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Re-evaluating the
Legacy of
Henry Kissinger:
Statesman or Stuntman?

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Re-evaluating the Legacy of Henry Kissinger: Statesman or Stuntman?¹

“Accept everything about yourself – I mean everything. You are you and that is the beginning and the end – no apologies, no regrets.”

-- citation attributed to Henry Kissinger

The somewhat obvious answer to the question posed in the title of this paper is an unequivocal, non-compromising, no-need-to-debate... YES. Henry Alfred Kissinger, born Heinz in 1923 in Fürth, Bavaria, was an exceptional statesman, who engineered some of the most profound transformations in the history of American foreign policy in the second half of the twentieth century. And he was a stuntman, who managed to pull off more rabbits out of his hat than perhaps any other national security advisor or secretary of state in modern American history. A Machiavelli and a Houdini rolled into one.

But Kissinger was, and is, so many other things. Just listen to some of the descriptions that his many defenders and numerous critics have used. According to them Henry Kissinger was, alternatively:

-“Allied with killers and complicit in slaughter” (Gary Bass)
OR “A child of the American century” (Jeremi Suri)

-“(he was a) massmurderer” and “a vile creature” (Christopher Hitchens) OR “The miracle man” (Sagar Ahluwalia)

-Perhaps “He is a dreadful, disgraceful and discredited man” (Hitchens again) OR “an indispensable statesman” (John Kerry)

-(Did he have a) “shallow, parochial and cruel perspective on world politics.” (Roger Morris) OR (is) “Kissinger’s classical realism (perhaps) emotionally unsatisfying but intellectually timeless” (Robert Kaplan)²

This is a small sampling that gives a taste of the divided opinion about Henry Kissinger’s personality and role in history. In a nutshell: Henry Kissinger is invariably described either as the prince of realpolitik who rescued his adopted nation from one of its many recent periods of decline OR as a monster manipulator who had no respect for human rights and should probably be tried for war crimes at the Hague.

To me, both views are false and often driven by other agendas than trying to place one of recent history’s most visible – and enduring – practitioners of American foreign policy in perspective. Choosing between the extreme views is, I would argue, ultimately not worth our while. Describing Kissinger as the mastermind of realpolitik gives too much credit to one man’s ability to orchestrate events; considering him a war criminal takes some of his actions out of their context and imagines cause and effect connections where such do not exist. Instead, what we need to do is to try and place Kissinger the policymaker in the context in which he operated.

So what I want to discuss here is divided into two parts. First, I wish to give a brief sketch of the Kissinger years – in essence, the good, the bad and the ugly of his policies, his achievements and failures, his modus operandi. Second, I wish to ask “so what”? Why should anyone care about the good, the bad, and the ugly of Henry Kissinger’s exploits in the 1970s? I.e. what

are the ramifications and legacies of his policies for the second decade of the 21st century? Or, a question that appeared on one of the earlier versions of the poster for today's talk: Has Henry Kissinger left American foreign policy damaged?

PART 1: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

If Henry Kissinger would be left to decide his own legacy – something he has attempted to do in the massive three volumes of his memoirs – it would undoubtedly stand upon three major policy achievements of the early 1970s.

First, there was the Opening to China. While Kissinger was hardly the original mind behind the opening to China, he was the operational manager that, on the American side, made it happen. It was ultimately Kissinger who controlled the channels of communication that resulted in his famous secret trip to China in 1971 and Nixon's public visit the following year. This was, undoubtedly, the biggest earthquake in the history of international relations in decades; it confirmed that there was no such thing as a communist monolith; it helped coin such terms as "triangular diplomacy"; it made possible the rise of China to the economic giant it has become. It might all have happened anyway but the fact of the matter is that Henry Kissinger was, very much, present at the creation³.

Second, Kissinger played a significant role in pushing ahead the Détente process. In fact, the opening to China was largely aimed at influencing America's relations with what Nixon called Subject A: the Soviet Union. Here Kissinger, again, played a key operational role as the controller of the

Soviet-American backchannel through Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. The major achievements were in display in 1971-72 as Americans and Soviets signed their first SALT agreement, agreed to normalize the status of divided Berlin, and commenced a series of negotiations and summits that characterized the easing of superpower tensions known as *détente*. While Kissinger himself displayed little direct interest in the CSCE, it is hard to imagine the Helsinki process without the changes in the Soviet-American relationship. In any case, Kissinger's personal role in the process of *détente* appears beyond reasonable doubt.

