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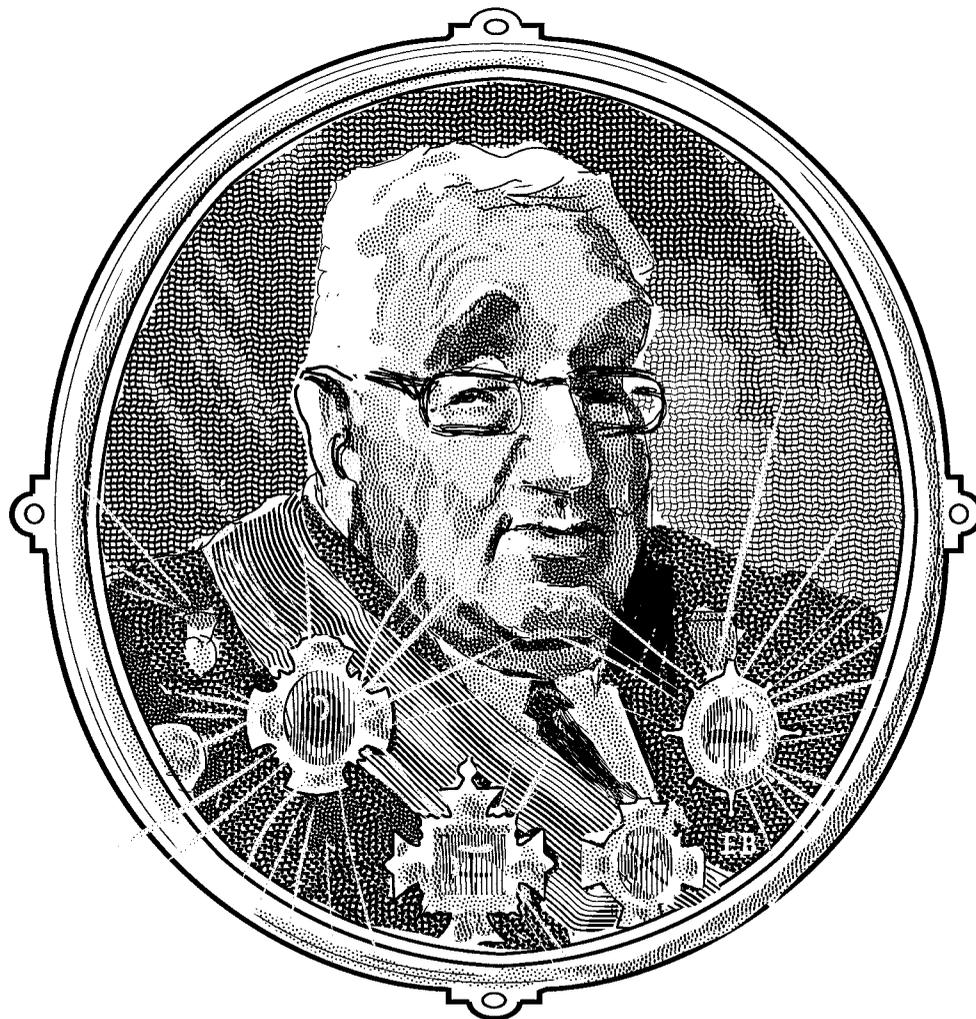
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Book Review by David P. Goldman

INDECENT INTERVAL

Henry Kissinger and American Power: A Political Biography, by Thomas A. Schwartz.
Hill and Wang, 560 pages, \$35



“Here’s my strategy on the Cold War. We win, they lose.”

—Ronald Reagan, 1977

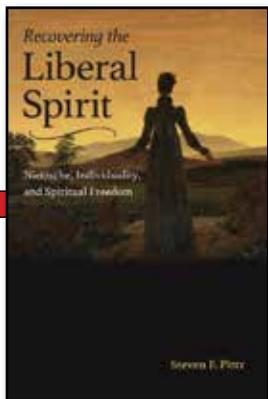
TO WIN THE COLD WAR AMERICA FIRST had to show it could win a hot war. The Israeli air force’s decimation in 1973 by a Russian-armed Arab coalition led Moscow to conclude it could win a conventional war in Europe. Subsequent Soviet aggression reflected this confidence. But by the 1980s American technological advances and President Ronald Reagan’s determination to defeat the Soviets steadily turned the tables. In 1982 U.S.-backed Israelis destroyed the Russian-built Syrian air force. A year later America’s deployment of Pershing II missiles and Reagan’s announcement of the Strategic Defense

Initiative convinced Moscow it could not defeat NATO. The Communist empire collapsed before the decade was through.

