Summary

Henry Kissinger was the most famous and most controversial American diplomat of the second half of the 20th century. Escaping Nazi persecution in the 1930s, serving in the American Army of occupation in Germany after 1945, and then pursuing a successful academic career at Harvard University, Kissinger had already achieved national prominence as a foreign policy analyst and defense intellectual when he was appointed national security adviser by President Richard Nixon in January 1969. Kissinger quickly became the president’s closest adviser on foreign affairs and worked with Nixon to change American foreign policy in response to domestic upheaval caused by the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nixon and Kissinger’s initiatives, primarily détente with the Soviet Union, the opening to the People’s Republic of China, and ending American involvement in the Vietnam War, received strong domestic support and helped to bring about Nixon’s re-election landslide in 1972. In the wake of the Watergate scandal, Nixon appointed Kissinger secretary of state in August 1973. As Nixon’s capacity to govern deteriorated, Kissinger assumed all-but presidential powers, even putting American forces on alert during the Yom Kippur war and then engaging in “shuttle diplomacy” in the Middle East, achieving the first-ever agreements between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Syria. Kissinger retained a dominating influence over foreign affairs during the presidency of Gerald Ford, even as he became a lightning rod for critics on both the left and right of the political spectrum. Although out of public office after 1977, Kissinger remained in the public eye as a foreign policy commentator, wrote three volumes of memoirs as well as other substantial books on diplomacy, and created a successful international business-consulting firm. His only governmental positions were as chair of the Commission on Central America in 1983–1984 and a brief moment on the 9/11 Commission in 2002.
Heinz Alfred Kissinger was born May 27, 1923, in Fürth, Germany. Raised in an Orthodox Jewish home, the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 rudely interrupted Kissinger’s middle-class childhood. Kissinger’s father lost his teaching job, and the family faced increasing discrimination and isolation. In August 1938, the Kissingers emigrated from Germany to the United States. Kissinger finished high school in New York City and began college at the City University of New York, fully intending a career as an accountant. However, with the outbreak of World War II, Kissinger was drafted and served with distinction in Europe, winning the Bronze Star. He also met a fellow German refugee, Fritz Kraemer, who helped Kissinger enter the army’s Counter-Intelligence Corps. Kissinger then served in the American occupation government of Germany, supervising the re-establishment of local government and rounding up suspected Nazis in Bensheim, a small city thirty miles south of Frankfurt. Kissinger stayed an extra year in Germany as a civilian lecturing to American officers on foreign policy, and both experiences clearly transformed his ambitions and the direction of his career.

Kissinger entered Harvard University in 1947, receiving his undergraduate degree in 1950 and staying on to obtain a doctoral degree in the government department. Although his dissertation examined the peacemaking at the Conference of Vienna, Kissinger was already thinking of its application to Cold War diplomacy. In the preface he was quite explicit that he chose for his topic “the period between 1812 and 1822, partly, I am frank to say, because its problems seem analogous to those of our day.” Kissinger’s sympathies were with the conservative leaders who sought to preserve the stability of the international order against the revolutionary forces unleashed by France. He argued that effective diplomacy required the possible use of military force, and that the search for peace could not be the primary objective of the major powers, since it would place the international system “at the mercy of the most ruthless member of the international community.” True peace would only come out of a balance of power, an international equilibrium created as nations pursued their national interests within a generally accepted, “legitimate,” international order. The focus of his narrative was the “two great men,” Lord Castlereagh of Britain, “who negotiated the international settlement,” and Klemens von Metternich of Austria, “who legitimized it.” Kissinger was particularly interested in the struggle of the two diplomats to reconcile the political demands of their own domestic situations with the necessity for international leadership and cooperation. Kissinger admired Metternich for his skill at negotiation and ability to manage—and manipulate—other powers in Austria’s interests. However, he also criticized the Austrian’s “smug self-satisfaction” in not recognizing that Austria’s domestic structures required reform and adaptation. On the other hand, Kissinger praised Castlereagh for leading a reluctant Britain into a role in Europe’s concert of powers but regretted his failure to make that achievement more lasting. In an often-quoted conclusion, Kissinger wrote, “The two statesmen of repose were therefore both defeated in the end by their domestic structure: Castlereagh by ignoring it, Metternich by being too conscious of its vulnerability.”

*The World Restored* is often read as an overture to Kissinger’s career, with his advocacy of a foreign policy of “realpolitik,” which downplayed ideological or moral considerations in favor of “practical” interests such as military, economic, or political power. Kissinger would spend considerable time dismissing the idea
that he was another Metternich, a crafty and secretive leader determined to manipulate the balance of power.\textsuperscript{5} Kissinger’s attempt to derive historical lessons from this analogy between the post-Napoleonic era and the Cold War, with the revolutionary Soviet Union taking the role of Napoleonic France, and the United States in the position of both Castlereagh’s Britain and Metternich’s Austria, was occasionally heavy-handed and simplistic. Nevertheless, it is in Kissinger’s insights into the intimate relationship between foreign policy and domestic politics that the study provides the most revealing insights into his later career, although less as a detailed plan and more in the spirit in which he behaved as a practitioner of diplomacy.

At Harvard Kissinger’s mentor, Professor William Yandell Elliott, encouraged Kissinger’s academic interests but more importantly helped him to acquire contacts and associations for a continuing involvement in government and public policy. Even as a graduate student, Kissinger founded a journal, \textit{Confluence}, and ran the Harvard International Seminar, which brought promising students from around the world to Harvard for a summer. Kissinger described the program as a way to create a “spiritual link” between future elites in Europe and the United States. In Kissinger’s view, it was “primarily in the spiritual field that American stock is lowest in overseas countries due to a combination of Nazi and Communist propaganda which pictures the U.S. as bloated, materialistic, and culturally barbarian.”\textsuperscript{6} He hoped that by giving to “active, intelligent Europeans the opportunity to observe the deeper meaning of United States democracy,” the program would strengthen the bonds of the Western unity. The program began with twenty European participants in the summer of 1951 and would continue for the next eighteen years, expanding to include students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Among the more than six hundred participants would be politicians who became presidents and prime ministers from France, Japan, Belgium, Malaysia, and Turkey, as well as influential academics, artists, journalists, publishers, and corporate officials. The CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) provided some money for both ventures, eventually using various front organizations, including the Fairfield Foundation and a group called the Friends of the Middle East, to make its contributions. When this was revealed in 1967, Kissinger denied knowing the true source of the money.\textsuperscript{7} While his denial is hard to credit, it is also the case that the CIA’s funding was extremely limited.\textsuperscript{8}