Third, the Arab-Israeli shuttle diplomacy. Kissinger's status as a brilliant negotiator was cemented in 1973-74 when, in the wake of the October War, he shuttled tirelessly between various Middle East capitals, mediating ceasefire/disengagement agreements and installing the United States as the key external power in the region. In particular, the agreement between Israel and Egypt in early 1974 paved the way for the process that led to the 1978 Camp David Accords.

Should Henry Kissinger's career have been defined by these three issues alone, I doubt that anyone would have – then or today – be charging him as a war criminal, or wondering why he received the Noble Peace Prize in 1973. If one could stop here, then we could surely be in awe of the man who was depicted in one of his many Time magazine covers as the magician pulling doves of peace – not rabbits – out of his hat. One might even agree with Kissinger's own assessment of his eight years in office, given to New York Times reporters on his last day in office, January 19, 1977:

I have to say that I pass on a world that is at peace, more at peace than in any previous transition; (a world) in which, in addition, in every problem area solutions can be foreseen even if they have not been fully achieved and the framework for solutions exist, in which the agenda of most international negotiations was put forward by the United States. Therefore it cannot be entirely by an accident and it cannot be a series of tactical improvisations.⁴

Humility was, obviously, not one of Kissinger's character faults. Nor was he obviously beyond maximizing the impact of his own role in the events that had transpired between 1969 and 1977. Kissinger's Kissinger was – a view he would hammer home by publishing a set of remarkably detailed memoirs – a statesman to a fault; a man equally at home with the likes of Mao and Brezhnev, Golda Meir and Anwar Sadat. Or as one of his successors, George Schultz, would put it: “There is only one Henry Kissinger. They broke the mold after they made him.”⁵

Indeed, whether acting like a statesman or behaving like a stuntman, Kissinger had played a major role in reshaping US foreign policy in ways that continue to resonate well into the twenty-first century.

But, there was so much more. There was some bad stuff; some of it really bad.

Much of the critique of Henry Kissinger has revolved, ironically, around the major reason why the Norwegian Nobel Committee decided, in the early fall of 1973, to award him (and his North Vietnamese negotiation counterpart Le Duc Tho) the Nobel Peace Prize; that is, the way in which the Nixon administration fought in and escalated, negotiated about, and eventually

exited the Vietnam War. One book's title summed up the Nixon administration's – and Kissinger's – policies vis-à-vis the Vietnam War in straightforward terms: No Peace, No Honor.⁶

There was, above else, the secret bombing of Cambodia. The decision in early 1969 to bomb enemy sanctuaries in a neutral country may have been militarily justifiable. But without sharing the details with the American public, the Nixon administration opened itself for serious domestic criticism. Kissinger himself lost some talented staffers who resigned in protest. When the bombings were followed, a year later, with an actual invasion of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge took full advantage to recruit followers that plunged Cambodia into a long civil war. In the US, anti-war protests exploded on campuses and tragedies ensued at Kent State and Jackson State universities.

Indeed, the Nixon administration's policy towards the Vietnam War was filled with paradoxes. In part as an effort to calm down domestic protest Nixon pursued Vietnamization: the gradual withdrawal of US troops coupled by injections of massive amounts of military aid. But the administration also simultaneously escalated the war: in addition to secret bombing, US troops participated in the spring 1970 invasion of Cambodia. In 1971 the South Vietnamese incursion to Laos was supported by the United States.

In retrospect the impact of such policies on the two Vietnamese sides appears predictable: the South felt secure in continued US material support, the North was assured that the Americans were on their way out. Neither side had a particular incentive to accept a negotiated settlement.

Amidst escalation and withdrawal, however, secret talks – a Kissinger specialty – dragged on, intermittently, in Paris. The US reacted to a full scale North Vietnamese offensive against the South in the spring of 1972 with massive aerial bombings that almost derailed the Moscow summit and prompted Nixon to ruminate about the possibility of dropping “the big one.” Happily, he did not; the North Vietnamese offensive was stalled by other means.

Finally, as the Paris talks appeared to be approaching conclusion Kissinger put the proverbial foot in his mouth by declaring, in October 1972, that peace was at hand. It was not, mainly because no one had bothered to consult South Vietnam about the terms of peace and the Saigon government was not willing to allow North Vietnamese troops to remain south of the 17th parallel. Hence, another set of bombings (the famous Christmas bombings of December 1972) and heavy diplomatic pressure on the South (essentially threatening to cut off aid if they wouldn’t agree to go along) and presto: the Paris Peace Agreements of January 1973 were ultimately signed. In a few months remaining Americans left while the Nixon administration pledged to provide massive amount of aid to prevent the North from launching an attack and uniting the country.