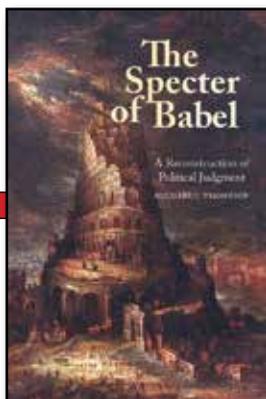
Reagan defeated the Soviets despite the open hostility of America’s foreign policy establishment and the reluctance of a fair part of his own cabinet. The reigning academic wisdom, informed by game theory, thought winning impossible. Players with roughly equal forces could only annihilate each other or reach a *détente*. The establishment embraced this pseudo-scientific mathematicised nuclear strategy and its concomitant shibboleths: flexible response, limited nuclear war, counter-value versus counterforce targeting, strategic arms limitation, and so forth. The Soviets humored their American counterparts—and prepared to win an actual war.

HENRY KISSINGER WAS THE PRIMARY architect of the establishment strategy. Equal parts Doctor Strangelove and Professor Harold Hill, Kissinger sold his buncombe to eager buyers from the media, academia, and political elite. His reputation rose inversely with his accomplishments. Vanderbilt historian Thomas Schwartz’s new book, *Henry Kissinger and American Power: A Political Biography*, reports in painstaking detail the shambles Kissinger made of his most important initiatives. The sole exception—1972’s opening to China—was Richard Nixon’s idea, and succeeded in spite of Kissinger’s opposition. Everything Kissinger undertook—withdrawal from Vietnam, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, 1971’s South Asia crisis, Arab-Israeli peace talks—turned out a dog’s break-

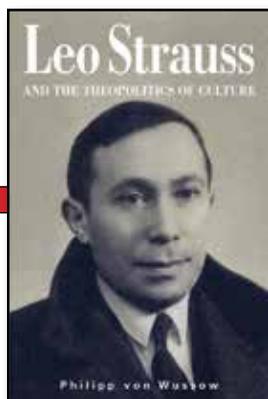
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fast. Never in the course of diplomacy was so much botched for so many by so few. North Vietnam humiliated the United States, Russia cheated on nuclear arms, and the Israelis and Arabs returned to war. But the establishment wanted reassurance about peace in our time, and Dr. Kissinger told them what they wanted to hear.

SCHWARTZ'S BIOGRAPHY IS FOCUSED, readable, and tightly constructed. In contrast to Niall Ferguson's authorized presentation of Kissinger as an idealist thrust into the harsh world of Realpolitik (*Kissinger: 1923–1968: The Idealist* [2015]), Schwartz depicts him as Klemens von Metternich—as played by Groucho Marx: “Those are my principles. And if you don't like them, well, I've got others.” It's a testament to his authorial integrity that this impression emerges despite Schwartz's establishment bias and admiration for Kissinger. The author doggedly follows the facts where they lead and paints warts where they appear.

Kissinger, a German émigré who taught government and international relations at Harvard University throughout the 1950s and '60s before serving in the Nixon and Ford administrations, was long an establishment—and media—darling. In 1955, Schwartz writes, he began a “lasting odd-couple relationship” with establishment doyen Nelson Rockefeller, whose patronage gave the young Harvard professor “access to Rockefeller's enormous resources and contacts.” Kissinger's 1957 attack on President Dwight Eisenhower's doctrine of massive retaliation, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, made him the best-known advocate for the then-novel idea of tactical nuclear strikes in a limited nuclear war.