After completing his dissertation, the Council on Foreign Relations recruited Kissinger to head a study group examining the strategic implications of nuclear weapons. The book Kissinger wrote, \textit{Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy}, captured a widespread unhappiness within the foreign policy elite over the Eisenhower administration’s reliance on a strategy of “massive retaliation” but went even further in accepting the possibility of limited nuclear war.\textsuperscript{9} The book became a surprise bestseller and vaulted Kissinger into the forefront of “defense intellectuals.” Having met the politically ambitious Nelson Rockefeller in 1955, Kissinger ran the Rockefeller Foundation’s Special Studies Project, which produced a series of reports on major national problems, including defense and national security, that echoed his book’s conclusions. Kissinger remained close to Rockefeller over the next decade, assisting him in each of his presidential runs. Despite this identification with the Republican New York Governor, Kissinger became a part-time adviser to both Democratic Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.
During the Kennedy administration, Kissinger worked closely with Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a friend of Kissinger from Harvard, to provide diplomatic options during the Berlin Crisis of 1961, opposing the more aggressive and military-oriented proposals of former Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Under Lyndon Johnson, Kissinger became an informal adviser, initially on European and German issues but then on Vietnam. Kissinger’s most dramatic involvement was in the attempt to start negotiations with the North Vietnamese in 1967 in the initiative code-named Pennsylvania. At a Paris meeting in June 1967, Kissinger approached two French intellectuals, Raymond Aubruc and Herbert Marcovich, about conveying messages to Hanoi about a possible opening of negotiations. Over a two-month period in the summer and early fall of 1967, Kissinger traveled between Boston, Washington, and Paris, bringing messages from American government officials to the Frenchmen and hoping for a positive response from Hanoi. He even met with Mai Van Bo, the North Vietnamese representative in Paris. The North Vietnamese ultimately refused to give the Frenchmen entry visas, putting an end to the channel.

After Nixon defeated Rockefeller for the Republican nomination in August 1968, Kissinger was bitterly disappointed. He refused an offer to serve on Nixon’s foreign advisory board, telling Nixon’s advisers that he could be of more help “behind the scenes.” At the same time, he kept up his contacts with his Democratic friends, including Averell Harriman, who was handling the Paris negotiations on Vietnam. Kissinger sought to position himself for a high foreign policy position no matter who won the election. As one of his more sympathetic friends later 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. This was a tribute to Kissinger’s brilliance as well as his deviousness.” Kissinger did use his access to the Paris negotiators to try to keep the Nixon camp informed on the progress in the Vietnam negotiations, although “there was nothing very secret about what was happening in Paris.” During the fall, he spoke a number of times to Nixon campaign officials, always insisting that they keep his role secret. Nixon appreciated the information, though he also suspected that Kissinger might be providing disinformation, even if unintentionally.

Christopher Hitchens has argued that Kissinger’s information enabled Nixon to sabotage the chance for peace by encouraging the South Vietnamese not to respond favorably to President Johnson’s bombing halt and the negotiations in Paris. Saigon’s recalcitrance then blunted Vice President Hubert Humphrey’s momentum and led to Nixon’s election and four more years of war in Vietnam. However, this argument by Hitchens and others underestimates both the North and South Vietnamese governments and their knowledge of the American electoral process. Both governments fully understood how an “October surprise” might affect their interests, and both acted accordingly. For his part, Kissinger has argued he was a political independent, keeping both sides informed of the negotiations and trying to prevent a bad deal in Paris. That his behavior also advanced his career was a happy byproduct, a reflection of the degree to which both American political parties shared a consensus view on foreign policy that enabled Kissinger to walk the line between them. His behavior during the weeks before the election certainly proved self-aggrandizing and did increase his “credibility” with Nixon, who appreciated the secrecy with which Kissinger operated and valued Kissinger for the “finer points of duplicity.”
When on November 25, 1968, Richard Nixon asked Henry Kissinger to come to the Hotel Pierre in New York, it was only the second time the two men had met personally. The first had been at a Christmas party in 1967 at the home of Clare Booth Luce, when the two had a brief conversation. Now the two men had a long and rambling conversation about foreign policy, with Nixon expressing his distrust of the State Department and the CIA—Kissinger recorded on a yellow pad Nixon’s blunt “Influence of the State Department establishment must be reduced.”

For Nixon, stealing away Rockefeller’s prized academic adviser was a coup itself, both for its outreach to the liberal wing of his party but also as a way of besting Rockefeller, his frequent and bitter rival. Nixon, although he appreciated Kissinger’s help on Vietnam during the campaign, wanted to be sure of Kissinger’s acceptance. Although the two men shared a professional love for foreign policy, and had a sense of themselves as outsiders not fully accepted by the elites, they were also possessed of markedly different temperaments and backgrounds. Nixon was from a lower-middle-class, Californian, and Quaker background and resented the Eastern Establishment, liberal Jews, and Ivy League intellectuals. He was, despite being in the most public of professions, a loner who hated confrontation with others and brooded over real and imagined slights. Kissinger was more gregarious than Nixon was, enjoyed dealing with the media and people of different views, and was confident of his own intellectual superiority. They soon became the odd couple of American politics, brought together by their own love of intrigue and power but most importantly by what William Safire observed was Kissinger’s “tuning fork relationship with the president on the matters that mattered to them most.”

It was Kissinger who tuned into Nixon’s frequency, becoming more like him in some ways but able to understand, anticipate, and most importantly, manipulate Nixon better than many who had known him for years.

