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Henry A. Kissinger  
White House Years

by

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Henry A. Kissinger - White House Years

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Henry A. Kissinger, White House Years. Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown & Co., 1979) pp. XXIV, 1521. \$22.50.

The lessons of history cannot be learned until the past is truly behind us. Memoirs and contemporary accounts by participants and observers can assist historians in their tasks or contribute to obscurity by blazing false trails which must be sorted out before the "truth" may be discovered. The test for the historian is distinguishing the false from the true trails. Public officials can assist future historians or make their work more difficult by the quality of record they leave behind.

Henry Kissinger's White House Years will confound future historians more than provide illumination because it blazes numerous false trails, lacks analytical integrity, frequently lacks credibility and obscures critical issues as often if not more often than it provides enlightenment. No living person comes off badly in the book; yet none quite measures up to Kissinger's own qualities of intelligence, comprehension or vision.

To be sure, Kissinger is frequently self-deprecating but always to the end that we are assured that his mastery knows no peers, that while he is not infallible, others are more fallible. In the few instances when Nixon differed sharply on policy, Kissinger brought him around so things turned out well after all. Nixon had, Kissinger avers, a better feel for public relations - one must give credit where due. But Nixon was deprived of greatness because he was mean, petty, vindictive, isolated and suspicious. Yet he was courageous; witness: the opening to China, the Allende ouster in Chile, the perseverance in Vietnam, extending the war to

Cambodia. Nixon's "courage" stands in bold contrast to those less resourceful and courageous around him such as Secretaries Laird and Rogers, Ambassadors Bunker and Lodge, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Haig -- stalwart men all but not of Nixon's (or Kissinger's) mettle.

When North Korean MIG fighters shot down an unarmed US reconnaissance intelligence plane over the Sea of Japan in April 1969, Nixon was restrained from bombing North Korea "primarily because of the strong opposition of Rogers and Laird. But as always when suppressing his instinct for a jugular response, Nixon looked for some other place to demonstrate his mettle." (p. 247) Kissinger tells us that Cambodian targets were selected as surrogates for Nixon's "jugular response".

The period covered by this book, January, 1969 to January, 1973, covers Nixon's first administration and the author's tenure as National Security Advisor. With the second term came appointment as Secretary of State which post he held coterminously with his Advisor's post until the inauguration of President Carter in January, 1977. Kissinger's "record" of the second term will be presented in a companion volume to be published subsequently. One can but hope that that volume will be more revealing and less pretentiously literary than White House Years. The Forbidden City's "yellow roofs seeming to tumble like waterfalls into the pools of sand . . ." (P. 749) exemplifies a literary reach beyond the author's grasp.

The book is replete with vignettes describing world leaders with whom Kissinger was associated. While praised by some reviewers,

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these biographical diversions are often shallow, condescending, and unilluminating. While many of us might be intimidated by former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban's (born, reared and educated in England as Aibrey Epstein) mastery of the English language, Kissinger's reaction was that "English was for me, after all, an acquired language." (p. 359)

Kissinger's record was not one of unmixed success of stellar accomplishments piled one upon another. In part he limited his opportunities by his penchant for secrecy and monopoly of decision, attributes he shared with President Nixon. Kissinger disdained the career practitioners in State, Defense, Treasury, and the CIA as bureaucrats who provided obstacles to policy formulation and implementation. Not one instance is mentioned throughout the fifteen hundred pages wherein the career service - a rather well-trained, experienced set of professionals on the whole - performed any substantiative, creative or important roles in making and carrying out policy. Of course they did, else the government's conduct of foreign policy would have ground to a halt. Curiously the only predecessor singled out for high praise, Dean Acheson, earned Kissinger's praise for his management of the bureaucracy, for his skillful use of all of the tools of statecraft.

