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The Inevitability of Tragedy: Henry Kissinger and His World (Book Review)

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a contemporaneous and non-eschatological reading (145, 150, 164). Daniel does not refer to the far distant future. Chapters 2 and 7 represent kingdoms and situations now long past. Chapters 8 and 11 relate to the period of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (216-164 BC) and the Maccabean Revolt (144-8, 157-8). More particularly, the much debated passage at Daniel 7: 9-14 is seen as referring to the first advent, *not* the last judgement (144).

Calvin's humanistic training as a lawyer was formative for his approach to the biblical texts. At a pivotal point in his life he learned from teachers such as Pierre de l'Étoile (1480-1537) and Andrea Alciato (1492-1550) to interpret legal sources such as the *Corpus iuris civilis* of Justinian in historical terms. These earlier legal studies were formative for the way they shaped Calvin's approach to the Five Books of Moses (172-3) and the Bible generally. This is an area

in which further research would be most valuable. Other such areas highlighted by Pitkin include the importance of the Calvin-Melanchthon connection (60-6) and the part played by Calvin's view of history in the political-legal-historical writing of François Hotman (1524-90), whose *Francogallia* (1573) offered an interpretation of French history deeply respectful of Calvin's teaching (208-18).

I first read Calvin (in translation) in 1962. My interest in historiography dates from the same time. I wish that I had had access to this sort of work on Calvin back then. As to the minister whom I mentioned earlier, I expect that this volume would have gone a long way to addressing his misapprehensions. Indeed, with this book Barbara Pitkin has placed those who honor and respect the legacy of John Calvin in her debt.

The Inevitability of Tragedy: Henry Kissinger and His World. Barry Gewen. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020, 452pp. ISBN 978-1-324-00405-9. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor of Political Studies and Public Affairs emeritus, University of Illinois-Springfield.

Barry Gewin is refreshingly forthright about his view of international politics. He opens his new book about the American statesmen Henry Kissinger by characterizing himself as a political "Realist" thusly: "[I have] tried to reach conclusions based on the power relationships of a given situation. I attempted to assess how American national interest would be affected by a particular decision and to measure what was possible, not simply desirable. To put it another way: I thought it was important to distinguish between what was true—Realism—and what one wished was true. I was distrustful, even dismissive, of applying moral considerations in a field where abstract morality did not seem especially relevant.... I certainly didn't believe in moral absolutes that outweighed all other considerations, national well-being foremost among them" (xi).

Equipped with this intellectual perspective, Gewen chooses to differentiate "good guy-bad guy" perspectives on American foreign relations. His heroic political realist is Henry Kissinger, definitely for Gewen a good guy. In American politics, according to Gewen, the quintessential bad guy was Woodrow

Wilson. The Wilsonian liberal ideal, holding out for a golden age of freedom and democracy throughout the world, justified a world war for democracy. As Gewen puts it, "Wilson appealed to a mind-set that was fundamentally melodramatic and absolutist rather than political and pragmatic....The United States was not like other nations. It would engage in battle for the sake of the transcendent, universal values, with confidence that God, or at least history, was on its side" (325).

To expound and interpret Kissinger's life and Gewen's Realism, Gewen traces the views of earlier intellectual interpreters of Realism: Leo Strauss, a noted philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, and Hannah Arendt, a secular Jewish scholar who grew up in Germany before World War II. The common threads of thought they shared included a skepticism about human equality and, therefore, government imposed through democracy and equal rights. Strauss approved of an elite rule pursuing the public good rather than a democratic process for people primarily in pursuit of their self-interests. Arendt, a refugee from Nazism, wrote skeptically about various dangers

in post-war American trends, particularly the decline of authority and disregard for tradition. She feared the delusions of unthinking, anti-intellectual masses.

Kissinger's closest intellectual mentor was, like Kissinger, a Jewish refugee from Germany: Hans Morgenthau. As Gewen details, Morgenthau was a colleague of Strauss, a friend of Arendt, and, thereby, an intellectual "bridge" to Kissinger. Morgenthau escaped Germany in 1937 after the rise of Nazism. By scholarly accomplishment he gained an appointment at the University of Chicago in 1943. Between 1946 and 1951, Morgenthau published four books and 34 articles. He became a leading proponent of a Realist approach to international politics. In a world of potentially hostile relationships, Morgenthau interpreted and explained relations among the nations according to their accumulation of and application of power. In his view, the road to international peace (or the absence of war) is best achieved through a balance of power. Balance can be achieved by preventing dominance by any particular state. If violators arise, rival states can (should) unite to reset the power balance. The Realism of power politics means that statesmen make calculated choices, not between "good and evil," but between "bad and less bad" (199).

The heart of Gewen's inquiry is in the last two chapters, "Vietnam" and "Kissinger in Power." Kissinger completed his doctorate at Harvard in 1954 and remained there in an academic appointment. During the bipolar 1950s, President Eisenhower eschewed engagement in Vietnam. Willing to "pay any price," President Kennedy sent a number, growing into thousands, of American military "advisors" to South Vietnam. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, hugely upped the ante with armed forces, eventually discrediting himself and the Democrats by failing to save South Vietnam from its northern communist aggressors.

The 1968 presidential election brought the Nixon administration, conspicuously including Henry Kissinger, to the White House. Gewen points out that "Two Realpolitikers were now in charge of American foreign policy, with ideals, and even morality, far from the center of their thinking" (259). Gradually and painfully, but eventually, the Realists "Vietnamized" the war by reversing the Johnson

numbers with withdrawals. The 550,000 Americans in Vietnam in 1968 dwindled under Nixon to 90,000 in 1972. In October of that presidential election year, Kissinger claimed, "Peace is at hand."

Well, not really. After winning re-election in November, in a burst of Nixonian impatience in December, a "Christmas bombing" over a dozen days brought negotiations to a head. In January 1973, the U.S. agreed to exchange prisoners and depart Vietnam. Two years later what was left of South Vietnam fell to the communist regime. By that time domestic politics was focused upon Watergate and the Nixon denouement and departure from the presidency.

Gerald Ford clung to Henry Kissinger and his Realist approach to foreign policy. Except for George H.W. Bush, Gewen notes that Nixon's successors, even Trump, have mostly applied a moralistic, nationalistic perspective in foreign-policy making, not a judicious balance-of-power pragmatism. Gewen admires Kissinger for applying power for limited, and not absolute, ends. Gewen's immersive book that well describes the Cold-War world of international relations concludes with a pessimistic coda:

If doing good in the world is what you yearn for, you aren't cut out for foreign affairs. Maybe there is no better way of putting all this than to say that in Henry Kissinger's world, the amoral world of statesmen and diplomats, you could allow yourself few expectations. If you were to act at all what had to be accepted was the imperfectability of man, the unpredictability of consequences, the prospect of arriving at no permanent solutions, the inevitability of tragedy. (393-4)

Let me respond to Gewen with a challenge founded on Christian faith with a call for our government to do public justice. This counsel is from *Our World Belongs To God*, para. 55:

Following the Prince of Peace, we are called upon to be peacemakers, and to promote harmony and order. We call on our governments to work for peace; we deplore the arms race and the horrors that we risk. We call on all nations to limit their weapons to those needed in the defense of justice and freedom. We pledge to walk in the ways of peace, confessing that our world belongs to God; he is our sure defense.