

A black and white close-up portrait of Walter Isaacson, an older man with glasses, looking slightly to the right. The background is dark and out of focus.

# KISSINGER

A BIOGRAPHY

WALTER  
ISAACSON

AUTHOR OF  
*BENJAMIN FRANKLIN*

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION

TWENTY-NINE

# MORALITY IN FOREIGN POLICY

## Kissinger's Realpolitik and How It Was Challenged

*If I had to choose between justice and disorder, on the one hand, and injustice and order, on the other, I would always choose the latter.—KISSINGER, paraphrasing Goethe*

### THE ROOTS OF REALISM

When Henry Kissinger was asked, at a secret congressional hearing in 1975, why the U.S. had abruptly cut off aid to Kurdish rebels fighting for their freedom from Iraq, he replied that “covert action should not be confused with missionary work.” The answer, though glib, reflected a basic tenet of his philosophy. Moral crusaders, he felt, made dangerous statesmen. In a nation whose instincts tend to be idealistic, even at times crusading, Kissinger was a rare and unabashed disciple of the school of political thought known as “realism.”<sup>1</sup>

Based on a pessimistic view of human nature (which Kissinger came to naturally), the realist tradition—and its Prussian-accented cousin realpolitik—holds that power is paramount in international relations. Nations have their own interests, which are destined to clash now and then. A realist keeps his eye on these national interests, rather than on some idealistic vision of morality or justice, and understands that they can be protected only by military credibility. With a disdain for ideology, the realist tends to view the goal of statecraft as

stability, best achieved through unsentimental alliances, a carefully tended balance of power, and competing spheres of influence.

A classic exposition of the realist outlook comes from Thucydides in his book, *The Peloponnesian War*. "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta," he writes. In his accounting, the city-states that relied on fairness and fidelity to agreements lost out to those that made an unvarnished appeal to power politics.

In its modern form, the realist tradition is best defined by the German sociologist Max Weber and two German American professors, Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau. All emphasized the primacy of power, the circumscribed role of morality in foreign affairs, and a Hobbesian pessimism about human nature. As Bismarck wrote in 1854: "For heaven's sake no sentimental alliances in which the consciousness of having performed a good deed furnishes the sole reward for our sacrifice."<sup>2</sup>

Like much in the American political character, the debate between idealism and realism in foreign policy can be traced back to Jefferson and Hamilton. Jefferson saw America's world role in idealistic terms: "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against any form of tyranny over the mind of man." Hamilton had a feel for realpolitik: "Safety from external danger is the most powerful director of national conduct." Jefferson's idealism triumphed, supplemented by an isolationist resistance to ensnarement in overseas alliances, as expressed in George Washington's farewell address.

The modern exemplar of American idealism was Woodrow Wilson, a liberal internationalist who declared that the goal of World War I was to make the world "safe for democracy" and who believed that national interests could be transcended through the moralistic-legalistic mechanisms of the League of Nations. "Sometimes people call me an idealist," he said when the war was over. "Well, that is the only way I know I am an American. America is the only idealistic nation in the world."<sup>3</sup>

## KISSINGER'S REALISM

Kissinger tended to be dismissive of this strand in American policy. He once told Syrian dictator Hafiz al-Assad that Franklin Roosevelt had not understood at the end of World War II the importance of gaining the best possible military position vis-à-vis Moscow's Red Army in Europe. Roosevelt's grasp of geopolitical real-

ities, he said, was not as good as his feel for the idealistic values of America.

For Kissinger, the reverse was true. "Americans," he once wrote, "are comfortable with an idealistic tradition that espouses great causes, such as making the world safe for democracy, or human rights." But it was not in the country's nature, he often lamented, to sit still for the unedifying work of tending to imperfect alliances or the never-ending meddling necessary to maintain a balance of power. The U.S. has historically been, in Stanley Hoffmann's words, "traditionally hostile to balance of power diplomacy with its closets of partitions, compensations, secret treaties and gunboats."

To Kissinger, this excessive aversion to secret treaties and gunboats, and to all the other trappings of realpolitik and balance-of-power diplomacy, stemmed from the simple, often simplistic, naïveté and decency of most Americans. With a jarring use of the first-person plural that belies the fact that the descriptions scarcely apply to him, Kissinger once wrote that "our native inclination for straightforwardness, our instinct for open, noisy politics, our distrust of European manners and continental elites, all brought about an increasing impatience with the stylized methods of European diplomacy and with its tendency toward ambiguous compromise."

