occurred in September 1975, and but for the grace of God and a quick thinking ex-Marine named Oliver Sipple, Rockefeller would have become president. Kissinger’s political judgment was not flawless, but it was far more on the mark than Ferguson’s implies.

Ferguson’s book also reflects the difficulty of writing the biography of someone who is still very much alive, especially in the author’s sensitivity when it comes to issues in Kissinger’s personal life. Ferguson is rather delicate in his treatment of Kissinger’s family relationships, especially his divorce from his first wife, and he is practically silent about his relationship with his younger brother Walter. At other times Ferguson reproduces in full a cringe-inducing letter the young Kissinger wrote to a girl for whose affections he was competing with some of his high school friends. Such lines as “I want to caution you against Kurt because of his wickedness, his utter disregard of any moral standards, while he is pursuing his ambitions, and against a friendship with Oppus, because of his desire to dominate you ideologically and monopolize you physically,” (109) sound like they could have been lifted from Woody Allen’s satirical take on Kissinger as Harvey Wallinger, in the short film *Men of Crisis* (3). By contrast, Ferguson does illuminate the more rebellious side of Kissinger, especially in such actions as having a German and gentile girlfriend when he was an occupation official and breaking

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<sup>3</sup> One of the earliest accounts of Kissinger’s role in Krefeld, which exaggerated his effectiveness, is contained in Ralph Blumenfeld, et.al., *Henry Kissinger: The Private and Public Story* (New York: New American Library, 1974), 63-64. Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 48, repeats the story as does Suri.

with the Orthodox Judaism of his parents. But it will probably take a future biographer at some chronological distance to illuminate the complexities of Kissinger's personal and family life.

The most controversial claim which Ferguson registers comes in his rejection of the “deeply rooted” view of Kissinger “as an amoral realist.”<sup>4</sup>(21) It is Ferguson's contention that “far from being a Machiavellian realist, Henry Kissinger was in fact from the outset of his career an idealist, having immersed himself as an undergraduate in the philosophy of the great Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant” (28). Ferguson makes clear that he is not using the word idealist in the way in which most American diplomatic historians understand it, or as George Kennan famously referred to the “moralism and legalism” of American foreign policy in *American Diplomacy*.<sup>5</sup> Rather, Ferguson sees Kissinger's idealism in the Kantian sense. In Ferguson's view, for Kissinger, “the burning historical question was how far Kant's view of the human predicament -as one in which the individual freely faced meaningful moral dilemmas - could be reconciled with the philosopher's vision of a world ultimately destined for ‘perpetual peace’” (29). Kissinger's Harvard thesis – one of the only unpublished works in his long career – certainly makes clear the influence of Kant on his thinking, and Ferguson sees its application in a number of Kissinger's public and private expressions of criticism of American foreign policy during this era. He makes much of Kissinger's appearance on the journalist Mike Wallace's interview show in July 1958, during which Kissinger argued that that the United States needed to “have some image for the construction of the free world which is based on other motives than simply defending the world against communism,” and that “we should go on the spiritual offensive in the world” (414-415). Although Ferguson views Kissinger as a solitary ‘idealistic’ voice in the wilderness, in fact his concern was part of the larger critique of President Dwight Eisenhower's foreign policy that ranged across the political spectrum. For some this was captured in the one of the best-sellers of 1958, *The Ugly American* by William Lederer and Eugene Burdick, which also called out for a more positive American policy toward the revolutionary world and may have been President John Kennedy's inspiration for the Peace Corps.<sup>6</sup> Kissinger was nothing if not in tune with his times, and his criticisms of Eisenhower's foreign policy reflected that as much as they did any deep-seated idealism.

Ferguson identifies a number of other examples of Kissinger's ‘idealism,’ and while they are at variance with his image as a devotee of realism, they are not really that hard to explain. For example, Kissinger privately criticized the Kennedy Administration's handling of the Bay of Pigs crisis, noting that the world “looks on us as psalm-singing hypocrites” who “think it is moral to go in with 1000 men and fail-but immoral to go in with 10,000 and win” (474). He took a harder line in support of “applicability of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination” in support of German reunification and in defense of Berlin than the Kennedy Administration did, but Ferguson himself remarks that we should “thank our lucky stars” that Kennedy chose a more realist policy than Kissinger advocated in accepting Germany's division and the Berlin Wall (513). Ferguson also calls Kissinger's criticism of the Kennedy-supported coup against the Diem regime in South

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<sup>4</sup> For examples of this view, see Isaacson, *Kissinger*, Jussi Hahnimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> George Kennan, *American Diplomacy 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), especially 91-103.