Nixon wanted Kissinger to establish the National Security Council as the center of foreign policymaking, excluding the State Department and the other parts of a bureaucracy that Nixon mistrusted. Like his great rival Kennedy but in sharp contrast to his predecessor Johnson, Nixon believed that a president should focus on foreign policy, once saying “this country could run itself domestically without a President” and joking that domestic policy amounted to “building outhouses in Peoria.”

He was also convinced of the importance of foreign policy for a president’s domestic political position, and Nixon hoped to use dramatic moves on foreign policy to strengthen his domestic position and insure his re-election. Bringing foreign policy into the White House and enveloping it in much greater secrecy would be Nixon’s way to insure that the State Department did not frustrate foreign policy innovation—and the political credit for that innovation—that he sought to achieve. Kissinger understood this and knew he was the key to it.

Kissinger proved to be a brilliant bureaucratic infighter who came to dominate the foreign policy process. When Nixon appointed his old friend and Eisenhower’s attorney general, William Rogers, as secretary of state, the press immediately speculated as to whether Rogers, who had little background in foreign policy, could ever compete with Kissinger for the president’s ear. The answer was no, although Nixon recognized Kissinger’s insecurity, and he used Rogers to exploit that weakness in the national security adviser. As Kissinger later wrote, Nixon “did not really mind the tug-of-war that developed between Secretary of State Rogers and me” and was convinced “my special talents would flourish best under
conditions of personal insecurity." Nixon was right both about Kissinger’s bureaucratic talents and his personal insecurities, and with his help, the president was soon able to seize control of the foreign policymaking process.

Nixon signaled a change in foreign policy from the very beginning of his presidency. In his conciliatory inaugural address, Nixon pleaded with Americans to “lower our voices,” and announced, “After a period of confrontation, we are entering an era of negotiation.” Nixon made a “sacred commitment” to the “cause of peace among nations” but cautioned that “peace does not come through wishing for it—that there is no substitute for days and even years of patient and prolonged diplomacy.” Unlike Kennedy’s call to “pay any price, bear any burden,” the Nixon inaugural signaled the beginning of a policy of retrenchment, of limiting America’s commitments and using surrogate powers to defend national interests. Demonstrating his own skill with the media, Kissinger quickly sought to put his mark on the new policy. In an interview and cover story in Time, Kissinger emphasized the need for the United States to “get some reputation for steadiness [in foreign policy]. We will not get steadiness unless we have a certain philosophy of what we are trying to do.” He was careful not to define this “philosophy” or use an exotic term like “realpolitik” to describe it. Rather, he tried to position the administration’s approach between the extremes of “excessive idealism” and “excessive pragmatism” in foreign policy, an approach that was trademark Kissinger. Both he and Nixon quickly began using a different vocabulary to describe America’s objectives. In just his second press conference, Nixon answered a question about possible withdrawals from Vietnam by saying, “I do not want an American boy to be in Vietnam one day longer than is necessary for our national interest.”

Although Nixon and Kissinger used the language of realism and put the Vietnam commitment in terms of the national interest, their understanding of the term included the notion of credibility, both international and domestic. To Kissinger, no American president could accept the demand of an immediate and unilateral withdrawal of American soldiers, something advocated by the one of the leading realist thinkers, Hans Morgenthau. Kissinger sympathized in part with Morgenthau’s position but thought such an approach was politically unacceptable: “By 1969 the over half-million American forces, the 70,000 allied force, and the 31,000 who had died there had settled the issue of whether the outcome was important for us and those who depended on us.” For Kissinger, the credibility of the United States was on the line. “What is involved now is confidence in American promises. However fashionable it is to ridicule terms ‘credibility’ or ‘prestige,’ they are not empty phrases; other nations can gear their actions to ours only if they can count on our steadiness.” Although Nixon also stressed that a rapid American withdrawal would have “disastrous” effects in Asia, the president tended to emphasize the domestic effects: “The most serious effect would be in the United States. When a great power fails, it deeply affects the will of the people. While the public would welcome peace initially, they would soon be asking why we pulled out and this would in turn lead to an attack on the leadership and establishment and the U.S. role in the war.” Nixon believed that a rapid withdrawal, with a likely collapse of Saigon and victory for the North Vietnamese, would cause an intense political crisis within the United States. Critics would rightly ask, “What was the sacrifice in American blood and treasure for? Why did my father or son or brother have to die? Who was responsible for this failure?” Nixon believed this would destroy his capacity to govern. He shared the sentiment...
that Kissinger’s mentor, Fritz Kramer, penned in a memo Kissinger forwarded to the president: “The ‘people’ are not very just, they forgive the victor, but always make scapegoats of their own leaders who are not victorious.”

Nixon’s priority was to end the war in Vietnam, hopefully maintaining the existence of a non-communist South Vietnam—at least for a reasonable period of time—and thereby preserving American credibility. He and Kissinger believed they could reach a settlement within a year, and in April 1969 Kissinger told a group of antiwar protestors in Washington, “If you come back in a year and things haven’t changed, we won’t have a morally defensible position.” Following the policy of “linkage,” Nixon and Kissinger wanted the Soviet Union to exert pressure on the North Vietnamese to negotiate a settlement in return for which the United States would make concessions on arms control negotiations and in the Middle East. This strategy failed, as the Soviets were preoccupied with their conflict with China and proved unwilling to pressure Hanoi for a settlement.

Kissinger was generally the most hawkish of Nixon’s advisers during this period, believing that American diplomacy needed to be backed by the threat of force and hopeful that decisive military action would compel the North Vietnamese to settle the war. Kissinger favored “Operation Menu,” the secret bombing of North Vietnamese troop installations and sanctuaries in Cambodia that began in March 1969 and was designed to signal to Hanoi that Nixon was not bound by the restrictions the Johnson administration had followed. The bombing was also part of Nixon’s “madman theory,” the hope that the North Vietnamese would believe that Nixon was irrational and willing to use military force in terrifying and unpredictable ways. The bombing served to destabilize Cambodia, creating conditions that would lead to the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the end of Cambodia’s neutrality, and the rise of the Khmer Rouge.