Kissinger excelled at telling his audience what it wanted to hear. At one point in his biography Ferguson characterizes Kissinger as the very model of a modern game-theorist, who “for many years...exchanged ideas on European affairs and nuclear strategy” with game-theory guru Thomas Schelling. Elsewhere Ferguson asserts the opposite, writing that Kissinger avoided “[t]he greatest defect of the academic strategists of the 1960s,” namely their “love of abstraction, taken to its logical extreme in game theory. Kissinger, by contrast, thirsted to make the dilemmas of the nuclear age more concrete.” Whatever does that mean? Ferguson quotes Kissinger: “Much of our planning has concerned itself mostly with the forces required for D-day and for a single crisis. If the above analysis is correct, more consideration should be given to the process by which local crises develop over

time, particularly to the situation obtaining on D+15, D+30, D+45, etc.” That's gibberish, but Kissinger delivered it with such style his bewildered listeners were convinced he must know *something*.

KISSINGER HOPED TO LAND A JOB IN John F. Kennedy's administration, but the president disagreed with him on limited nuclear war. Schwartz observes that critics “accused Kissinger of delusion in thinking that the United States and the Soviet Union would ever be able to limit a nuclear exchange, and said that he was proposing ridiculous ‘Marquis of Queensbury rules in the midst of a nuclear war.’” Obliging, “Kissinger now advocated a conventional arms buildup,” and since “the dividing line between conventional and nuclear weapons is more familiar and therefore easier to maintain...he moved his own position to where he thought Kennedy's was.”

What was Kissinger's actual position? It depended on whom he was talking to. In 1968, reports Schwartz, he “sought to position himself for a high foreign policy position no matter who won the election,” leaking to the Republicans information gleaned by his Vietnam trips as a consultant for the Johnson Administration. As one of his friends put it, “Whether they were conservatives or liberals, each one felt that Kissinger understood their point of view and may have been sympathetic with it.”

When Richard Nixon named Kissinger his National Security Advisor in 1969, “*New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker noted ‘the collective sigh of relief that went up from the liberal Eastern establishment, and the Ivy League.’” Kissinger was chosen to mollify the establishment and curry favor in the press. His first magic trick was “linkage with the Soviet Union” and “a deadline for military escalation against North Vietnam to end the Vietnam War.” Kissinger failed; the United States abandoned the South Vietnamese and resumed Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) without linkage. Despite the failure of his advice, Kissinger emerged as the most celebrated figure in the Nixon Administration.

Kissinger's response to Pakistan's 1971 massacres in East Bengal was no more successful. According to Schwartz,

Nixon's and Kissinger's belief that supporting Pakistan was essential to China was only an assumption, resting on the hubris of the two men who thought they understood Chinese national interests better than the Chinese themselves.... Kissinger traveled to New

York to tell the new Chinese ambassador to the United Nations, Huang Hua, that the United States would support China if the country decided to move against India. Kissinger used the conversation to offer satellite intelligence on the disposition of Soviet forces.... He told Nixon, "If the Soviets move against them and then we don't do anything, we'll be finished." Nixon responded, "So what do we do if the Soviets move against them? Start lobbing nuclear weapons in, is that what you mean?"

Fortunately China did not want to intervene and a broader war did not break out.

DESPITE HIS FAILURES, KISSINGER'S popularity remained politically useful to Nixon. Unlike Kissinger, Nixon had contempt for arms control as an expression of the "pathetic idealism" of the establishment. Nonetheless, writes Schwartz,

by 1971 he recognized that it was a political and economic imperative.... [He] knew "the SALT thing would be enormously important" to his political prospects.... In Nixon's view, the establishment media—the TV networks and the Eastern liberal newspapers—had anointed Kissinger, and for political reasons it was important for the administration to use that popularity. The announcement of the breakthrough in the SALT talks...was the featured news item on all three networks, with the CBS commentator Eric Sevareid noting directly how it would improve Nixon's chances for reelection.

From the beginning of his presidency, Nixon planned an opening toward China as a flank against the Soviet Union. "We should give every encouragement to the attitude that this Administration is 'exploring possibilities of rapprochement [*sic*] with the Chinese,'" Nixon instructed Kissinger. Kissinger thought Nixon crazy:

"Our Leader has taken leave of reality," Kissinger remarked to [Alexander] Haig, but he ordered an NSC study of relations with the Communist giant. When [Chief of Staff H.R.] Haldeman told Kissinger in July 1969—during a worldwide trip in which Nixon was asking the Pakistanis and Romanians to signal China of his interest—that Nixon "seriously intends to visit China be-

fore the end of the second term," Kissinger replied, "Fat chance."