<sup>6</sup> William Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York: Norton, 1958).

Vietnam another example of him “as an idealist compared with the unscrupulous pragmatists of Camelot” (594). In all three of these cases one can make a plausible case for Kissinger expressing a point of view which elevated moral principles above the pragmatic, cynical, or ruthless actions taken by the Kennedy Administration.

On the other hand, an equally plausible case could be made that all of Kissinger’s criticisms were designed to be used in the domestic political competition shaping up between Nelson Rockefeller and John Kennedy. Ferguson notes that “it was a recurrent theme of Henry Kissinger’s mature work that domestic political activities and foreign policy are fundamentally different activities” (514). While this might sound trenchant and insightful to foreign-policy enthusiasts, a large part of Kissinger’s genius and his usefulness to politicians like Rockefeller was recognizing how to craft a critique of existing foreign policy that would benefit the political aspirations of an opposition candidate. Indeed, Ferguson concedes Kissinger’s interest in “the oily mechanics of American domestic politics” in describing the advice he was giving Rockefeller even before Kennedy was inaugurated. (457) Kissinger’s ‘idealist’ approach in the years before he actually entered into a position of power is best understood not as any consistent philosophical or ideological stance, but as a political position to help in winning power, and not as a real guide to the practice of foreign policy.

The book’s closing chapters, which discuss Kissinger’s growing involvement with Vietnam policy, make a real contribution in understanding many of the problems with the Johnson Administration’s handling of the war.<sup>7</sup> Kissinger was a supporter of Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam escalation, but his first trip to Vietnam in October 1965 with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge quickly disillusioned him about the conduct of the war. His frank discussion of the weakness of the Saigon government made its way into a *Los Angeles Times* story that irritated the White House, with Johnson plaintively asking his Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, “Who sent Kissinger out there?”<sup>8</sup> Kissinger’s early recognition of the necessity of some type of face-saving arrangement for the United States, what later would be called his ‘decent-interval theory,’ led him to pursue all manner of hints at a negotiated settlement. Ferguson is surprisingly harsh in his assessment of these efforts, convinced that Kissinger’s efforts to negotiate a settlement were an “impossible task,” not because of the antiwar movement, as some revisionist historians have argued, but because of “the ruthless resolve of the North Vietnamese, regardless of the losses inflicted on them, to settle for nothing less than total victory and the unification of the two Vietnams under Communist rule”<sup>9</sup>(734). Of course we also learn that one reason Kissinger was anxious to pursue the search for negotiations was because it allowed him to travel often to Paris, where Nancy Maginess, his future wife, was on a sabbatical at the Sorbonne. (xvii) Ferguson’s certainty that the North Vietnamese were not interested in serious negotiations also leads him to dismiss the charge of

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<sup>7</sup> There is one minor error here. On page 614, Ferguson mistakenly identifies McNamara as the author of the memorandum that described Westmoreland’s request for 175,000 troops as “rash to the point of folly.” The author was actually National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy. The source is Francis M. Bator’s “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 32, Number 3, June 2008, p. 316. Bator correctly identifies Bundy in the article.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson’s conversation of November 2, 1965 can be accessed at <http://millercenter.org/presidentialclassroom/exhibits/assessing-the-war>

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Newyork: Oxford University Press, 1978), and C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).

investigative journalists Seymour Hersh and Christopher Hitchens charge that Kissinger's warnings to Nixon about the Johnson administration's bombing halt before the November 1968 election somehow prevented a settlement of the Vietnam War. Ferguson is right to note that this argument has always rested on an assumption about North Vietnamese willingness to settle the war for something less than total victory, which has never been demonstrated.

Whatever reservations one might have about Ferguson's book, it is hard for any professional historian to criticize a book that argues that one of the most significant and continuing problems in the conduct of American foreign policy is what Ferguson calls "the history deficit." American leaders "know almost nothing not just of other countries' past but also of their own. Worse, they often do not see what is wrong with their ignorance. Worst of all, they know just enough history to have confidence but not enough to have understanding...too many highly accomplished Americans simply do not appreciate the value, but also the danger, of historical analogy" (31). There is tremendous irony in all of this. This was one of Kissinger's Harvard colleagues, Ernest May's, fundamental arguments about American foreign policy as well, and May and his political-scientist colleague Richard Neustadt taught a course in the Kennedy School, and wrote a book, which sought to educate future decision makers on the peril of using history in such a manner.<sup>10</sup> Ferguson describes how May was one of the Harvard professors who came down to Washington in May 1970 after the invasion of Cambodia, confronting Kissinger in a manner which led to an enduring rift between the two men. It is a shame the two never joined forces, because surely that history deficit remains a characteristic of American foreign policy today, and it is likely to continue to plague American foreign policy well into the future.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