The end result is well known. After an interval (decent or indecent), the North – perhaps encouraged by Nixon’s resignation in August 1974 – launched its final offensive against the South. In late April 1975 Vietnam was united, while the United States simply evacuated remaining personnel. Not only that, but dominoes fell in Cambodia and Laos; the former country experiencing a spree of mass killing and genocide that would

ultimately be halted only by, irony of ironies, a Vietnamese invasion.

One need look no further, it seems, than the series of apocalyptic events that shattered Indochina in the 1970s to see the failures of policy making on Kissinger's watch. No wonder that the calls for Kissinger to return his Nobel Peace Prize have never ceased (in fact, he offered to return the prize but the Norwegian Nobel Committee refused).

Not quite enough to convince everyone that, as Seymour Hersh put it, Henry Kissinger's "dark side is very dark indeed"?⁷ Well, we can – as Hersh and others have done – certainly find plenty of further evidence.

Take, for example, "the other September 11" – the 1973 coup in Chile that brought down an elected socialist government headed by Salvador Allende. Although the details will probably never be fully known, it is clear that the Kissinger had tried to oppose Allende's election already in 1970 and gave a green light for the coup in 1973. Not only that but he was supportive of the new military junta under Augusto Pinochet. "You did a great service to the West in overthrowing Allende," Kissinger told the Chilean leader in 1976.⁸

Or consider the Nixon administration's attitude towards one of the worst massacres of civilians in the early 1970s, when thousands of Bengalis were killed by the Pakistani military in the midst of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971. Again Kissinger (and Nixon) refused to listen to advice from the ground and pressure the Pakistani leadership towards changing their policies. Their argument for looking the other way was that

securing the smooth functioning of the Pakistani link to China – which was about to bear fruit a few months later – was more important than intervening in a regional bloodpath.⁹

One could cite a host of other examples from East Timor to Angola to make the basic case that for Kissinger the human suffering of civilians caught in the various conflicts that defined the so-called global cold war in the 1970s was of little consequence. Hence, perhaps we need to agree with the late Christopher Hitchens that Kissinger “should be tried for crimes against humanity, and for offenses against common or customary or international law, including conspiracy to commit murder, kidnap, and torture.”¹⁰

Without deconstructing Hitchens’ legal definitions it is fairly certain that Kissinger’s actions – or the policies he was advocating – were repeatedly morally questionable. The ‘good’ – the easing of Soviet-American tensions, the opening to China or shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East – seem outweighed by the ‘bad’ – the convoluted end and bloody consequences of America’s involvement in Vietnam, the support to a military dictator in Chile or the silent acceptance of genocide in South Asia.¹¹ On top of this, there was also something particularly ‘ugly’ in Kissinger’s *modus operandi*.

The inner workings of the Nixon White House were, indeed, as byzantine and conspiratorial as one can imagine. Most organizations have their structural problems and personal rivalries that often lead to back stabbing and pettiness. As someone who has been in the academia for the better part of my working life I can vouch that this is the case even when the stakes are rather low; except for those involved in battles

over, say, promotions and tenure or even the structure of a given curriculum or a mission statement of a small and obscure department.

The White House – particularly the Nixon White House – is no different, except that the stakes are much higher. And because Kissinger was successful in this environment, he clearly had an unusual ability to court those who needed courting (Nixon and the press); to sideline those who stood in his way (such as Secretary of State William Rogers or, to somewhat lesser degree, Secretary of Defense Melvyn Laird); and use the talents of those working for him to build his own reputation as the mastermind of American foreign policy. As one of the junior officials in Kissinger’s NSC staff would later put it, working in the West Wing basement of the White House (where Kissinger’s office was located) in the early 1970s made you feel “like you were at the political center of the universe.”¹²

The triumph of Kissinger’s opportunism ultimately came with the unfolding of the Watergate scandal. As heads fell left, right and center – John Ehrlichman, Bob Haldeman, George Mitchell -- Kissinger’s reputation kept soaring. While Nixon battled for his political life, Kissinger shuttled in the Middle East and was pictured on the cover of Newsweek as Super-K: the head of Kissinger, the body of Superman. And when Nixon finally resigned, Kissinger was left the unchallenged foreign policy czar, NSC Advisor and Secretary of State supported by a new president, Gerald Ford, who would, at least initially, yield to him in all important matters of foreign policy. This was not least because the general public seemed to share Ford’s high esteem for Kissinger. A Harris poll in the summer of 1974 found

that Kissinger was “the most popular member ever of Federal Government’s Executive branch.”¹⁴

Of course, pride came before the fall. By 1976 Kissinger was the favourite target of presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter; attacked for his ‘lone ranger’ style foreign policy. A year earlier he had been deemed a political liability when Gerald Ford took the NSC Advisor’s post from him. And his policies had been stonewalled by a number of other skilful and slightly younger manipulators like Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. After he left office in early 1977 Kissinger remained a high profile public personality but, despite repeated attempts, he would never again serve in a presidential administration. To some extent at least this was because the ugly part of his success had finally caught up with Kissinger; his domineering personality meant that no politician would want to be outmanoeuvred or overshadowed by Super-K (in the way that Nixon and Ford had been).

