



KISSINGER

A BIOGRAPHY

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WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION

one paid for admission to the president's inner circle. This devil's bargain did not cause Watergate. It was not an indictable offense. It could even be justified, if one tried hard enough, as a trade-off for the foreign policy triumphs that also occurred. However, it was the willingness of so many officials, Kissinger high among them, to make such compromises that allowed the Watergate mind-set to prevail.

KISSINGER AND FORD: BREAKING IN A NEW PRESIDENT

Gerald Ford was one of the many contacts Kissinger had made through his Harvard seminars. In the early 1960s, when the Michigan congressman was the ranking Republican on the Defense Appropriations subcommittee, he got a call from a professor he did not know asking him to be a guest lecturer at a defense policy seminar. So Ford, who was flattered, went up to spend two hours teaching Kissinger's students. "Henry made the visit a very pleasant experience for me," recalled Ford, who enjoyed it so much that he came back two years later. "I found him to be bright and hospitable and attentive."

Their paths continued to cross: Ford became a participant in Rockefeller's Critical Choices program, which Kissinger helped to run, then was a regular at the Republican leadership briefings held at the White House during Nixon's first term. To anyone who asked, the uncomplicated congressman would proclaim his awe at Kissinger's intellect. So it was no surprise that as early as March 1974, back when the vice president was avoiding any comment about a possible Nixon resignation, he told reporter John Osborne of *The New Republic* that if he ever became president, he would keep Kissinger.

During Nixon's final month, Kissinger personally took over from Scowcroft the job of conducting the vice president's foreign policy briefing. Ford remembers that the sessions, under Kissinger, became longer and more frequent.

Nixon had only one piece of personnel advice when he called Ford to the White House to say that he was resigning: keep Kissinger. But Nixon added a caveat. "Henry is a genius," he said, "but you don't have to accept everything he recommends. He can be invaluable, and he'll be very loyal, but you can't let him have a totally free hand." Nixon put it more bluntly when speaking to one of his staffers. "Ford has just got to realize there are times when Henry has to be kicked in

the nuts," he said. "Because sometimes Henry starts to think he's president. But at other times you have to pet Henry and treat him like a child."

That afternoon Ford phoned Kissinger, later saying that he felt it important to give him some reassurance. "Henry," he said, "I need you. . . . I'll do everything I can to work with you."

"Sir, it will be my job to get along with you and not yours to get along with me," Kissinger replied.⁹

Gerald Ford of Omaha, Nebraska, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, was about as different from Henry Kissinger of Fürth, Germany, as the political system permits two bedfellows to be. Ford's strength lay in his simplicity, his solidness, and his fingertip feel for the values that down-home Americans hold dear. He was a man at ease with himself and with his fundamental faith in the American system—qualities that Nixon and Kissinger, for all of their brilliance, did not share.

Either by luck, happenstance, or divine grace, the nation's constitutional process had come forth with an unexpected president who was right for the moment. Ford was straightforward rather than deceitful, and his rise had come by virtue of good human instincts rather than brilliant designs. He had a rocklike common sense that was neither cluttered by excess cleverness nor unduly burdened by a reflective intelligence.

This decency of Gerald Ford was sometimes belittled, as if decency were a pleasant enough virtue but not one to base a presidency on. If part of the job of Nixon's aides had been to save him from his worst instincts, Ford's aides felt they had to save their president from his best instincts. But in tough times, decency is more than a virtue; it is a grace. It was the word that George Orwell used for what kept Britons sane when their intellectuals were embracing tyrannies of the Left and the Right. After an administration that had been felled by its addiction to secrecy and conspiracy, a dose of decency was a welcome antidote.

Soon after Ford took office, reporters snidely asked Kissinger why the president had been brought into a meeting with Soviet foreign minister Gromyko concerning the details of the SALT II talks. Kissinger paused, smiled mischievously, and (knowing his press corps would not betray him by quoting him) replied: "We felt the need to get some technical competence into the discussions."

But a few months later, when North Vietnam was poised to capture Saigon, Ford would show the value of his own foreign policy instincts. Kissinger was raging about the need for the U.S. to become reengaged in Vietnam, despite a vote in Congress to stop all aid. Ford, on the other hand, understood that the American people would not

support continued involvement and that Kissinger's predictions of doom to U.S. credibility were overblown. As in many other cases where the brilliant men around him were not so smart, Ford turned out to be not so dumb.