In crisis situations such as that attending the Cuban missiles in 1962, decisions are made with little or no search for information. Neither time nor opportunity for searching is available. Kissinger's account depicts routine decisions being made in the same way as those made during crises. While this may be a more efficient process for doing something fast, it created marvelous opportunities for

ignorance of conditions and events to have significant impact upon decisions. Kissinger was unprepared for and reacted with hostility toward West Germany's Ostpolitik, opening relations with the East Europeans and the Russians independently. The signs had all been there; Kissinger simply had neither time nor opportunity to become sufficiently aware of the impending change in German foreign policy.

Kissinger tells of receiving Chancellor Brandt's emissary, Egon Bahr at the White House with Assistant Secretary of State Hillenbrand sitting in to represent the State Department. At the end of their formal meeting, Bahr left the White House by the front door. "He reentered it through the basement for a private talk with me .... As with my channels with Dobrynin to Moscow, with Pakistan to China and on occasion with Israel and even Egypt, my contact with Egon Bahr became a White House backchannel by which Nixon could manage diplomacy bypassing the State Department." (page 411) Thus were normal diplomatic channels undercut and rendered largely useless.

Nixon appointed William Rogers Secretary of State, says Kissinger, because he was felt to be incompetent in foreign affairs and ineffectual; but, nevertheless a friend whose loyalty would remain true - he would pose no threat to Nixon.

Curiously, the only area of foreign policy that was left to the Secretary of State for his "independent" administration of policy was the Middle East. Kissinger attributes that to Nixon's uncertainty as to what Middle East policy should be and to Kissinger's "Jewish background". Until mid 1971, the Middle East was not central to or even very important for American policy.

Yet these were years that witnessed Nasser's death and Sadat's succession in Egypt, Qaddafi's seizure of power in Libya, and the radicalization of politics in Syria and Iraq.

Additionally the United States engaged in rather significantly increased arms shipments to Israel; shipments that were to be matched in kind by the USSR to the Arabs. The end result was reached in the October (1973) Arab-Israeli war which witnessed larger tank battles than any engaged in during World War II. Indeed the initial Egyptian invasion of the Sinai included more tanks than the Germans used to invade Russia in June 1941. Almost inadvertently, the arms race in the Middle East had gotten out of hand, had escalated to alarming proportions that consequently greatly enhanced the cost in terms of money and of human lives.

There are curious omissions in White House Years that are perhaps explainable by Kissinger's inattention or by his careful exclusion of items that might not be quite so flattering to his self-image. Cyprus, for example, never appears in the discussion although it could hardly be omitted from his second volume. Kissinger was implacably hostile to Cypriot President Archbishop Makarios. Kissinger frequently referred to Makarios as the Mediterranean Castro yet he bore little resemblance to Castro - Makarios was a conservative religious figure. Makarios was independent and steered clear of both Russian and American spheres of influence. All of the consequences for our policy today need no elaboration at this point.



this is omitted as is any reference to the Greek junta whose machinations provided the US with difficult problems.

Iran was to become for Kissinger the most important Middle Eastern power destined to provide military protection for the Persian Gulf, the Straits of Hormuz (through which 40% of all Western oil is transported) the Arabian Sea and the Arabian Peninsula. In order to accomplish these ends, the Shah was encouraged to purchase enormous quantities of weapons in order to build up a military force second to none in the region and indeed ultimately surpassing those of Britain, France or Germany. Many observers have concluded that this set of actions, this interest indicated by Kissinger contributed to the Shah's growing megalomania leading ultimately to his downfall. Yet to Kissinger, "he was rather shy and withdrawn. I could never escape the impression that he was a gentle, even sentimental man who had schooled himself in the maxim that the ruler must be aloof and hard, but had never succeeded in making it come naturally. His majestic side was like a role rehearsed over the years. In this, he was a prisoner I suspect, of the needs of his fate, just as he was ultimately the victim of his own successes." (page 1259)

To Kissinger, the Shah was "a dedicated reformer" and a true progressive in that he sought to modernize and industrialize his society. There is no indication that Kissinger was aware of or sensitive to the fact that there was a large and powerful opposition to the Shah that might supplant him. The old adage of politics that one should not put all of one's eggs in one basket was ignored to the end that in the latter part of the Shah's regime we relied on him to inform us of such things as his durability and stability.