So there you have it: the transformation of superpower relations, the peacemaking in the Middle East, the apocalyptic end of the Vietnam War, the disregard for human rights, support for right-wing dictators, the scheming and back-stabbing behind closed doors. By no account is this a pretty story.

But so what? What import, if any, do these aspects of Kissinger’s career carry in today’s world? Are there significant legacies or insights to be gained from revisiting the good, the bad, and the ugly of Henry Kissinger’s career? Was there something uniquely impressive or something exceptionally evil in the policies he promoted? Why should we care?

PART 2: Kissinger in Context

Indeed, how should we consider the legacies of the stuntman-statesman; how can we “think in time” about the good, the bad and the ugly of Henry Kissinger’s exploits? How can we avoid applying standards of behaviour that may not have existed four decades to make judgments about his actions. The simple answer is: difficult. But perhaps worth a try.

So let me begin with the breakthroughs; the ‘good’.

Naturally the opening to China stands as the centrepiece of Kissinger’s (and of course) Nixon’s achievements – reflected in the very fact that only last year Kissinger published a new book on the subject. Whether we think of it as a positive breakthrough naturally depends on one’s perspective – an unemployed factory worker in the United States (should he or she be aware of the story of the opening) might well feel that Kissinger’s July 1971 trip unleashed a process that, in the long term, undermined America’s economic security. The Dalai Lama or various human rights activists may well feel that the centrality that was accorded to good relations with China following the fabled opening may well have prolonged the Chinese Communist Party’s hold on power, hence effectively insulating the People’s Republic of China from serious external scrutiny regarding its human rights record. In short, the basis for the past four decades of Sino-American relations have followed a certain Kissingerian reasoning in which morality and foreign policy do not often appear in the same sentence (or receive the same consideration).

And yet, if you are an economist, especially a macroeconomist, you might have a slightly different take. Since the 1970s

global economic growth has been driven in large part by the gradual incorporation of China into the liberal international economic order. The world as a whole has become a more prosperous place; America's latest – and historically longest – economic boom depended to a large extent on China's rapid (and still continuing) growth. None of which could have been possible without the initial opening. But, of course, this hardly means that Kissinger single-handedly transformed the global economy: such mainly unintended consequences of the opening to China became evident only after Kissinger left office. The purpose of the opening in the early 1970s had little to do with boosting American trade – what mattered was the geopolitical significance and gains that could emerge from a tacit Sino-American partnership.

What about détente? Well, the Soviet Union no longer exists; nuclear weapons still do. As such, the SALT agreements were a significant first, although the progress of nuclear arms agreements, non-proliferation, and disarmament have been somewhat disappointing over the last four decades.

HOwever, the most significant impact of the détente process of the 1970s was not necessarily in the bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington. Rather, it was the atmosphere of détente that made possible the gradual transformation of Europe from a divided to an essentially borderless one. The CSCE and the opening of a multitude of East-West exchanges from the mid-1970s onwards had, or so most historians agree in retrospect, an important role to play in the transformations that took place in the late 1980s.

Of course, here we need not, should not, applaud Henry: these were largely unintended consequences for Europe, the part of the world that Kissinger normally played little heed to. And yet, explaining the Helsinki Accords in August 1975 to his cabinet colleagues Kissinger did maintain: “all the new things in the document (the Helsinki Final Act) are in our favour – peaceful change, human contacts... At the conference (in Helsinki) it was the West which was on the offensive... No one observing from another planet would have thought Communism was the wave of the future.”¹⁵

He may not have had a master plan for bringing down totalitarian states in Europe but Kissinger was conscious that ideas mattered and, if allowed to spread, could easily undermine the legitimacy of non-democratic states. In reverse, of course, this also explains why he was reluctant to criticize the “right” kind of totalitarian – authoritarian – states like Pinochet’s Chile.

