

A Roundtable on Thomas Schwartz, Henry Kissinger and American Power: A Political Biography

*Andrew J. Kirkendall, Daniel J. Sargent, Jeremi Suri, Chester Pach,
and Thomas A. Schwartz*

Roundtable Introduction

Andrew J. Kirkendall

Few of my students over the years have expressed strong opinions about National Security Advisor/Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. For someone of my generation, this is hard to fathom. Since history in the United States continues to be made (if not always written) by older people, Kissinger has remained a name to conjure with, even invoked by rival Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders for dramatically different purposes in 2016. At the time, I thought that it would be great to hold an old-fashioned teach-in and gather students together to read books by authors like Christopher Hitchens and Niall Ferguson and see if they could figure out what all the fuss was about.

A Distinguished Professor of History at Vanderbilt University, Thomas A. Schwartz has written two highly-regarded monographs on U. S. relations with Europe. His political biography of Kissinger, it is to be hoped, will attract a larger audience. Our reviewers clearly think that it deserves one, not least of all for its measured tone of sweet reasonableness. Perhaps one has to know much of the previous literature, as most undergraduate students do not, to appreciate such a truly “fair and balanced” approach, if one can use that phrase anymore without drowning in irony. But, as Daniel Sargent suggest, in Schwartz’s own modest way, he provides “an analytical agenda that is as bold and vital as it is persuasive.” Schwartz, Sargent continues, is a “creative and perceptive historian working at the very top of his game.”

In contrast with the international and trans-national trends of recent years, the reviewers clearly appreciate Schwartz’s attention to Dr. Kissinger’s own focus on the domestic aspects of foreign policy, an approach Schwartz first laid out in his *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* presidential address of 2008. Kissinger tried to employ his scholarly credentials to present himself as an apolitical expert, in keeping with what Suri notes were the intentions of institution-builders in the early stages of the Cold War. The wealth of information available in Richard Nixon’s extensive tape recordings of conversations with Kissinger provides little that supports such a self-image. As Suri notes, “More than any other author, Schwartz shows in detail how the politics, national and personal, drove the policy, and not vice-versa.”

Pach emphasizes the inadequacy of Kissinger’s reputation as a cold-blooded realist with a larger vision of U. S. national interests, and the dangers frequently posed by his tendency to personalize issues. Kissinger was better

at tactics than grand strategy. In the short term, as Suri contends, he still was able to expand U. S. influence (and his own) in an age of perceived decline. Sargent contends that Kissinger’s “aura of competence... made American foreign policy, for much of the 1970s, appear more coherent and purposeful than it was capable of being.”

All three reviewers also recognize the contribution Schwartz has made by employing the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. Kissinger’s gravelly voice and heavy German accent made him at first an unlikely spokesman for administration policy on the three major networks of the time. Suri, Pach, and Sargent all concur that Schwartz has done an excellent job of delineating how Kissinger became powerful through courting the press through background briefings and gradually and then explosively acquiring an unlikely “pop star status” for a foreign policy-maker. (To use the phrase “rock star negotiator,” as Pach does, may, in itself, date him.)

Pach particularly admires the chapter on Kissinger’s “enduring status” in the years since the end of his secretaryship. Sargent considers this part of the book alone to be “worth the price of admission.” (Personally, I find that the extended treatment of the Jimmy Carter administration in this chapter represents Schwartz at his most conventional.)

The sharpest criticism of Schwartz’s book is offered here by Suri, who suggests that Schwartz ignores the larger debates about U. S. domestic and foreign policies in the Kissinger years, both on the streets of American cities and even in the halls of Congress, not least of all about the perceived disconnect between American values and foreign policy. The breakdown of the Cold War consensus and the increasing incoherence of the Cold War itself in the 1970s may provide an explanations for the periodic “prosecutorial” takedowns of Kissinger over the years, as represented by what Sargent characterizes as “leaden and derivative tomes” by authors Hitchens and Greg Grandin.¹

Sargent maintains that Schwartz’s book represents the first truly historical treatment of his subject. Suri himself might want to contest that, and I would certainly propose other worthy contenders like Jussi Hanhimäki and Mario Del Pero who preceded him as well. Kissinger continues to attract admirers, like Ferguson and Barry Gewen. (The latter author is bold enough to tackle the fall of Chilean democracy in 1973 first.)² By this point, one can hardly expect any one book on this subject to be definitive. But the reviewers concur: Schwartz has made an extraordinarily valuable contribution. The book will be on graduate students’ comprehensive exam reading lists for many years to come. But one also hopes that the elusive educated public will encounter it “in the wild” in local bookstores.

In contentious times, as in Kissinger's day, Schwartz could be the calm voice at a teach-in at your local college or university.

Notes:

1. Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (London: Verso, 2001); Greg Grandin, *Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2015).
2. Jussi Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Mario Del Pero, *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Barry Gewen, *The Inevitability of American Foreign Policy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020).