Some historians—notably John Lewis Gaddis—consider Nixon's opening to China the definitive move in America's eventual Cold War victory. This is overstated—the revolution in U.S. military technology and the Reagan military buildup were more important—but Nixon's maneuver did contain the damage to U.S. interests from the fall of Vietnam and helped America remain the dominant military power in Asia for the next 40 years. With China's ascent to strategic rivalry with the United States, it has become fashionable to regard Nixon's China policy as an error. Hindsight is cheap: Nixon couldn't have foreseen the later gullibility of a foreign policy establishment that believed a prosperous China would also become democratic.

DESPITE KISSINGER'S BUNGLING OF the May 1972 SALT negotiations—he deliberately excluded American experts from his entourage in order to maintain control over negotiations—Kissinger "was now a global superstar." In 1973 he polled as "the most admired man in America, surpassing Richard Nixon and Billy Graham," with an 85% approval rating. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 for the de facto surrender of South Vietnam. One may argue the merits of the Paris accords, but diplomatic genius is not required to cut losses and leave.

U.S. policy suffered a setback with Egypt's October 1973 surprise attack on Israel, a proxy war in which Soviet personnel manning Egyptian air defenses and Russian anti-tank weapons proved Soviet arms held a key advantage over American tanks and airframes. As former Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work explained in 2016,

the Yom Kippur War provided dramatic evidence of advances in surface-to-air missiles.... Israeli armored forces were savaged by...antitank guided munitions. U.S. analysts cranked their little models and extrapolated that the balloon went up in Europe's central front and we had suffered attrition rates comparable to the Israelis. U.S. tactical air power would be destroyed within seventeen days, and NATO would literally run out of tanks.

While the foreign policy establishment lay entranced with visions of arms control, Russia built the capability to win a rapid conventional war against NATO—and demonstrated it in Egypt and the Sinai. The

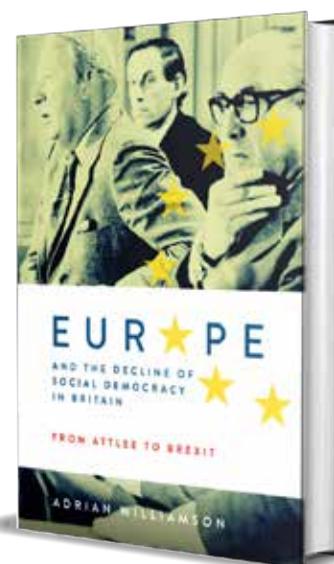
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Yom Kippur War “caught American intelligence agencies flat-footed,” Schwartz reports. Kissinger’s response was “to preserve détente with the Soviet Union.” He failed to grasp that surface-to-air missiles coordinating with anti-aircraft cannon had shifted the power balance. Even after he “recognized that the situation had changed, Kissinger still clung to the hope that the United States could escape from the crisis with détente and relations with the Arabs intact.”

Contrary to his expectations, Israel lost over a hundred American-built military aircraft and more than a thousand tanks. The price of oil quadrupled as Arab oil producers declared an embargo against the United States. Russia enjoyed a windfall from its own oil sales, and the United States economy sank into recession. With the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the United States added strategic humiliation to the misery of the oil-induced recession combined with high inflation.

KISSINGER’S HALO WAS TARNISHED by 1975. Too many things had gone wrong, above all détente. He kept his job at the State Department under President Ford, but even Kissinger’s core constituency, the media, had begun to turn on him. Schwartz recounts:

Barrie Dunsmore, ABC’s diplomatic correspondent, started a report that contrasted Kissinger’s position...when he was “Super K,” at the “height of his career” and “everybody’s favorite,” with his current situation, when he had become “everybody’s favorite target.” Dunsmore assembled an impressive list of attacks on Kissinger: the Senate Intelligence Committee’s report criticizing Kissinger’s role in the overthrow of the Chilean government; the congressional testimony of the former chief of naval operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, who accused Kissinger of lying about Soviet violations of the SALT treaty; and James Schlesinger’s characterization of détente as weakness toward the Soviet Union.