"It was a strange friendship," Ford said of his relationship to Kissinger. "You'll find none with more wildly divergent backgrounds. I trusted him, and he was not used to that. And I think that helped him trust me."¹⁰

The secret to Ford's success with Kissinger was that he was a secure man, unthreatened by Kissinger's brilliance. "President Ford made it clear that he considered my father intellectually superior to him, but he was comfortable with that," said David Kissinger.¹¹

Ford was even unthreatened by Kissinger's appetite for publicity, and he realized that satisfying Kissinger's craving for recognition—something that Nixon took bitter delight in thwarting—would make everyone better off. "You get Henry to do better when he's in his glory."

Robert Hartmann, a gruff former newsman who joined Ford's congressional staff in the 1960s and became a counselor in the White House, captures this aspect of the Ford-Kissinger relationship:

Henry was and is a congenital celebrity. His compulsion to crow is as natural as a rooster's, his propensity to preen as normal as a peacock's. Ford was wiser than most about this. He knew it was hopeless to fool with Mother Nature. Henry's vanity was part of his total ability to perform well. If he needed more reassurance than the rest of us, Ford gladly gave it.¹²

Kissinger felt much more relaxed around Ford than Nixon. When Ford invited him one weekend to Camp David, Kissinger felt free to bring along not only his son, David, but also the new yellow Labrador retriever, named Tyler, which Nancy had just bought. Kissinger was incorrigible about spoiling dogs. At dinner, he kept feeding Tyler under the table while the president watched. Ford's own retriever, Liberty, sat politely at a distance like a properly bred dog. Then Tyler went off and ate Liberty's food. As Kissinger fussed over his puppy, Ford smiled affectionately. "My father never would have felt comfortable enough with Nixon," David said, "to bring his dog along to Camp David."

What made Ford so tolerant toward Kissinger was that he was truly fond of him. Years later, when presenting him with the 1991 Nelson Rockefeller award for public service, Ford said of Kissinger: "I not only admire Henry immensely, I also like him."¹³

With the transition from a manipulative president deeply interested in foreign policy to a forthright one with little such interest, a question arose as to whether Kissinger's own style would change. "Will he move to a more open style, taking the cue from his new president?" asked Richard Holbrooke in a *Boston Globe* magazine cover story. "Or will he remain the elusive, manipulative, brilliant diplomatist of recent years?"

The issue went to the heart of Kissinger's character. Was his secretive style mainly a function of his service to Nixon, or was it part of his personal baggage?

The record indicates that Kissinger's style was largely a reflection of his own nature, reinforced but not caused by his association with Nixon. It had been evident in the past when he worked in less sordid surroundings: at Harvard, where he clashed with the gentlemanly Robert Bowie, and on the Rockefeller staff, where he had run-ins with Emmett John Hughes and others. And these bureaucratic rivalries would be evident, although not quite as pronounced, in the administration of genial and forthright Gerald Ford.

"He's about as supersensitive to criticism as anyone I know," Ford said. Tending to Kissinger's vulnerable ego meant regularly dealing with his sensitivity to slights. As often as once a week, he would arrive in the Oval Office anguishing over some anonymous quote attacking him or some perceived raid on his turf by another staffer. "It was usually on a Monday," Ford recalled. "He would unburden himself: 'All this criticism is too much,' he would say, referring to some comment in the press or some leak. He always felt it was conspirators. 'I have to resign,' he would tell me."

Soothingly puffing his pipe, Ford would listen and stroke and restore Kissinger's calm. "I would take however long it required, which was sometimes minutes and often a whole hour, to reassure him and tell him how important he was to the country and ask him please to stay." The task was not one that Ford particularly enjoyed, but he realized that managing such problems was one of his talents, just as managing the world's problems was one of Kissinger's.