With regards to the Middle East Kissinger’s legacy is more complex. On the one hand, Kissinger’s active role after the Yom Kippur war laid the basis for the idea that the US should and must fix the Arab-Israeli conflict along with the other troubles in the region, and that only the US can do this. This, it seems to me has been the curse that has affected American policy vis-à-vis the Middle East over the past four decades. On the other hand, this was not, perhaps, the lesson one should have drawn from shuttle diplomacy. Kissinger was successful, to the degree that he was, because the US during his watch refrained from the overt direct use of force in the region. There were no American boots on the ground. He acted as an intermediary and a mediator

rather than an enforcer or a belligerent. This was hardly the approach taken by succeeding US administrations.

Indeed, as anything in history, the perspective on events and policies shifts with the relentless passing of time. The opening to China, the détente process, and shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East were all policies adopted to advance a certain perception of American interests in the 1970s. They had consequences -- mostly unintended ones -- that can be regarded in retrospect as either positive or negative. Yet, on balance, it seems that in terms of substance they were acts of an American statesman trying to advance his (and his president's) perception of his the United States' national interest.

It's a different story, though, if we turn to Vietnam, Cambodia, Chile, Bangladesh, East Timor; an endless list, it seems, of wrongdoing and immoral acts with real and immediate negative consequences. Lives were lost because of decisions made in the West Wing of the White House. Were such decisions unusual? Were they immoral, perhaps even criminal, maybe even meriting -- if the late Christopher Hitchens would have had his way -- a war crimes tribunal?

My take is that yes, many of these acts were immoral given the consequences. Sadly, they were not particularly unusual when placed within a trajectory of American foreign policy. We can find, in fact, parallels -- before and after the 1970s -- to Cambodia, Vietnam, and the many other possible examples. Since, as a historian, I am not in the business of whitewashing or crucifying let me try to explain these acts in the context of their times.

Let's take the secret bombing of Cambodia. If we ignore the notorious epithet 'secret' for the moment, what was the bombing all about? Well, it had a straightforward military aim: to attack North Vietnamese sanctuaries that were based on the Cambodian side along the South Vietnamese border. The sanctuaries were there essentially as safe havens for the so-called Vietcong, the southern rebels fighting with North Vietnamese support to overthrow the South Vietnamese government which, of course, was supported by ½ million American troops. Americans wanted to take the sanctuaries out to protect US troops. There were two ways to do this: bomb or invade. Americans tried both and failed to achieve their objective. And as a consequence, the already fragile Cambodia was further destabilized as the Khmer Rouge took full advantage of the opportunity to advance its cause against the American imperialists and the Cambodian government that tended to turn a blind eye on the bombing campaign.

Was this a criminal act that prompted a later genocide; an act made possible because a madman (Nixon) and a psychopath (Kissinger) were in charge? Or an effort to protect American troops from an endless series of guerrilla raids? Truth, it seems, is in the eye of the beholder on this one. Yet one should at least note that the bombing of Cambodia had actually started already in 1965, under a different president and a different national security advisor. That makes the impact of the bombing no less horrific, but it should put the campaign into some perspective.

But there is another question worth considering: was the secret bombing of Cambodia such a horrendous disaster, such an immoral policy, such a cause of instability in the country and

region involved, that it stands out in the annals of American foreign policy as a one-off event ?

Of course not. It is in fact quite easy, without digging too deep into the record of almost any US administration engaged in a military campaign, to draw some parallels. But the most apt one, it seems to me, is the present situation (2014) in Pakistan. We know relatively little about the drone campaign that began in Northwest Pakistan in 2004; except that the intensity of the so-called “drone war” has increased under the current administration and more than 400 drones have flown over the past decade, killing at least 3000 militants and civilians. The numbers, of course, pale in contrast to Cambodia. But the violation of Pakistan’s national sovereignty appears eerily similar to that of Cambodia’s. Moreover, the effects on the ground are very much the same: if the ceaseless bombing of Cambodia helped the Khmer Rouge’s recruitment campaigns, the drones have become one of the great assets of militant groups; “the recruiting tool of choice” as one journalist put it.

One could, in fact, go on and on about the parallels between Vietnam and Afghanistan (and/or Iraq); one could play with words like Vietnamization, Iraqinization and Afghanization. We might speculate about the US responsibility for the rise of ISIS. Actions have consequences; military actions rarely have positive or predictable ones.

In the end, I would simply point out that the bombing of Cambodia and the tortuous road to an American exit from Vietnam in the early 1970s were not examples of a particularly (or uniquely) callous or immoral policy, only of bad policy built upon a

difficult legacy, and conceived in specific historical context that had ruled out simple withdrawal from South Vietnam or overt attack on North Vietnam as realistic policy alternatives. And something we may all hope will not be repeated; at least not too often.