Kissinger also backed “Operation Duck Hook,” which originated in a Nixon ultimatum sent to Hanoi in July 1969. The American demanded that Hanoi begin to negotiate seriously by November 1, 1969, the anniversary of Johnson’s bombing halt, or face the military consequences of a dramatic escalation. Ultimately, Nixon decided to cancel the plan in the face of the widespread domestic opposition to the war, although he and Kissinger tried to bluff the Soviets. Nixon and Kissinger ordered the US military to go on nuclear alert, instructing the defense secretary to order US forces to take a series of measures designed to convey to the Soviets an increasing readiness by US strategic forces. Nixon and Kissinger wanted the highest level of secrecy within the government and military and wanted to avoid any measures that might lead to public disclosure. In effect, they wanted an alert loud enough for the Russians to hear but soft enough to avoid public notice. When this gambit failed, Nixon gave a nationally televised address, rallying the “great silent majority,” to support his attempt to end the war “honorably.” Nixon’s support climbed in the polls, and it looked as though he had successfully bought more time for his attempts to end the war.

To deal with domestic pressure, Nixon began a unilateral withdrawal of American forces under the policy of Vietnamization, and proclaimed the “Nixon Doctrine” of supporting regional powers to defend American interests with military aid but not US soldiers. Kissinger, who had begun secret talks with the North Vietnamese in August 1969 in Paris, did not believe that Vietnamization would end the war and warned Nixon that he risked being in “the same position as was President Johnson, although the substance of your position will be different.” He told Nixon
that the “withdrawal of US troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public: The more U.S. troops come home, the more will be demanded. This could result, in effect, in demands for unilateral withdrawal—perhaps within a year.” To Kissinger, Vietnamization, with its regular—and unreciprocated—troop withdrawals, undermined whatever slim hope there was of a diplomatic settlement. “It looks as though they are prepared to try to wait us out,” Kissinger wrote, an approach that “fits both with its doctrine of how to fight a revolutionary war and with its expectations about increasingly significant problems for the U.S.” Nixon underlined this concluding sentence, well aware that Kissinger had put his finger on the central, politically driven, contradiction within his Vietnam policy.  

Kissinger’s secret peace talks with the North Vietnamese continued through the first months of 1970, with Kissinger consistently more optimistic in his reports to Nixon about progress than the reality of the negotiations merited. The talks proved frustrating and unproductive, with North Vietnam insisting on the removal of South Vietnam’s President Thieu before a settlement could be reached. To try to pressure the North Vietnamese, Kissinger supported Nixon’s decisions to expand American bombing in Laos and, more fatefully, the American military invasion of Cambodia in April 1970. The widespread and angry public reaction, intensified by the Kent State shootings, shook Nixon personally. Kissinger’s support contrasted with the skepticism about the action expressed by Secretary of State Rogers and Defense Secretary Melvin Laird and increased Nixon’s appreciation for what he perceived as Kissinger’s unwavering loyalty.  

Kissinger also took charge in dealing with the crisis in Chile, where the Marxist Salvador Allende won the presidential election in September 1970. Nixon was furious and wanted action to prevent “another Cuba” in his administration. With the State Department reluctant to intervene, and the president insistent, Kissinger stepped into the role with determination, as much to promote his relationship with Nixon as out of any deep-seated concern with the dangers posed by Chile. When Secretary of State Rogers warned him of undertaking anything in Chile that might “backfire” on the United States, Kissinger told him, “The President’s view is to do the maximum possible to prevent an Allende takeover, but through Chilean sources and with a low posture.” As the chair of the “40 Committee,” the group that oversaw US covert operations, Kissinger engineered approval of “Track I,” a measure designed to find ways to convince the Chilean Congress to avoid selecting Allende. When this approach failed, Kissinger also helped launch Track II. This involved finding Chilean generals who would undertake a coup to prevent Allende’s selection by the Congress. Kissinger has argued that by mid-October 1970, only a week before the Chilean Congress would meet, he called Nixon and told him that the Track II effort “looks hopeless,” and that he “turned it off. Nothing would be worse than an abortive coup.” Nixon’s response was to affirm that policy toward Allende be “coolly detached” and to insist that the United States cut off any financial assistance to the Allende government. However, even after he “turned off” Track II, Kissinger told the CIA that they should continue keeping the pressure on Allende, “until such time as new marching orders are given.” Kissinger’s attitude reflected what Nixon wanted and undoubtedly encouraged Allende’s opponents, who assumed that they would receive Washington’s support no matter what they did. These Chileans went ahead with their attempts to encourage a coup by kidnapping General René Schneider, the head of the Chilean military who had opposed a coup. Their botched kidnapping attempt resulted in Schneider’s murder and to a popular revulsion against such interference by the
military. Shortly after Allende was inaugurated president, the National Security Council met to decide on future American policy toward Chile. Kissinger encouraged the president to study the issue carefully, using a warning that must have set off alarm bells in Nixon’s brain: “Chile could end up being the worst failure in our administration—‘our Cuba’—by 1972.” Although Kissinger paid relatively little attention to Chile over the next three years, American policy continued to work to undermine Allende through economic and other measures.

Although Kissinger stressed in his memoirs how he and Nixon had prevented a Soviet submarine base in Cuba in the fall of 1970, their foreign policy had few successes in its first two years. When a brief crisis erupted in Jordan in September 1970, and the United States successfully backed King Hussein’s efforts to secure his regime against the Palestine Liberation Organization, Kissinger joked to one reporter that the administration’s new motto would be, “You can’t lose them all.” The irony was that despite this lackluster record, and Republican defeats in the midterm elections, Nixon now regarded Kissinger as “indispensable” and told his Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman “he’s got to stay here.” Kissinger now took a more public role, defending the US-backed South Vietnamese invasion of Laos in early 1971.