**Review by Philip Zelikow, University of Virginia**

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*“Kissinger, the American Castlereagh?”*

It is hard for anyone who has several books on their ‘must-read’ list to approach Niall Ferguson’s book without a good deal of wariness. Such a large time commitment. To what end? The likely buyers are not the casual reader of lite biographies of the fearsome and famous. Such likely buyers may feel they already know the basics about Henry Kissinger. So why bother with this magnum opus?

The book turns out to be worth the bother. Treat it as a life and times, journeying through these mid-century decades of the twentieth century with a very lively, erudite, and opinionated host.

Ferguson’s research, especially into Kissinger’s papers, is extensive. The journey is entertaining as well as edifying. Yet also treat the book as a chance to consider a few large questions along the way about Dr. Kissinger and about his life’s subject: statecraft.

First there is a rather basic question. How to account for the meteoric ascent of this German-Jewish immigrant? He wrote a doctoral thesis that hardly anyone read at the time, then held a nebulous academic post at Harvard. Yet he rose into the national and international limelight by the late 1950s before he was even thirty-five years old.

The picture that emerges from Ferguson’s book is a mix of the familiar – the brilliant young man and his Harvard training, the peculiar mix of philosophical reflection with dense diplomatic history and interest in current events. It is worth noting that Kissinger’s doctorate was in government, but it was attained for a doctoral thesis, an unabashedly historical study of statecraft at the end of the Napoleonic wars, that would never even get out the gate for a doctorate in Harvard’s government department today. What is more important, and less familiar, is the importance of Kissinger’s prior experience in the U.S. Army during and shortly after World War II.

Trained as a combat infantryman, pulled into his division’s intelligence staff, plunged into postwar Nazi hunting and local governance, Kissinger had an intensely formative war. Ferguson handles this very well. What makes it so important to the ‘ascent’ question is what Kissinger obviously took away from all this: he gained deep experience with operations, with the practicalities of getting things done in large organizations or disordered circumstances.

Part of what enthralled contemporaries with Kissinger was not just the wide-angle lens he could bring to seeing the world. It was the zoom lens that enabled him to range swiftly from the grand view right down to the minute details of what steps or instruments were vital, at that moment, in relation to the big picture. It was his manifest ability to marry his conceptual vocabulary to the practicalities of the moment. Kissinger’s war years gave him that gift.

In his subtitle for this volume, “The Idealist,” Ferguson puts the reader on notice for another great question. If Kissinger is portrayed as an “idealist,” should we accept his provocative rebuttal of the Machiavelli/Metternich caricature, an image that Americans still naturally associate with this accented, bespectacled foreign-policy magus?

Ferguson's rebuttal of the caricature is convincing. The rebuttal works at several levels. While still an undergraduate, Kissinger articulated his notions of idealism in Kantian terms. Kissinger's commitment to anti-Communism ran deep and never wavered. He also always regarded himself as someone who sought a peaceful accommodation of disputes, but on terms that stood by his cardinal values of opposing totalitarian Communism and preserving the beneficial influence of his adopted country, the United States.

At the next level, Kissinger's doctoral thesis is, above all, about how to connect ideals to the many limitations of practice in public life. His hero was not Metternich. Kissinger regarded that statesman as having employed great skill in the service of an "essentially sterile conception of statesmanship," an unwise marriage of his gifts to the hogtied reactionary impulses of the polyglot Austrian empire.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, Kissinger would later emulate some of Metternich's renowned wit and charm. But in substance his real hero was a very different character: it was that frosty British statesman, Lord Castlereagh. "Kissinger's ideal," Ferguson observes, was of "an American Castlereagh" trying to educate his parochially idealistic public to support a durable equilibrium of peace. (311)

None of this fits the image of Kissinger as the cartoon realist, heaping abuse on idealists who ignore power realities. Nor does it fit the oft-stated view that these supposed "realists" believed in the "*Primat der Aussenpolitik*" – the primacy of foreign policy unhindered by domestic political squabbles. Even in 1954 Kissinger stated plainly that "the acid test of a policy ... is its ability to obtain domestic support." This required the effort to legitimize a policy within the wider governmental apparatus. It meant winning broad domestic acceptance for a policy by "harmonizing it with the national experience."<sup>2</sup>