Let me take another case: the obvious disregard for human life that is evident in the tapes that form the major data set of Gary Bass's book *The Blood Telegram*.¹⁷ The telegram in question was not named for blood the liquid but after Archer Blood, an American diplomat serving in Dhaka, East Pakistan, what became Bangladesh as a consequence of the 1970-71 Indo-Pakistani war. In April 1971 Blood and his staff sent a dissent telegram to Washington, protesting against the US attitude towards the Pakistani army's ruthless suppression of the Bengali independence movement (Awami League).

“Our government has evidenced moral bankruptcy (and) chosen not to intervene, even morally, on the grounds that the conflict, in which unfortunately the overworked term genocide is applicable, is purely and internal matter of a sovereign state.”¹⁸

As mentioned earlier, the Nixon administration chose not to intervene. This was justified, later on, by referring to the potential impact that pressuring the Pakistani government might have had on the secret channel of communication between the US and China that, at the time, ran via Pakistan. Instead, Blood was recalled for contradicting official policy. In July, four months after the telegram, Kissinger flew, via Pakistan, to Beijing and the opening to China was a reality.

This issue is not new but has been debated ceaselessly over the past four decades. The White House tapes and other evidence make it quite clear that the priority of Nixon and Kissinger back in 1971 was indeed to safeguard what they, thought was a major breakthrough: the opening to China; Nixon's anti-Indian prejudices that Kissinger carefully emulated were a further cause for the administration pro-Pakistani 'tilt'. Nixon and Kissinger were, as many of their contemporaries were, insensitive and prone to racist remarks and innuendo – very much in display in the conversations about the people of the South Asian subcontinent. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was, regularly, denigrated as the “witch.” Neither Nixon nor Kissinger had, as none of their contemporaries had not, heard much about humanitarian intervention or about the responsibility to protect.

This may sound a bit callous and insensitive from the perspective of 2014. But I would invite everyone to think in time. What was the context? Were humanitarian considerations part of the canon of American foreign policy on a consistent basis during the Cold War? Or subservient to, perhaps even tools of, other interests and goals? You probably guess my preferred answer to such a question. It also leads me to wonder about the uniqueness of the dark side of the Kissinger era. There was much that was bad in American foreign policy during the 1970s. But little, it seems to me that was uniquely bad.

If you accept – and I doubt that all of you do – that perhaps Henry Kissinger, while flawed in a number of ways, was not the Darth Vader of American foreign policy, one is left wondering why so many observers still regard him as the master criminal?

To me the answer to Kissinger's notoriety lies partly in his very success. By this I don't mean success of a particular policy or the brilliance of a specific conceptual insight. In fact, anyone who has studied his cumbersome writings is unlikely to find many particularly original insights. What I mean is Henry Kissinger the personality, Henry Kissinger the celebrity, Henry Kissinger the rockstar of diplomacy.

One undeniable fact about Henry Kissinger is that he became the most famous American diplomat of his and, perhaps, any era. He became a brand. His various policy successes and diplomatic breakthroughs were part of the making of the Kissinger brand. His personal history was a publicity boon – the German born Jewish boy who immigrated to America in 1938, hence escaped the holocaust, was part of the US occupation forces in Germany, went to Harvard, became a professor and was invariably, at least by his own estimation, the smartest guy in any room. Along the way to stardom, however, there were casualties, there was backstabbing. Kissinger outmanoeuvred competitors, focussed on building his reputation above else, was, in other words profoundly selfish and profoundly ruthless. He was, one might say, profoundly human.

In fact, because he was usually considered an outsider Kissinger, to be successful, had to be ruthless. He had to break through some rather thick glass ceilings in order to be the first to achieve a number of accolades: the first Jewish Secretary of State, the first naturalized US citizen to become Secretary of State – to mention but the most obvious. Others would benefit from Kissinger's ruthless rise – starting, perhaps, with another naturalized American: Zbigniew Brzezinski. Kissinger made an

extraordinary career and his life story is worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster. But unlike most Hollywood blockbusters this one would require too much realism, too much straying away from the simplistic good guys – bad guys scenario to ever become a box office hit.

The problem with all this success was that it inspired both a cult-like following and a cult-like demonizing. The personality brand and celebrity was an asset and a curse; we know more about Kissinger and his nasty foibles than probably those of any other non-elected American official in the modern era. And, despite the persistent complaints about secrecy, we are likely to find out even more as the vast record of documents and tape recordings is unearthed by scholars and journalists in years to come.