What vexed Kissinger more than most any world problem was having to cope with yet another new set of top White House aides determined (or at least he so suspected) to diminish his power. He had outlasted Haldeman and Ehrlichman, and now Haig was on his way out. ("I wanted someone I could totally work with and trust," Ford later said in explaining why he ousted Haig.) The thought of becoming embroiled in the internecine rivalries and power struggles of a new clique, Kissinger recalled, "filled me with a sense of dread."¹⁴

After some floundering, Ford selected as his chief of staff Donald

Rumsfeld, a former Eagle Scout and Republican congressman from an affluent Chicago suburb. Rumsfeld was bright, charming, and ambitious, the last of these traits causing an inevitable clash with Kissinger. Rumsfeld also felt it was crucial to portray Ford as more in command, more "presidential." He angrily told the new president that it had begun to appear that he was delegating most policy decisions and leaving himself with "such tasks as meeting with the Sunflower Queen and receiving the Thanksgiving turkey." Solving the problem, Rumsfeld felt, required making sure that it did not seem as if Ford were merely lip-synching Kissinger's foreign policy.

Together with Press Secretary Ron Nessen, Rumsfeld put out the word at one point that Ford was seeking foreign policy advice from a broader spectrum of people. It was an innocent enough assertion that had the added attribute of containing a trace of truth. When CBS newsman Bob Schieffer asked whether this meant that Ford was pulling away from Kissinger, Nessen nodded yes.

The resulting story sent the press pack baying. Kissinger fumed, railed at Nessen and Rumsfeld, then threatened to resign. Nessen scurried for cover by telling other reporters that the stories about Kissinger's decline were totally fabricated. Then he did something he later confessed to being ashamed of: he fired a low-level staffer for being the source of the leaks, even though Nessen knew he was not. The result was that Nessen's stature was diminished, as was Kissinger's, as was Rumsfeld's, as was Ford's.

The effort to shrink Kissinger continued at a NATO summit in May 1975. Rumsfeld decided, and Ford concurred, that the president rather than Kissinger would conduct the press briefings while in Brussels, and he would be pictured conferring with NATO leaders without Kissinger included in the shots. This was not merely some personal prejudice of an anti-Kissinger cabal; even Kissinger should have realized (but didn't) that the president's stature was diminished by the perception that Kissinger was running foreign policy.

Kissinger stormed into Nessen's curtained-off cubicle next to the pressroom in Brussels to raise hell. If his rivals on the staff thought that he was going to allow himself to be nibbled to death, Kissinger railed, they were crazy. When angered, Kissinger warned, he knew how to strike back. "It became a ritual on virtually every trip," Nessen recalled, "for Henry to blow up at least once about anti-Kissinger leaks, his tone bitter and arrogant, his voice high-pitched and quavery."

On the flight home, Kissinger leaned over to Ford's gruff speechwriter, Robert Hartmann, and apologized for suspecting him as a prime leaker. "Now it is perfectly clear who has been doing it," Kissin-

ger said. "But we have ways of dealing with those clowns." With a cantankerous facade but a humorous heart, Hartmann tended to take Kissinger in stride, figuring that anyone who hated Rumsfeld couldn't be all bad. In addition, as Hartmann once said about Ford's coddling of Kissinger, "people who employ geniuses, as Michelangelo taught several Popes, have to pay a price."¹⁵

Outweighing all of these new rivalries, however, was the presence of the man for whom Kissinger felt the most trust and affection of anyone in public life: Nelson Rockefeller, who was selected by Ford to become the new vice president, partly at Kissinger's urging. The Kissingers and the Rockefellers spent New Year's together at the outset of 1975 at Dorado Beach in Puerto Rico. Relaxing in the sun with a Rockefeller and married to a socially impeccable former Rockefeller aide, Kissinger seemed more at peace with himself than he had been for a long time.

To friends, he said the transition from Nixon to Ford was as if a nervous knot had, after more than five years, suddenly disappeared from his stomach. "It's much easier, infinitely easier, on human grounds," Kissinger told his traveling press corps off the record. Over the next two years, Kissinger would make, almost despite himself, some disparaging comments about the thickness of Ford's skull, but there was an affection to the remarks rather than a bitterness. "It was touching to hear my father talk about Ford and to watch how comfortable he seemed to be in this new president's presence," recalled David Kissinger.¹⁶

Though it would not prevent the staff rivalries and the personal insecurities from swirling, this new mood would slowly manifest itself in a somewhat more open and straightforward conduct of foreign policy.