This idealistic streak in the American character, this desire to seek moral perfection rather than messy accommodations, was what caused the nation to lurch over the years between isolationism and interventionism, to embark on crusades (World War I, Vietnam), and then to recoil into self-righteous withdrawal. "Emotional slogans, un-leavened by a concept of the national interest, had caused us to oscillate between excesses of isolation and overextension," Kissinger wrote. The way to moderate these pendulum swings, he said, was "by making judgments according to some more permanent conception of national interest."<sup>4</sup>

One key component of Kissinger's brand of realism was his special emphasis on the role of military might. "Throughout history," he once wrote, "the influence of nations has been roughly correlative to their military power." This view led him to favor great displays and pretenses of power: bombings, incursions, aircraft carriers steaming toward trouble spots, nuclear alerts.

Even from a realist perspective, this emphasis on military power was subject to criticism. Other sophisticated realists, such as George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau, emphasized that economic vitality and political stability are equally important elements of national power. Kissinger's best diplomacy came in China, the Middle East, and later Africa, where the direct threat of American force played

little role; his greatest failures came in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Pakistan, where displays of force abounded. There was also a political constraint: the brutal and cold application of force was incompatible with America's self-conception and what its citizenry in the 1970s was willing to countenance.

Another component of Kissinger's realism was the stress he put on the role that "credibility" played in determining a nation's influence and power. An emphasis on credibility is why realism in foreign policy is not always the same thing as pragmatism. In dealing with Vietnam, for example, a pragmatist would have come more quickly to the conclusion that the war was simply not worth the effort, that the costs were greater than any potential benefits. Realists such as Kissinger, however, emphasized that America could not abandon its commitments or else it would undermine its influence elsewhere in the world.

From his *Foreign Affairs* piece in 1968, to his analysis of Vietnam options in 1969, to his arguments in early 1975 as Saigon was falling, Kissinger put enormous weight on the credibility argument. The problem with an emphasis on credibility is that it can—and in the case of Vietnam did—result in an inability to discriminate between vital interests and ones that are merely peripheral.<sup>5</sup>

A third aspect of Kissinger's realism was his lack of concern about supporting democratic forces and human rights movements in authoritarian countries. He was more comfortable dealing with strong rulers—Brezhnev, Zhou Enlai, the shah of Iran, Assad, and Sadat—than with the messy democracies in Europe and Israel.

In office and after, he opposed the crusades of moral activists who wanted the U.S. to push for domestic reforms in the Soviet Union, China, Pakistan, and the shah's Iran. "Why is it our business how they govern themselves?" an annoyed Kissinger asked at a meeting in 1971 when State Department bureaucrats were recommending pressure on Pakistan. This attitude was later reflected when Kissinger refused to join in the criticism of China after the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square.

Though complex, even ingenious, in its design, Kissinger's realism began with a simple premise: any event should be judged foremost by whether it represented a gain for the Soviets or for the West in the overall global balance. That was the basis of his credibility argument in Vietnam: the war would show the rest of the world whether Washington had the will to stand up to Soviet expansion elsewhere. He embarked on the Middle East peace process partly as a way to undermine Soviet influence there. In the India-Pakistan war, the U.S. be-

came involved on the losing side partly because Kissinger insisted on viewing the regional war as a proxy struggle between a Soviet and an American client.

This tendency to see global disputes through an East-West prism provided his foreign policy with a coherent framework, but it could also be distorting, as he later admitted. "We must outgrow the notion that every setback is a Soviet gain or every problem is caused by Soviet action," he said in May 1975, after setbacks in Vietnam, Cambodia, Portugal, and the Middle East put him on the defensive about his policy of détente with the Soviets. Yet the "we" in his speech fit snugly, for he had spent six years pushing that notion.<sup>6</sup>

### *SOLZHENITSYN, HELSINKI, AND HUMAN RIGHTS, JULY 1975*

By 1975, Kissinger's critics, both on the left and the right, had begun to attack his dismissive attitudes toward idealism and morality. The fact that he had developed a personal reputation for being Machiavellian and manipulative did not help: it served to make his approach to foreign policy seem that way as well.

Without appealing to idealism or ideology, it was difficult for Kissinger to build a constituency for an interventionist foreign policy. America had become involved in foreign alliances such as NATO and SEATO after World War II largely as a response to the threat of communism. By pursuing a policy of détente with Russia and China, Kissinger undermined the populist rationale for overseas involvement. He also unnerved conservatives who saw a moral crusade against communism as the foundation of foreign policy. Liberals, already alienated by Vietnam and by Kissinger's faith in military force, made common cause with conservatives by criticizing the disregard for moral issues that was inherent in his *realpolitik*.

These issues were crystallized in the summer of 1975 by an imbroglio over whether President Ford should meet with exiled Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who came to Washington to address a gala dinner hosted by the AFL-CIO on June 30. His presence created a symbolic showdown between the supporters of détente and its foes. Kissinger passed the word that it would be inappropriate for executive branch officials to attend the dinner, especially since Solzhenitsyn's speech was likely to include an attack on the administration's policy