So who ultimately was, is, the real Henry Kissinger? A genius of realpolitik who rescued his country from one of its difficult moments of doubt and decline? The self-serving schemer who lacked common decency and respect for basic human rights? Or a man who, opportunistically, made a career by using his academic credentials to carve a significant niche in the policymaking circles of his time? A man whose sincerity was always in doubt? A man who could somehow push the Israelis and the Egyptians towards a peace agreement? A man who could look the other way when genocide was under way?

That one man could be and do all those things – and more -- may seem impossible. I would, however, suggest that the story of Henry Kissinger proves the opposite. It was possible for the same person to engineer major diplomatic breakthroughs

like the opening to China AND oversee colossal failures like the needlessly costly withdrawal from Vietnam.

Yet, what seems to me ultimately more important than re-inventing the heroics or crimes of Henry Kissinger is to distinguish between the man – an important but still small player in a drama that unfolded – and the broader historical forces at play. These were ultimately beyond his control: his actions alone did not cause the collapse of the Soviet Union or the economic boom in China. Nor did his actions kill democracy in Chile for good; they surely did not bring permanent peace to the Middle East.

What his actions did create is a personality that endures. Unlike the national security advisors and secretaries that preceded or succeeded him, it is only Henry Kissinger who managed to sustain a brand name that still survives even as his ideas and policies may appear anachronistic and even irrelevant. And for Henry Kissinger the statesman to have become Henry Kissinger the brand necessitated not only the thought processes of a Machiavelli but the instincts and skills of a Houdini.

In other words, the answer to the question in the title of this talk: Henry Kissinger: a statesman or a stuntman? is ultimately straightforward: Yes.

End notes

¹ Much of this paper is based upon Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2004). I have tried to keep footnotes. To a minimum, mentioning mainly works published since 2004 or, if appropriate, direct citations from documents.

² Gary J. Bass, “Indefensible Kissinger,” *Politico*, January 13, 2014; Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). See the introduction of Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect*, for rest of these citations. John Kerry cited from a report on Henry Kissinger’s 90th birthday party. “Kissinger’s Counsel,” *The National Interest* (September/October 2013). <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/kissingers-counsel-11132>

³ For details on the opening to China see Margaret Macmillan, *Nixon and Mao : The Week that Changed the World* (New York : Random House, 2007).

⁴ Cited in *Flawed Architect*, p. 455.

⁵ Cited in Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect*, p. xv.

⁶ Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor : Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York : Free Press, 2001).

⁷ Hersh quotation from an interview in the film *The Trials of Henry Kissinger* (Directed by Eugene Jarecki(2002)).

⁸ Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Pinochet, June 8, 1976. <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB437/docs/Doc%2010%20-%20Kissinger-Pinochet%20memcon%20Jun%208%201976.pdf> (last consulted on September 30, 2014). See also Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File :A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York : New Press, 2013).

⁹ Kissinger and Nixon’s policies vis-à-vis the 1971 South Asian conflict that produced and independent Bangladesh are detailed in Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2013).

¹⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*(London: Verso, 2001), p. xi.

¹¹ There are other cases that have been invoked in this vein, such as the US quiet acquiescence to Indonesia’s intervention in East Timor in 1975.

¹² Samuel Hoskinson as cited in Bass, *Blood Telegram*, p. 8.

¹³ *Newsweek* June 10, 1974.

¹⁴ Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect*, 356. A remarkable 85% of the poll’s participants agreed that Kissinger was doing a “splendid“ job.

¹⁵ In *Flawed Architect*, p. 437.

¹⁶ Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, *Bombs over Cambodia*,” *The Walrus* (October 2006). http://www.yale.edu/cgp/Walrus_CambodiaBombing_OCT06.pdf

¹⁷ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 54.

Vision

Today, decision-makers, opinion-formers, politicians and citizens in European countries increasingly need to ‘think European’, to transcend national perspectives and empathise with a European mix of national and international cultures.

To meet that challenge, 10 leading European university institutions – Oxford, Leiden, Bologna, Krakow (Jagiellonian), Paris I, Geneva, Prague (Charles), Helsinki, Barcelona (UPF), Munich(LMU), closely supported by Madrid (Complutense), and Lisbon (Institute of Political Studies) – jointly set up an association designed to serve as an ‘international university without walls’, in which future scholars and leaders of our ‘new’ Europe have an opportunity to share common learning and confront common concerns together.