On the eve of his election in 1968, Candidate Richard Nixon said that he had a secret plan to end the war in Vietnam. No such plan existed of course; indeed, shortly after coming into office the Nixon administration escalated the war in Vietnam considerably beyond the limits imposed by his predecessor. The war was played to disastrous conclusion four years later well after the new election on the eve of which Kissinger declared to an anxious public that "peace is at hand". Careful reading of Kissinger's volume leads to one principal conclusion: that the extension of the war for four and one-half more years was occasioned by the need to guarantee the reelection of Richard Nixon for a second term. Once the election had taken place, the war was settled on terms quite favorable to North Vietnam; terms according to Kissinger, that had been available several years earlier. To be sure, Kissinger states that the North Vietnamese could have had those terms four years earlier but had rejected them; however, his case isn't convincing by his own account. The extended war resulted in the ultimate destruction of Laos as a viable independent state and in Cambodia's descent into a maelstrom of bestiality, disease, famine and destruction. The end result of Kissinger's management of the war and the settlement of the peace with North Vietnam has been the uniting of North and South Vietnam and the establishment of Vietnamese hegemony over Laos and Cambodia. Thailand today stands exposed and endangered by Vietnamese troops on her borders.

The disarray facing the world today is largely the result of the Nixon-Kissinger management of American power during their term of office. Kissinger was convinced, in large measure correctly, that the principal overriding fact of the international relations today is the relationship of the United States and the Soviet Union. In order to manipulate this relationship properly, the Soviet Union had to have parity with the United States as a major power. Kissinger was convinced that intelligent statecraft would then permit the two to have a functional condominium in global affairs. Everything was sacrificed to this end and permitted enormous difficulties to be raised.

The Nixon shock, that almost benign term that covers a near-declaration of economic warfare against Germany and Japan, fit in well with American policy because it permitted the US and Soviet Union to play a major role. That it destroyed in essence the alliance relationship that we had with Japan and Germany was not adequately comprehended by Kissinger. Our allies were put on notice that we would act unilaterally even if it hurt them. Hence when first we embargoed Iranian oil, Japan's initial response was to continue importing it despite American pressure. Similarly, France and Germany resisted American leadership in dealing with the Soviet Union and Europe to the end that the dollar is under attack and the economic position of the United States is not threatened by the Soviet Union so much as it is threatened by our allies.

This conflict with our allies was not foreordained but was a

direct result of American mismanagement of international economic relationships under the bluster and fundamental ignorance of Treasury Secretary Connally's blunderbus approach which led to the scuttling of the Bretton Woods agreement which established the postwar international monetary system and which has not yet been replaced. International financial markets are in near chaos and that chaos is largely attributable to the management of American economic relations.

Kissinger indicates that this occurred largely because he was preoccupied and did not take enough interest in economic issues. Indeed, he states that he needed some tutoring by Undersecretary Peterson, who was subsequently removed from his position in the Treasury and promoted to Secretary of Commerce and denied access to highlevel discussions of economic issues because he did not agree with the basic thrust. Indeed, even Federal Reserve Board Chairman Arthur Burns is said to have urged Kissinger to stand firm because the United States needed an economic policy that would replace the scuttled international system with a new monetary system. Such replacement has yet to be achieved and the dollar and gold markets are rather unstable and in a state of disarray.

Henry Kissinger is a brilliant, contemplative person who will at some future day, hopefully, write down a record that will permit proper evaluation of his conduct of our foreign policy during the Nixon-Ford years. This book was written to take advantage of the market and serves as a useful vehicle to propel him into a senior post in the next Republican administration or perhaps even the

Democratic administration. As such it is a useful volume for a campaign document for Henry Kissinger seeker of portfolio. It is not a terribly useful historical document nor an adequate representation of his very notable accomplishments.

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