As Kissinger pointed out in his thesis, the policy choices for these men "did not reside in the 'facts.' ... It involved what was essentially a moral act: an *estimate* which depended for its validity on a conception of goals as much as on an understanding of the available material ...."<sup>3</sup> As Ferguson points out later in his book, Kissinger – in a work he never finally published -- came to hold a similarly negative view of the statecraft of the brilliant German chancellor, Otto von Bismarck (see pp. 693-702). There Kissinger saw great skill harnessed to an essentially aimless pursuit of personal primacy. Understand Kissinger's anti-Communist and patriotic idealism and it is easier to understand why the liberal and ardently anti-Communist historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was one of Kissinger's closest friends in the Harvard of the late 1950s.

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<sup>1</sup> "Sterile conception" from Kissinger's exchange of letters about his book with McGeorge Bundy in January 1954, quoted in Ferguson, 311.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap ed., 1964, originally published in 1954), 326.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 325. Kissinger wrote his thesis just as the American diplomat George Kennan had, as he retired, just published a set of lectures attacking a recurrent strain of mushy moral-legal thinking in America's past responses to world developments. The thesis has a footnote that seems like a veiled punch at George Kennan's then well-publicized views. "The argument that policy is 'objective' because it reflects the requirements of security amounts to a truism which assigns a motivation to completed action." Of course security is desired. The "crucial problem" is not to define an accomplished policy with such labels. Instead there are just arguments over how to get there through a policy's concrete "*content* at any given period." *Ibid.*, note 1 (italics in original)

Rather than rely on the caricature of the unprincipled Dr. Strangelove of the famous film, Ferguson's book offers grounds for a more serious critique of Kissinger's policy views. This is a critique that in fact flows from the firmness and inflexibility Kissinger proffered about his goals.

Kissinger became a celebrity because he felt the United States was 'timid' in standing up to Communist aggressors. Kissinger's criticism was that – shadowed by fears of global thermonuclear war – the Eisenhower administration was not sufficiently creative in its military strategy because it had not adequately contemplated proportionate limited war that might use smaller-yield nuclear weapons. Nor, Kissinger wrote, had the Eisenhower administration been creative enough in its diplomatic strategy, because it had not adequately built up multipolar coalitions with empowered allies.

Kissinger thereby articulated the inherent dilemmas in the newly hallowed strategy of 'containment.' That, combined with Kissinger's place as a director of seminars and centers convening policy thinkers and intellectuals in the then-so-powerful and hierarchical Harvard-New York axis of opinionators, made Kissinger – with his personal gifts already mentioned – one of the major strategic commentators of his day.

But at the time, Kissinger's policy positions were not supple enough to cope well with the greatest issues of the crisis years of 1958-1962. One could even call Kissinger's positions, well, unrealistic. After all, it was his very lack of realism about nuclear warfare that elicited sharply observed comments from such knowledgeable commentators at the time as William Kauffman. No hagiographer, Ferguson acknowledges these and other criticisms of his subject.

However unfair Kissinger was in his harsh judgment of the Eisenhower administration, it is revealing how this idealist regarded the Kennedy administration. Amid a complicated and ultimately embittered bid to be a major adviser, abetted yet also thwarted by Kissinger's former great patron at Harvard, McGeorge Bundy, Kissinger became a critic of John F. Kennedy's most important choices. He saw Kennedy's responses to the Berlin crisis as unprincipled, too "pragmatic." (see, for example, 561, 569.) To this account Ferguson adds plenty of his own scorn -- too much, I think -- about unscrupulous Kennedys.

Kissinger's views on the Berlin crisis of 1961-62 and the related Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 do not hold up very well today. Not only is it interesting to reflect on why Kissinger's judgment was off during those years, it is also interesting to note what Kissinger got right – and how his qualities of judgment evolved. Here Ferguson provides some unique evidence and reflections.

Kissinger was at his very best when it came to sizing up foreigners, and how to fashion coalitions and strategies to work with them. His critique of Eisenhower's and Kennedy's diplomatic strategies were more astute than his critiques of their military side. In Ferguson's persuasive treatment, Kissinger was profoundly wiser than the officials of both the Kennedy or Johnson administrations (and especially the Dean Rusk/George Ball Department of State) when it came to understanding Europe's leaders, like France's Charles de Gaulle or the Federal Republic of Germany's Konrad Adenauer, and think about how best to sustain the Atlantic Alliance.