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Dr David Robertson, Oxford, on *A Common Constitutional Law for Europe: Questions of National Autonomy versus Universal Rights*.*
- **November 2000, Oxford**
Dr John Temple Lang, former Competition Director at the EC, on *The Commission and the European Parliament – an Uncertain Relationship*.*
- **February 2001, Geneva**
Professor Ian Brownlie CBE QC, from Oxford, on *International Law and the Use of Force by States*.*
- **May 2001, Oxford**
Professor Philippe Burrin, Director HEI Geneva on *Strands of Nazi Anti-Semitism*, followed by a round-table discussion. *
- **June 2001, Paris**
Raymond Barre, Professor of Economics and former French Premier, on *Quelle Europe pour Demain?*
- **December 2001, Berlin**
Professor Peter Scott, Vice-Chancellor of Kingston and former *Times Higher Education* Editor, on *The European University – What is its Future?*
- **April 2002, Geneva**
Lord Professor Dahrendorf, from Oxford, on *Global Security Interlinked*. *
- **April 2002, Bonn**
Professor Michael Meyer-Blanck, from Bonn, on *Reflections of Religious Education*.
- **June 2002, Bologna**
Professor Tiziano Bonazzi, from Bologna, on *The Labyrinth: Euro-American Relations*.
- **November 2002, Oxford**
Professor Charles Wyplosz, Professor of Economics, Geneva, on *Fiscal Discipline in the Monetary Union*.*
- **November 2002, Oxford**
Professor Robert Frank, Professor of Modern History, Paris I, on *France and the UK in the Construction of Europe*.
- **April 2003, Geneva**
Sir Marrack Goulding, Warden, St Antony's College, Oxford, on *The UN and Peace since the Cold War: Success, Failure or Neither?**
- **June 2003, Leiden**
Professor Sir Adam Roberts, from Oxford, on *International Law and the Use of Military Force*.*
- **March 2004, Geneva**
Sir Alan Budd, Provost, from Oxford, on *A Tale of Two Economies*.*

- **June 2004, Prague**
Professor Sir Anthony Kenny, from Oxford, on *What is it to be European?*
- **November 2004, Leiden**
Professor Christian Hacke, Professor of Politics, Bonn, on *Challenges for German Foreign Policy*: *
- **November 2004, Leiden**
Dr Godfrey Hodgson, Rothermere American Institute, Oxford, on *The Other American Presidential Election*.*
- **January 2005, Oxford**
Dr Grigory Yavlinsky, Chairman of the Russian Democratic Party (Yabloko), on *Russia: Where do we go? How do we get there?**
- **February 2005, Oxford**
Professor Victor-Yves Ghebali, Professor of Political Science, Geneva, on *The OSCE and European Security?**
- **March 2005, Madrid**
Professor Geoffrey Lewis, Emeritus Professor of Turkish, St Antony's College, Oxford, on *Europe, Turkey and Islam*.
- **June 2005, Helsinki**
Professor David Robertson, Professor of Politics, Oxford, on *Where Next? Europe After the Recent Referenda*.
- **September 2005, Leiden**
Professor Jean-Philippe Genet, Professor of History, Paris 1, on *European History: Union or Disunion?*
- **October 2005, Krakow**
Professor David Robertson, Professor of Politics, Oxford, on *the EU Constitution*.
- **October 2005, Prague**
Iain McLean, Professor of Politics, Nuffield College, Oxford, on *Why the British Left Matters for Europe*.
- **June 2006, Geneva**
Hew Strachan, Chichele Professor of the History of War, All Souls College, Oxford, on *Diplomacy and Civil-Military Relations*.
- **June 2006, Krakow**
Professor Tariq Ramadan (Oxford Visiting Professor in Islamic Studies, St Antony's College) on *Islam in Europe*.
- **November 2006, Oxford**
Professor Wladyslaw Strozewski, Professor of Philosophy, Krakow, on *Human Being and Values*.
- **February 2007, Oxford**
Professor Wim Blockmans from Leiden, on *The Medieval Origins of European Democracy*.
- **October 2007, Krakow**
Professor David Marquand from Oxford, on *The Challenges for Democracy in Europe*.
- **March 2008, Geneva**
Professor Vaughan Lowe from Oxford, on *The Double Helix of Terrorism and Tyranny: can Civil Liberties Survive the War on Terror?*

- **February 2009, Oxford**
Professor Vera Gowlland-Debas from Geneva, on *The Middle East and the Challenges for International Law*.
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Professor Vernon Bogdanor, from Oxford, on *Overcoming the legacy of the 20th Century: Protecting Human Rights in Modern Democracies*.
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- **May 2015, Geneva**
Professor William Beinart on *South Africa: Lessons for African democracy*.

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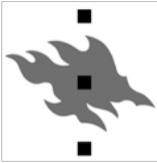
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