In April 1971, when China sent word that it was willing to receive a presidential envoy, Nixon dispatched Kissinger on a secret visit. Nixon’s announcement that he would now travel to Beijing stunned and largely delighted the American public and vaulted Kissinger into the status of a celebrity-diplomat. The subsequent announcement of a summit with the Soviet Union, brought about in part by Soviet fears of a US–China alignment, demonstrated the effectiveness of “triangular diplomacy,” a policy whereby the United States sought to be on better terms with each of the major communist powers than they were with each other. The media painted Kissinger as a modern-day Metternich. The Nixon and Kissinger emphasis on realist diplomacy that downgraded ideological differences appealed to Americans traumatized by Vietnam, and it almost immediately boosted Nixon’s chances for re-election. However, Kissinger’s image as a master of diplomacy took a hit when he and Nixon attempted to “tilt” American policy toward Pakistan during the Indo–Pakistani war of late 1971. The policy of supporting dictatorial Pakistan, which had committed horrendous atrocities in East Pakistan, looked both incompetent and immoral when India’s military liberated the new country of Bangladesh. Nixon allowed Kissinger to take the brunt of the brunt of the criticism, especially when transcripts of the National Security Council meetings leaked to the press. For his part, Kissinger slipped into a short-lived depression, and Nixon even speculated that his national security adviser had lost his effectiveness.

Yet Kissinger rebounded quickly, as Nixon publicly revealed that he had been conducting secret talks with the North Vietnamese through his national security adviser. This only heightened the celebrity aura around Kissinger, with his picture on the cover of both Time and Newsweek as Nixon’s “secret agent.” The Nixon trip to Beijing in February 1972 was short on substance but captivated Americans, and Kissinger played a key role in coming up with the Shanghai Protocol, whose language was vague enough about the future of Taiwan to ward off domestic criticism of a sell-out. North Vietnam’s massive Easter offensive, which pushed deeply within South Vietnam, almost derailed the Moscow summit of May 1972. Kissinger, although supporting Nixon’s decision to escalate military pressure on Hanoi through B–52 bombing and the mining of Haiphong, worried that this
would lead the Soviets to cancel the summit. In a revealing display of his own independence, Kissinger even resisted Nixon’s orders to stress Vietnam with the Soviets during a preliminary visit to Moscow in April. Kissinger was more concerned to see a successful Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT), which would restrict anti-ballistic missile (ABM) deployments and put limits on offensive nuclear weapons. Nixon told Kissinger emphatically a military defeat in Vietnam would be more damaging to him politically than a successful summit in Moscow. Nixon gambled successfully that the Soviets would swallow his use of force against their ally, and he and Kissinger were able to achieve a successful summit and arms control agreement.

After the Moscow summit, Kissinger headed to Paris again to try to achieve the third part of what he called the “trifecta”—China, the Soviet Union, and a peace agreement in Vietnam—all designed with Nixon’s re-election in mind. In the wake of their failed offensive, the North Vietnamese leadership, pressed by the Soviet Union and China, and judging Democratic candidate George McGovern’s candidacy likely to be defeated, decided to give way on their demand for Thieu’s removal. Kissinger now thought he had a deal, though he failed to take into account the reaction of the South Vietnamese government. In return for the release of its POWs (prisoners of war), the United States conceded that North Vietnamese soldiers would remain in South Vietnam after an agreement and assured the Soviet Union and China that it only sought a “decent interval” between its withdrawal and the “political evolution” that might take place in South Vietnam. Kissinger even held his first public and televised briefing to announce, “Peace is at Hand.” Nixon called him after the TV performance, and the two men agreed that they had “wiped McGovern out.”

Nixon won a landslide victory, and his foreign policy successes played a crucial role. But Vietnam was not yet settled. Kissinger flew to Saigon, where he found that President Thieu was adamantly opposed to North Vietnamese troops remaining in the South and demanded numerous changes to the proposed treaty. With both Nixon and Kissinger convinced that Congress would try to cut off funding, Kissinger went back to Paris to face an angry North Vietnamese delegation. The talks collapsed, and Nixon decided to launch B–52 raids on North Vietnam. As Kissinger himself indicated, the “Christmas bombing” was done to impress both North and South Vietnamese leaders with the American determination to end the war. The result was the Paris Peace Agreement, signed January 27, 1973. The agreement, similar to that which had been negotiated in October, allowed America to withdraw from South Vietnam and repatriate its POWs, but it did not stop the war between the Vietnamese. Nevertheless, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho received the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts.

Secretary of State, 1973–1977

Although Nixon and Kissinger’s personal relationship suffered strain toward the end of the Vietnam negotiations, Nixon intended to continue to use his national security advisor for foreign policy spectacles in his second term, especially those that would strengthen his domestic political standing. Among those were a peace settlement in the Middle East, a reaffirmation of the Atlantic alliance, continued progress in détente with the Soviet Union, and the opening of diplomatic relations with China. Kissinger’s brilliant manipulation of the media, both print and electronic, made him seem indispensable to Nixon’s political position. However,
as the Watergate scandal escalated in March and April 1973, with the resignations of the president’s top advisers Harry R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, Nixon clung to Kissinger like a life preserver. He believed that the successful foreign policy of his administration, with he and Kissinger as its guides, would protect him from any possible impeachment proceedings.

The ironic result is that Kissinger’s power and authority in foreign affairs came to be quasi-presidential. By August Nixon had to appoint Kissinger secretary of state, the first Jew and naturalized immigrant to hold the office. During the Middle East War in October 1973, it fell to Kissinger to orchestrate the American response, as Nixon was preoccupied with Vice President Spiro Agnew’s resignation and the firing of the Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox. Kissinger’s actions included both flying to Moscow to negotiate the details of a ceasefire in the conflict but also placing the American military on worldwide alert when it looked as if Soviet forces might intervene in the region.

Over the next several months Kissinger would enhance his fame and reputation through his “shuttle diplomacy,” arranging disengagement agreements between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Syria. While Nixon expressed a preference for an imposed settlement by the two superpowers, Kissinger’s approach to the Middle East sought a Cold War victory, excluding the Soviet Union from the negotiations. When he negotiated with Egypt’s Anwar Sadat and Syria’s Hafez al-Assad, he arranged for their agreements to be with the United States rather than directly with Israel, effectively making the United States the “honest broker” in the talks, as well as the de facto hegemon in the region. Kissinger developed a strong bond with Sadat, effectively turning Egypt away from its pro-Soviet stance toward the United States and planting the seeds for the Camp David agreements of the Jimmy Carter years.