Emboldened by the triumph of its anti-aircraft weaponry and convinced it could win a war in Europe, the Soviet Union began a campaign of bullying and subversion. Jimmy Carter withdrew the SALT II Treaty from Senate consideration in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; presidential candidate Reagan denounced the treaty as “fatally flawed.” Détente was dead in Washington. In Europe, though, the po-

litical elite cowered before the Russian threat. Russia had introduced the SS-20 intermediate range ballistic missile in 1976. If they attacked Western Europe with nuclear weapons, no American president would risk a second strike on American soil by launching nuclear missiles against Russia. As Nixon had foreseen, “[f]lexible response” was “baloney” and the American nuclear umbrella “a lot of crap.” German Defense Minister Helmut Schmidt quipped that “the definition of a tactical nuclear weapon was a nuclear weapon that explodes in Germany.” The culmination of Kissinger’s long dance with détente was a demoralized NATO, a weakened United States, and a wave of Soviet subversion throughout the Third World.

CONTRARY TO KISSINGER AND HIS zero-sum strategic game, Reagan followed Carl von Clausewitz: to prevail, a power must be willing to fight and win a real war. Another proxy war in the Middle East—the engagement of Israeli and Syrian air forces in June 1982—showed that superior American avionics, with help from Israeli drone technology, could annihilate Russia’s surface-to-air missiles. The combination of look-down radar, AWACS (Airborne Warning And Control System), and drones enabled Israel to destroy 29 out of the Syrians’ 30 surface-to-air missile batteries in the Beqaa Valley and shoot down nearly 90 Russian-built planes with minimal Israeli losses. The Russian General Staff was stunned. When Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative the following year, the Russians knew that they could not keep pace with American technology. That’s why great powers have allies: to do the dirty work they can’t or won’t do themselves.

Reagan came closer to real war than he expected during Operation Able Archer in November 1983. By then the United States had deployed Pershing II intermediate range missiles in Germany and Italy, and the Russians weighed the possibility that NATO planned a preemptive strike under the cover of a military exercise. The Kremlin Old Guard pondered war then in the belief that NATO’s growing advantage would make it impossible to fight in the future. The Kremlin was cowed, though, by Reagan’s determination to achieve victory rather than a game-theoretical stalemate. By now Moscow knew that it could not win a conventional war, and it balked at fighting a nuclear war. Unlike in Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968, Russia didn’t send troops to crush the Polish and East German demonstrations of 1989 because it knew it was losing strategically.

NEARLY A CENTENARIAN, DR. KISSINGER has become the next best thing to our Delphic Oracle, offering opaque pronouncements on the state of the world. Last year he declared at a Beijing conference:

It is no longer possible for one side to dominate the other. We are in the foothills of a new Cold War.... We do not at present have a mechanism for political discussions with China. It is all being done through trade talks.... China is a continental power, the U.S. a naval power. If the two superpowers are forced to take opposite positions, conflict is likely.... So a discussion of our mutual purposes and an attempt to limit the impact of conflict seems to me essential. If conflict is permitted to run unconstrained, the outcome could be even worse than it was in Europe. World War I broke out because a relatively minor crisis could not be mastered.

That Kissinger’s proposed “mechanism” for a “discussion of our mutual purposes” will solve our problems with China seems fanciful. There is no lack of clarity about China’s ambition. Unlike Soviet Russia, which impoverished its people to build its military power, China produces butter as well as guns, and has boosted personal consumption eight-fold in the past 30 years. Its designs are not territorial but technological: it wants to dominate what Chinese planners call the Fourth Industrial Revolution and control the Eurasian continent through a combination of technology and infrastructure.

China’s leaders are connoisseurs of power, and little else. And power today is technology. The lesson we should learn from Kissinger’s failure and Reagan’s success is simple: America’s position in the world rests on technological superiority. Under Reagan the United States devoted 1.4% of GDP, or \$300 billion a year in today’s dollars, to basic R&D, with an agenda directed by the Defense Department. We remade the world. Today the proportion is 0.6% of GDP, and even the most ambitious proposals circulating in Congress would restore only a small fraction of the difference.

We have a choice: return to Reagan’s winning approach or defer to China. With his remarkable longevity, Henry Kissinger might still be available to negotiate another American surrender.

David P. Goldman is a columnist for the Asia Times, a principal of Asia Times Holdings, and the author, most recently, of You Will Be Assimilated: China’s Plan to Sino-Form the World (Bombardier Books).

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