Ready to treat European leaders as genuine partners, looking for ways to empower them even if they disagreed with some aspects of American policy, Kissinger had a more mature and durable view of how to hold together the alliance than the leaders in Washington displayed during the 1960s. Yet Kissinger was also able to talk

honestly with European leaders about their reciprocal obligations. Ferguson recounts a February 1962 discussion between Kissinger and Adenauer that is a model of its kind (529-532).

Further, and in one of the most interesting parts of the book (pp. 628-689), Kissinger was given an extraordinary invitation to size up the situation in Vietnam, beginning with extensive travels around the country during 1965. Although Kissinger's public stance was firmly supportive of a U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, his private assessment of the situation – offered for the benefit of his State Department sponsors -- stands the test of time as remarkably, troublingly perceptive and astute. No other biography of Kissinger has mined this material about Kissinger's 1965 and 1966 work in Vietnam nearly as well as Ferguson has.

The dilemma for Kissinger must have seemed practically impossible. He saw all the problems the U.S. was encountering. Although the basic goal of preserving an independent South Vietnam was worthy, he plainly viewed all the strategies and instruments being assembled toward that goal as failing, ill-coordinated, and inadequate. What to say to other officials? What to say in public? Above all, what to do?

Nowhere was there any sign that Kissinger reached back for the nostrums about limited war that he had been offering back in 1957. Clearly, his conceptions of statecraft, of how to bridge the ideal with the possible, had also evolved and deepened.

Readers of Ferguson's book will see how, by 1966 and for every year thereafter, Kissinger was instead trying to find some face-saving way of negotiating a diplomatic exit. He seems to have been willing to use or talk to almost anyone who seemed like a promising channel, which often meant working with French Communists who had friendly ties to people in Hanoi. What ensues is an agonizing story to read, of quixotic efforts chasing various mirages of feigned North Vietnamese interest, while Hanoi actually tried to win the war on the ground.

As all this was happening, Kissinger's position as a public intellectual was secure. But his potential bridges to power as the adviser of a moderate Republican (Governor Nelson Rockefeller) had collapsed. Ferguson recounts how he attended the Republican national convention in 1964, the one that nominated Barry Goldwater, and it disgustingly reminded him of nothing so much as the Nazi rallies he had witnessed as a child in the 1930s. His contacts in the Johnson administration were respectable, but fruitless. In 1968 he had some polite connections to the Nixon campaign, passing along some quite wise (and still relevant) process-related advice for a new president that had been pulled together by a group of Harvard colleagues that notably included Ernest May and Frank Lindsay. But Kissinger's personal connection to Nixon was negligible. There was nothing especially close or promising.

This, then, is the situation as Ferguson wraps up his volume with the stunning development, that Richard Nixon asked Kissinger to become his National Security Adviser. That position was not as exalted in image or practice back in 1968 as it was to become in the Nixon White House, but it was the great opportunity for the would-be statesman. And his primary problem would be the one he had come to know so well, the practically impossible problem of America's war in Vietnam.

The terrible choices to come are previewed, in a way. Again and again, Kissinger (and Ferguson) muse over the 'problem of conjecture' – that statesmen have to guess about future scenarios, using what we might nowadays call counterfactual analysis (e.g., pp. 871-873). They then have to take actions that might be

judged favorably or unfavorably, but through the misleading prism of what actually happened without ever being able to know what better or worse futures were averted.

I can safely conjecture that we will read more about that problem in the next volume. I will look forward to it.

## Author's Response by Niall Ferguson, Hoover Institution

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British historians of a previous generation liked nothing better than to savage one another in print. Perhaps the most famous all such spats was between A.J.P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper over the former's book, *The Origins of the Second World War*.<sup>1</sup> Reviewing it in July 1961, Trevor-Roper called it "utterly erroneous" and warned that it would do "harm, perhaps irreparable harm, to Mr. Taylor's reputation as a serious historian."<sup>2</sup> Taylor replied with "How to Quote: Exercises for Beginners," which suggested that his antagonist had been guilty of selective quotation. Trevor-Roper's methods, Taylor concluded, "might also do harm to his reputation as a serious historian, if he had one."<sup>3</sup>

Now comes Mario Del Pero. Writing of the first volume of my biography of Henry Kissinger, he asserts that my "approach is severely marred by conceptual and historiographical flaws, while the biographical frequently slips into the hagiographic." Far from being a subject worthy of study, Kissinger was "undistinguishable from a conventional Cold-Warrior of his era," who "rarely challenged conventional wisdom." The evidence that Kissinger appreciated as early as 1965 that the Vietnam War was unwinnable is "not particularly compelling, one must say."