Kissinger was at the height of his popularity and international fame when Nixon gave him his letter of resignation in August 1974. Gerald Ford greatly admired Kissinger, and there was never any doubt that he would retain him as his chief foreign affairs adviser. During the Ford presidency, Kissinger himself became a lightning rod for critics from both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum. The Democrats scored major gains in the November 1974 midterm elections and were determined to challenge what they perceived as the “imperial presidency” and Kissinger’s secretive and “lone ranger” style of diplomacy. When the North Vietnamese invaded South Vietnam in March 1975 in a reprise of their Easter offensive, Congress refused Kissinger’s request for additional funding, and Saigon quickly fell in April 1975. The ignominious defeat pierced Kissinger’s reputation for diplomatic success and opened the way for more challenges to his conduct of foreign policy. Congressional investigations into the administration, particularly the Church Committee, brought attention to Kissinger’s role in the administration’s covert policy toward Chile, which had led to the overthrow of Allende in September 1973 and to a bloody wave of repression by the military. Senator Henry Jackson challenged the administration’s détente policy and forced Kissinger to accept the Jackson–Vanik Amendment, tying trade with the Soviet Union to the emigration of Soviet Jews. When the Soviets rejected this form of linkage, Kissinger’s détente policy, and the prospects of a SALT II agreement, were imperiled. In July 1975, Kissinger advised Ford not to meet with famed Soviet dissident and writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, opening up Ford to attacks from Republican conservatives critical of détente. Even the signing of the Helsinki
accords, later celebrated for their role in promoting human rights, brought American liberals and conservatives together in denouncing Ford and Kissinger for selling out Eastern Europe.

Kissinger himself sought to deflect such attacks, and in a series of talks, called the “Heartland speeches” for their location away from the coasts, tried to convince Americans that, “like most other nations in History, we can neither escape from the world or dominate it.” America needed to conduct its diplomacy “with subtlety, flexibility, maneuver, and imagination” and acknowledge the “complexity and ambiguity” of the world, rejecting “easy slogans” and political posturing. As self-serving as that defense was, Kissinger was both more truthful and more accurate when he said, “painful experience should have taught us that we ought not exaggerate our capacity to foresee, let alone to shape, social and political change in other societies.” He concluded by restating the way he thought America should approach foreign policy: “The question is not whether our values should affect our foreign policy but how. The issue is whether we have the courage to face complexity and the inner conviction to deal with ambiguity; whether we will look behind easy slogans and recognize that our great goals can only be reached by patience, and in imperfect stages.”

Although Kissinger’s efforts helped him to retain the support of the majority of Americans, the attacks from both the Right and the Left weakened his position. In late 1975, as Ford sought re-election against the conservative Ronald Reagan, he decided to replace Kissinger as national security adviser with Kissinger’s deputy, Brent Scowcroft. This irritated Kissinger and led him to consider resigning, but it did not fundamentally affect his influence with Ford. The two men agreed that Indonesia’s President Suharto should be given a green light to annex the former Portuguese colony of East Timor and were willing to overlook the atrocities committed in this invasion. Of greater consequence was the decision by Congress to cut off funding for CIA involvement in the civil war in Angola, leading to the triumph of a pro-Soviet and Cuban-supported government. Ford now decided to banish the word détente from his campaign, and the Reagan challenge forced Ford to accept a harder line on Soviet policy. Kissinger’s trip to Moscow in January 1976, with an attempt to negotiate a SALT II agreement and convince the Soviets to compromise on Angola, failed. In the wake of the defeat in Angola, Ford and Kissinger shifted American policy in Africa toward full support for majority rule, and Kissinger visited the continent in an attempt to bring about a settlement in Rhodesia. In September 1976, it looked as though Kissinger had once again succeeded, with Rhodesia’s Prime Minister Smith accepting the principle of majority rule. But the devil was in the details, and the subsequent conferences under British auspices failed, and majority rule would not come until 1980. Ford’s narrow defeat in the 1976 election meant an end to Kissinger’s time in public office.

**Post-Governmental Career, 1977–2019**

Kissinger left office to great acclaim, and most observers expected his return to power in the relatively near future. During the Carter presidency, he operated as something akin to the “shadow” secretary of state, offering support for some of Carter’s initiatives, such as the Panama Canal Treaty and the Camp David Accords, but provided withering criticisms of other aspects of Carter’s foreign policy, including its emphasis on human rights and its policy toward Iran. Kissinger
lobbied hard for the Shah to be admitted for medical treatment but was criticized harshly when this led to the seizure of American hostages. Kissinger hoped to return to power in a new Republican administration, and at the 1980 Republican convention he unsuccessfully tried to negotiate a vice-presidential spot on the ticket for Ford with Reagan. Although conservative opposition to Kissinger from figures like Senator Jesse Helms kept him from being offered a formal position in the first Reagan administration, Kissinger actually met with the president frequently and offered advice, especially on Soviet, Chinese, and Middle Eastern issues. The only formal role he played came as chair of the Central American Commission in 1983, during which Kissinger sought to rally public support behind Reagan's controversial policies in El Salvador and Nicaragua. During Reagan's second term, Kissinger split with Reagan over the president's embrace of Mikhail Gorbachev and willingness to withdraw American nuclear weapons from Europe.

Along with writing three volumes and almost four thousand pages of memoirs, as well as a number of other books on foreign policy, throughout the 1980s and 1990s Kissinger remained an active commentator on foreign affairs, appearing in the press and on television with great regularity. He also established an international business–consulting firm, Kissinger Associates, which proved financially lucrative but whose secrecy and list of powerful clients provoked controversy. When two of his former aides, Scowcroft and Lawrence Eagleburger, joined the George H. W. Bush administration, they were forced to disclose information from their work at Kissinger Associates. Kissinger strongly supported Bush in the 1988 election and was disappointed that Bush did not offer him the secretary of state position. Kissinger believed that the top positions of his former aides meant that he would have considerable access, and he suggested to Bush that he travel and meet Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in January 1989. Kissinger assured Gorbachev that he could send messages through him to the Bush administration, although Gorbachev may not have been as taken with him as Kissinger thought. Gorbachev later told his advisers that he thought Kissinger “hinted at the idea of a USSR–USA condominium over Europe.”

