
The Amoralist

KISSINGER: A Biography. By Walter Isaacson. Simon & Schuster. 893 pp. \$30

Except for John Kennedy, no recent public figure in American life has been the subject of more adulation and attack than Henry Kissinger. By 1974, five years after leaving his professorship at Harvard, Richard Nixon's national security adviser and secretary of state had ascended to the superstar status reserved for Hollywood actors and sports heroes. In an hour-long television documentary that year, ABC's Ted Koppel described the country as "half-convinced that nothing was beyond the capacity of this remarkable man. Kissinger already threatens to become a legend, the most admired man in America, the magician, the miracle worker."

Kissinger consciously contributed to this larger-than-life portrait by encouraging a view of himself as America's first true practitioner of *Realpolitik*—a combination of Machiavelli, Metternich, and Bismarck—who popularized the term geopolitics, offered brilliant monologues on world affairs in a German accent, and had the capacity to meet every conceivable challenge abroad. The Watergate crisis, which led to the first resignation of a president in U.S. history, added to Kissinger's hold on the public imagination. "As an individual I led a charmed life," Kissinger wrote in his memoirs. "I became the focal point of a degree of support unprecedented for a non-elected official. It was as if the Public and Congress felt the national peril instinctively and created a surrogate center around which the national purpose could rally."

Yet Kissinger was never immune to criticism. Stories about his arrogance, affinity for intrigue, bureaucratic back-stabbing, ruthless treatment of subordinates, and willingness to lie to the public, press, and Congress to advance himself and his policies coincided with his rise to prominence as a master of the diplomatic game. This assault on his reputation

reached something of a high point in 1983 with the publication of Seymour Hersh's *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*. Graphic details about Kissinger's sycophancy toward superiors and abuse of staffers—as well as about illegal wiretaps to plug press leaks—caused some Americans to have second thoughts about Dr. Kissinger. When coupled with complaints that the Nixon-Kissinger policies unnecessarily extended the war in Vietnam at a cost of more than 20,000 American lives, provoked the slaughter of millions of Cambodians, and caused the toppling of a democratically elected regime in Chile and the death of its president, Salvador Allende, Kissinger's reputation suffered a further erosion.

Now comes a new, massively detailed biography by *Time's* assistant managing editor,



Walter Isaacson. The book provides a fresh look at Kissinger—an interpretation based on extensive interviews with some 150 people, including Richard Nixon and Kissinger himself, previously unavailable transcripts of conversations, and numerous documents from the Nixon Presidential Papers Project in Alexandria, Virginia. Yet, despite Isaacson's impressive research, the great bulk of the documentary record on Kissinger's service as national security adviser and secretary of state was unavailable and will remain so until at least five years after Kissinger's death. Kissinger dismisses the need to open these materials any time soon by cavalierly arguing that "what is written in diplomatic documents never bears much relation to reality." He should understand, however, that it is in the national interest for Americans to have a realistic understanding of their history. Isaacson's book is a significant advance toward that end, but historians will do well to press the case for early disclosure of the entire Kissinger record.

Isaacson's reconstruction of Kissinger's life from those records at his disposal makes a powerful indictment of the man's character and behavior. It is a portrait of a temperamental neurotic, an insecure but stunningly brilliant man whose paranoia, petty rages, and deceitfulness in the service of his ambitions make the reader cringe at the thought that such ugly characteristics could have been rewarded with such high station and so much honor. Isaacson pulls no punches in describing this side of Kissinger's nature. In fact, the recounting of Kissinger's intrigues against and manipulation of university and government colleagues, including President Nixon, Secretary of State William Rogers, and Secretaries of Defense Melvin Laird and James Schlesinger, become at times a distraction from the larger public matters on which Kissinger's historical reputation must ultimately rest. There sometimes is a quality of journalistic sensationalism to Isaacson's revelations about Kissinger's personality. And while such disclo-

tures propelled the book onto bestseller lists, they may in the long run diminish it as a serious work of analysis about some of the more important foreign-policy decisions of the latter 20th century.