Warming to his theme, Del Pero accuses me of "historiographical vacuity." He erroneously claims that there is "little trace in the footnotes" of my "very rich and exhaustive bibliography." (As a matter of fact, the bibliography contains *only* works cited in the footnotes, because to have included all the secondary works I consulted would have made it intolerably long.) My prose, complains Del Pero, suffers from "a conceptual and terminological fuzziness" and is "often pleonastic and redundant." Del Pero wrote essentially the same review of my book for the *Washington Post*.<sup>4</sup>

Del Pero, too, is the author of a book about Kissinger.<sup>5</sup> I did not cite it in my own book for the simple reason that it is a typical example of what R.G. Collingwood dismissed as "scissors and paste" history, derived almost entirely from other books. (Del Pero cites in total fewer than a dozen primary documents, eight of them from the National Archives and Records Administration.)

For Del Pero, my initial definition of the Cold War is "simplistic and Manichean." In the spirit of Taylor's "How to Quote", here is my offending paragraph in full:

The Cold War, which was the defining event of Henry Kissinger's two careers as a scholar and as a policy maker, took many forms. It was a nuclear arms race that on

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<sup>1</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. 1963).

<sup>2</sup> H.R. Trevor-Roper, "A.J.P. Taylor, Hitler, and the War," *Encounter* (July 1961), 95.

<sup>3</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, "How to Quote: Exercises for Beginners," *Encounter* (September 1961), 73.

<sup>4</sup> Mario Del Pero, "Was Henry Kissinger in Fact a Tormented Idealist?" *Washington Post*, October 2, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Mario De Pero, *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Cornell University Press, 2010).

more than one occasion came close to turning into a devastating thermonuclear war. It was also, in some respects, a contest between two great empires, an American and a Russian, which sent their legions all around the world, though they seldom met face-to-face. It was a competition between two economic systems, capitalist and socialist, symbolized by Nixon's "kitchen debate" with Khrushchev in Moscow in 1959. It was a great if deadly game between intelligence agencies, glamorized in the novels of Ian Fleming, more accurately rendered in those of John le Carré. It was a cultural battle, in which chattering professors, touring jazz bands, and defecting ballet dancers all played their parts. Yet at its root, the Cold War was a struggle between two rival ideologies: the theories of the Enlightenment as encapsulated in the American Constitution, and the theories of Marx and Lenin as articulated by successive Soviet leaders. Only one of these ideologies was intent, as a matter of theoretical principle, on struggle. And only one of these states was wholly unconstrained by the rule of law. The mass murderers of the Cold War were not to be found in Washington, much less in the capitals of U.S. allies in Western Europe.<sup>6</sup>

I leave it to readers to decide how far "simplistic" describes this passage. As for "Manichean," it is a term often used to characterize the Cold War's fundamentally bipolar or dualistic character. Perhaps that is not how the Cold War looks in Paris in 2016. Del Pero might ask himself how it looked in, say, Prague in 1968.

Nothing, and certainly not what is quoted in his review, substantiates Del Pero's charges of hagiographical distortion, historiographical ignorance or bibliographical padding. As for his dismissal of the pre-1969 Kissinger as an unoriginal thinker, Del Pero does not even attempt to back it up. Readers of the three other reviews in this forum will certainly be puzzled by that assertion. To give just one example, all three acknowledge that my discussion of Kissinger's mid 1960s critique of U.S. policy in Vietnam is "a real contribution" (Schwartz), "one of the most interesting parts of the book" (Zelikow), and a "fascinating chapter" (Dueck). So much for "not particularly compelling, one must say" (Del Pero).

I am grateful to Philip Zelikow, Thomas Schwartz, and Colin Dueck for their thoughtful reviews. I stand corrected on who called Westmoreland's 1965 request for 175,000 additional troops "rash to the point of folly," on the role of the South in the 1968 election, and on how narrowly Nelson Rockefeller missed becoming president in 1975. Reviewing books in the scholarly and constructive spirit of these three authors is one of the ways to earn a reputation as a serious historian.

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<sup>6</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger, 1923-1968: The Idealist* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), pp. 21f.