The speed of events in Eastern Europe, with the relatively rapid collapse of communist authority, discredited Kissinger’s proposal and left him appearing as though trying to revive realpolitik in the midst of the triumph of liberal democracy. Although Kissinger continued to provide advice to the Bush administration, his hope for any public role disappeared. During the Clinton administration, he remained on the sidelines, running Kissinger Associates, finishing his memoirs, and providing a sustained critique of the Clinton administration’s approach to foreign policy.

The coming of another Republican administration in 2001 held the promise of a governmental role. When George W. Bush wanted Kissinger to head the panel charged with investigating the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, Kissinger initially accepted the call to re-enter government service but resigned within two weeks because of his reluctance to disclose fully the various business connections created by his consulting firm. Kissinger did maintain close and friendly relations with President Bush, Vice–President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Famed Washington journalist Bob Woodward argued that Kissinger played a key role in advising George W. Bush on the Iraq War, urging him not to withdraw American soldiers from Iraq without a military victory. In the 2008 presidential contest, Barack Obama cleverly used Kissinger’s advocacy of direct diplomacy with American adversaries like Iran and Syria to undermine Senator John McCain’s position during their first foreign policy debate in 2008.
Although his advanced age made Kissinger a less visible figure during the Obama years, as recently as the 2016 Democratic primary debates, Senator Bernie Sanders could still attack Hillary Clinton for her willingness to take advice from Kissinger when she was secretary of state.

The Kissinger legacy remains sharply contested. To some, he was an American war criminal, responsible for outrages such as the secret bombing of Cambodia, the overthrow of democracy in Chile, and support for Indonesian massacres in East Timor. To others, he remained a brilliant statesman whose dramatic moves toward China and the Soviet Union, and whose brilliant negotiating in the Middle East, rescued American diplomacy in the aftermath of defeat in Vietnam. There is not much middle ground in these assessments. Putting aside emotions and moralistic judgments, it is hard to resist the conclusion that Kissinger was a truly significant historical figure and symbol of America’s international power, a man who played a critical role in American foreign policy, and whose long life after his government service has allowed him to try to shape both the understanding of that era and America’s subsequent history. Kissinger both exercised and symbolized 20th-century American power, leaving a legacy that 21st-century Americans must come to understand.

**Discussion of the Literature**

Scholarship on Kissinger is a crowded field, often quite polemical but also reflective of Kissinger’s importance not only as a foreign policy decision maker but also as a symbol of American foreign policy. *Henry Kissinger and American Power* is a fresh contribution to the debate but unlikely to put an end to the controversies. There was a large outpouring of books during the period in which Kissinger first became famous, including a biography by the journalists and brothers Marvin Kalb and Bernard Kalb, studies by Kissinger’s friends Stephen Graubard and John Stoessinger, and more critical works by David Landau and Bruce Mazlish. More recently, the first volume of Niall Ferguson’s projected multi-volume biography stirred controversy by referring to Kissinger as an “idealist” in its subtitle, but it is a comprehensive and largely sympathetic look at Kissinger’s life before he became national security adviser. Ferguson’s full access to the Kissinger papers affords him an advantage not yet available to other writers. Walter Isaacson’s biography attempts to strike a balanced view and benefitted from scores of interviews with Kissinger’s contemporaries. Jussi Hahnimäki provides a study of Kissinger’s “triangular diplomacy” with an emphasis on his dealings with the Soviet Union and China. Jeremi Suri’s book focuses strongly on Kissinger’s German-Jewish background and his early years. Robert Dallek studies the odd partnership between Nixon and Kissinger. Mario Del Pero provides an insightful look at the limits of Kissinger’s “realism” and the influence of domestic politics on his thinking.

The extreme negative assessments of Kissinger, which frequently used the word “crimes” to describe his policy choices, began with the William Shawcross book and the powerful condemnation of the administration’s policies in Cambodia. Seymour Hersh assembled an avalanche of criticisms in his 1983 book, *The Price of Power*, and many subsequent authors have expanded upon these. Hitchens focused on Cambodia, Chile, and East Timor in his book and the subsequent BBC documentary. Critical assessments of Kissinger’s role in Chile and the India-Pakistan conflict can be found in the books of Peter Kornbluh and Gary Bass. Greg
Grandin echoed this attack in his book, seeing Kissinger’s hand behind much of American foreign policy over the last fifty years, and Robert Brigham continued the criticism in his most recent work on Kissinger’s mistakes in Vietnam.

**Primary Sources**

Researchers can find the Henry Kissinger papers in both the Library of Congress and the Yale University archives. Although some parts of these collections are closed to the public or require special permission, most of the digitized library is easily accessible. The compilation of historical documents includes direct correspondence, transcripts of conversations and meetings, policy papers, cartoons, and audiotapes from Kissinger's time working as the national security advisor (1969–1975) and secretary of state (1973–1977). Scholars can also utilize their large collection of documents pertaining to his time as a student and faculty member at Harvard University; his time as a consultant to Rockefeller, Kennedy, and Johnson; and Kissinger's post-government career in international affairs. The full online archive of the Kissinger Papers has been divided into three parts: Part I, Part II, and Part III (only accessible from the Yale collection). In addition, the sixty-five volumes produced by the Office of the Historian at the Department of State, the deservedly famous *Foreign Relations of the United States*, are essential primary sources for this era. The special volume on the so-called “backchannel” between Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969–1972*, is also essential.  

**Links to Digital Materials**

- [Kissinger Telephone Transcripts and Conversations](https://www.dnsa.org), Digital National Security Archive (DNSA).
- [Kissinger Conversations](https://www.dnsa.org), Supplement, DNA.
- [Kissinger Conversations](https://www.dnsa.org), Supplement 2, DNA.
- *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Nixon-Ford Years.