That is particularly unfortunate because Isaacson provides telling insights into and astute assessments of Kissinger's diplomacy in Vietnam, the opening to China, détente with the Soviet Union, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. On balance, Isaacson sees Kissinger's diplomacy as a success story. He writes: "The structure of peace that Kissinger designed places him with Henry Stimson, George Marshall, and Dean Acheson atop the pantheon of modern American statesmen. In addition, he was the foremost American negotiator of this century and, along with George Kennan, the most influential foreign policy intellectual." All this was accomplished, Isaacson points out, despite the fact that Kissinger lacked "an instinctive feel for American values and mores" and failed to satisfy American cravings for a "moral" foreign policy based on democratic give-and-take.

However much Isaacson's book may add to Kissinger's reputation for undemocratic and unprincipled actions, it will do little to undermine his continuing grip on the country's imagination. As the journalist George Black wrote in September 1992, Kissinger's "public reputation has never stood higher. His advice bends ears in the nation's top boardrooms, and the rest of us can rely on hearing those familiar wet-gravel tones on TV whenever international events require expert commentary." Henry Kissinger is, so to speak, our foreign-policy safety net. Should some awful maelstrom erupt abroad, we can continue to look to Dr. Kissinger for life-saving advice. Especially at a time when the country sees the need for a domestically minded president, it reassures Americans to know that Kissinger remains ready to provide needed expertise in foreign affairs.

But will we truly want it? Yes and no. Kissinger's record of foreign-policy leadership was a mixture of big successes and big fail-

ures. Perhaps the most striking feature of Kissinger's public service was his eagerness to address large questions. Kissinger shared with men like Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon an affinity for the grandiose. Each of them was determined to leave a large mark on American life. But large designs do not necessarily make for an unblemished record.

Kissinger, as Isaacson depicts him, was at his best in dealing with the Middle East, China, and the Soviet Union. The Nixon-Kissinger actions here will be remembered as vital achievements in the winning of the Cold War, comparable to the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, John F. Kennedy's resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, his Test Ban Treaty, and Ronald Reagan's later embrace of Gorbachev, perestroika, and glasnost. Likewise, Kissinger will win high marks for his shuttle diplomacy during and after the Yom Kippur War. His efforts to strike a balance between Israel and Egypt will be celebrated as ultimately leading to the Camp David Accords and greater stability in the Middle East.

Yet, as Isaacson shows, Kissinger also bears (along with Nixon) a heavy burden of guilt and shame for the massive loss of life and the substantial suffering inflicted on Southeast Asia. The two men's conviction that U.S. prestige required a slow, negotiated withdrawal from Vietnam—which in turn led to attacks upon Cambodia that brought internal instability and millions of deaths to that benighted country—was a flawed judgment.

It deserves to be remembered as among the worst decisions made by American statesmen in this century. And it was an extension of the deeper failing that will plague Kissinger's reputation forever. His affinity for realism—his readiness to sacrifice moral considerations for what he considered the national interest—should remind us that America's greatness as a nation rests partly on our antagonism to the more disastrous aspects of traditional international power politics.

In the final analysis Kissinger's record—and the heated response to it by the public and the press—seem a microcosm of America's 20th-century struggle with itself over realism and idealism. His use of balance-of-power diplomacy to advance the national interest takes its place in this country's century-long transformation into an orthodox nation-state practicing power politics. By contrast, complaints about Kissinger's unethical or illegal foreign policy reflect America's ongoing belief in, and hope for, a world governed by right rather than might. Ultimately, biographers and historians will debate and study Kissinger for what he tells us not only about U.S. diplomacy but also about the national anguish over what makes sense in our conduct of foreign affairs.

—Robert Dallek is professor of history at UCLA and the author of *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and his Times, 1908–1960* (1991).

Criticizing the Critics

A HISTORY OF MODERN CRITICISM, 1750–1950: Volume 8; French, Italian, and Spanish Criticism, 1900–1950. By René Wellek. Yale. 367 pp. \$42.50

A history of literary criticism? Why would anyone want to read such a thing? One possible answer is that literary criticism is comment on literature as an

image of human life, a fiction of possible lives. There is no reason to believe that the lives that have been lived exhaust the possibilities of living. The future may contain lives you or I could not imagine. So we have literature—as we have painting, sculpture, music, film, and dance—to sustain us in the conviction that life is, or may be, more various than anyone has known it to be.