**Further Reading**

1994.


Notes


8. As Ferguson rightly notes, “Kissinger’s activities at Harvard were among the most staid operations of the cultural Cold War. In modern terminology, it was soft power at its softest.” Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 281. Suri makes more of the CIA’s role, arguing that it was part of “a web of academic programs around the world dependent on U.S. intelligence agencies, as well as philanthropic foundations, for their basic sustenance.” Suri, *Kissinger*, 122.


11. The fact that Nancy Maginnes, the future Mrs. Kissinger, was on sabbatical at the Sorbonne was also a factor in encouraging Kissinger to pursue his search for negotiations. Ferguson, *Kissinger*, xvii.


16. Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 831 is correct that it really is impossible to see, in light of the North Vietnamese demands, how a chance for peace was lost. It is also the case that Thieu and Humphrey had met, and it is likely that Thieu realized Humphrey’s impatience with the progress of his government. Humphrey expressed that in careful terms when he came back to the United States in November 1967. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002), 997–1002.


18. In a taped conversation with Nixon in April 1972, Kissinger agreed when Nixon said, “You have to realize too that they [the North Vietnamese] are quite aware of American political things because there isn’t any question but that they agreed to the bombing halt before the election because Johnson convinced them that that was the only chance of defeating Nixon.” Kissinger went on to add, “As I told you all that fall, what the game was.” *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. 14, *Soviet Union October 1971–May 1972* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), 447.


22. In speaking once to Nixon, who asked him why academics hated the United States—a very loaded question, certainly—Kissinger described the difficult travails of the ordinary assistant professor, dependent on the approval of senior colleagues for advancement. He then remarked that academics “believe in manipulation,” and perhaps for no one was this more true than Kissinger himself. Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 329. In his biography of Nixon, Evan Thomas suggests that Kissinger was very skilled at “how to play off Nixon against Nixon,” in effect manipulating the President’s insecurities to his own advantage. Evan Thomas, *Being Nixon: A Man Divided* (New York: Random House, 2015), 193.


33. *CBS News*, May 1, 1969, Vanderbilt Television News Archive. There were also reports on ABC and on both networks on April 29, 1969, that quoted Kissinger.


38. The idea was to have the Congress select Jorge Alessandri, of the rightwing National Party, which had received 35.3 percent of the vote. The idea of this “Rube Goldberg” gambit was that Alessandri would serve briefly, perhaps only one day, but thereby provide a break in presidential succession that would legally allow the more popular current President Eduardo Frei to be selected for another presidential term. Chilean law did not allow a president to serve two consecutive terms. This approach collapsed from a lack of cooperation from the key participants. Mark Falcoff, “Kissinger and Chile: The Myth that Will Not Die,” *Commentary*, November 2003, 5.

39. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976*, vol. 21, 372–373. Nixon also insisted that the Hickenlooper Amendment, which prohibited assistance to governments that nationalized US companies without compensation, be applied to Chile.


42. Telcon, Henry Kissinger and Margaret Osmer, September 25, 1970, Box 7, Nixon Presidential Materials Staff (NPMS), National Archives (NARS), College Park, Maryland.


44. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, *phone conversation*, October 26, 1972. This conversation is particularly revealing in how well the two men understood the domestic political implications of this step. In his memoirs, Kissinger remarks blandly “Nixon and I did not discuss the domestic political implications.” Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1398.

45. All the quotations are from Kissinger’s speech, July 15, 1975, *Department of State Bulletin*, 73, no. 1884 (August 4, 1975), 161–168.

46. Svetlana Savanskaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladislav Zubok, eds., *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989* (New York: Central European Press, 2010), 351. The editors of the volume note that Gorbachev, in conversations with his aides, referred to Kissinger as “Kisa,” which is a diminutive term for a cat and contained
Henry A. Kissinger has been a member of the Council on Foreign Relations since 1956 and served as a member of its Board of Directors from 1977 to 1981. He is the fifty-sixth secretary of state of the United States, serving from 1973 to 1977 while concurrently holding the position of assistant to the president for national security affairs from 1969 to 1975. After leaving government service, he founded Kissinger Associates, an international consulting firm, of which he is chairman. From 1954 to 1971, Kissinger was a member of the faculty of Harvard University, both in the department of government Henry Kissinger dominated American foreign relations like no other figure in recent history. He negotiated an end to American involvement in the Vietnam War, opened relations with Communist China, and orchestrated détente with the Soviet Union. Yet he is also the man behind the secret bombing of Cambodia and policies leading to the overthrow of Chile’s President Salvador Allende. This book paints a subtle, carefully composed portrait of America’s most famous and infamous statesman. We see Kissinger negotiating, threatening and joking with virtually all of the key foreign leaders of the 1970s, from Mao to Brezhnev and Anwar Sadat to Golda Meir. This well researched account brings to life the complex nature of American foreign policymaking during the Kissinger years. Henry Kissinger received his AB degree summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa[22] in political science from Harvard College in 1950, where he lived in Adams House and studied under William Yandell Elliott.[23] His senior undergraduate thesis, titled The Meaning of History: Reflections on Spengler, Toynbee and Kant, was over 400 pages long.[24][25] He received his MA and A proponent of Realpolitik, Kissinger played a dominant role in United States foreign policy between 1969 and 1977. In that period, he extended the policy of détente. This policy led to a significant relaxation in US–Soviet tensions and played a crucial role in 1971 talks with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. Henry Kissinger is the most famous and most divisive secretary of state the US has ever had. In an interview, he discusses his new book exploring the crises of our time, from Syria to Ukraine, and the limits of American power. He says he acted in accordance with his convictions in Vietnam. Kissinger: There clearly is this danger, and we must not ignore it. I think a resumption of the Cold War would be a historic tragedy. If a conflict is avoidable, on a basis reflecting morality and security, one should try to avoid it. Kissinger appears shortly after being named a foreign policy advisor to President Richard Nixon in 1968. In his new book, “World Order,” Kissinger offers some self-criticism, including the revision of his earlier thought that you could explain history.