Review of Thomas A. Schwartz, *Henry Kissinger and American Power: A Political Biography*

Daniel Sargent

Some books begin with grand proclamations of authorial intent. Thomas Schwartz, in *Henry Kissinger and American Power*, reveals in more incremental fashion both the originality of his agenda and his reasons for writing the book. As he does, he answers the question that his agenda cannot help but raise: who needs another biography of Henry Kissinger? Contributions to the catalog, as it already exists, range from the vital to the vituperative. Meanwhile, Niall Ferguson is well on the way to publishing the second volume in what is likely to become the authoritative life of Kissinger. So, to lead with a blunt question, what is left to say?

Quite a lot, as it turns out. The key to Schwartz's agenda is buried in his subtitle, in a word as commonplace as it is freighted: *political*. The term "political biography" is sometimes deployed to describe biographies of the bloodless sort: public lives denuded of their private desires, lingering resentments, and messy divorces. But that is not how Schwartz proceeds.

Here, "political biography" signals not a circumscription of authorial ambition but an analytical agenda that is as bold and vital as it is persuasive. Henry Kissinger, Schwartz tells us, must not be taken on his own terms as a self-conceived *Realpolitiker* who fabricated foreign policy on the basis of conceptual insight but blundered, like a naïf, in the murky arena of American politics. Rather, Kissinger functioned as a consummate politician whose mastery of politics was not just the foundation for his career in policy but the very essence of it.

Readers may assume at the outset that Schwartz's attentiveness to domestic politics will yield an interpretation of Kissinger as a devoted reader of opinion polls—a reactive figure whose actions derived, to a greater extent than previously understood, from calculations of personal or partisan self-interest. Far from it. Schwartz's conception of politics is far grander than the ebb-and-flow of opinion polls, punctuated by elections. For Schwartz, politics involves not only personalities and parties but also institutions, whose logics and limitations emerge, with impressive clarity, through the lens of Kissinger's experience. The author confirms the expansiveness of his own analytical vision at the very end of his book when he invokes Alexis de Tocqueville's prediction, made in the 1820s, that democratic institutions would enfeeble the United States as a great power and that institutional weaknesses would likely preclude America from pursuing the kind of purposeful foreign policy in which Richelieu,

Vergennes, and Talleyrand specialized.

Schwartz concurs, grasping in the turmoil and rancor of the post-Vietnam years the prescience of de Tocqueville's insight. This approach situates Schwartz's Kissinger in a novel perspective: not as the inheritor of a Cold War consensus that the Vietnam War merely bruised, but as an apex official in a government that in some sense lacked, and perhaps continues to lack, the institutional capacities necessary to uphold the imperial responsibilities into which the United States stumbled after the Second World War.

Henry Kissinger's great achievement, Schwartz suggests, was to project an aura of competence that made American foreign policy, for much of the 1970s, appear more coherent and more purposeful than it was really capable of being. Operating as the "voice and symbol of American foreign policy on the evening news," Kissinger's authority at the height of his powers in the mid-1970s conjured a "perception of both reliability and creativity" that resulted, at least for a time, in extraordinarily high levels of public approval for Henry Kissinger as secretary of state and, during the Watergate years, a de facto president of the United States for foreign policy.

This analysis of Kissinger rests upon the deep insight that Schwartz brings as a creative and perceptive historian working at the very top of his game. But Schwartz's analysis also builds upon the novel use that he makes of media coverage, including television news, as a historical source. If other historians, especially Luke Nichter, have made pioneering use of Nixon's secret tapes to enrich their histories, Schwartz's major methodological innovation is to integrate media coverage into the history of American politics and foreign policy in a comprehensive fashion. Schwartz, to his great credit, leverages from these sources not just illustrative quotes and anecdotes but a new understanding of the sources of Kissinger's power and influence.

illustrative quotes and anecdotes but a new understanding of the sources of Kissinger's power and influence. Schwartz does not trumpet his own methodological innovation so forcefully as he might have done, but his masterful integration of two quite different kinds of archive—the archive of government and the archive of media—situates the making of foreign policy in a new perspective. Schwartz's own mentor Ernest May, who was fascinated by the role of news media and public opinion in the making of foreign policy, would surely have approved. Historians working on varied topics, including topics far removed from Henry Kissinger, will find in Schwartz's approach a model for emulation. Those working on Cold War, or TV-era, topics may want to pay especially close attention to the use that he has made of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, an exceptional repository of evidence for historians interested in the interplay between politics and the news media.

Schwartz's innovative method yields a story in two parts. The first charts Kissinger's ascent to the improbable pinnacles of power and influence that he achieved in the 1970s. While Schwartz moves quickly over Kissinger's intellectual formation, he notes that Kissinger's doctoral dissertation, which became *A World Restored*, dwelt at length on the struggles that its two central protagonists, Metternich and Castlereagh, waged "to reconcile the demands of their own domestic situations with the necessity for international leadership and cooperation." Here, Schwartz intimates, we find premonitions of the structural challenges that Kissinger would encounter after President-elect Richard Nixon tapped the Harvard academic and policy intellectual to serve as national security adviser.

The dynamics of the Nixon-Kissinger relationship



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appear, in Schwartz's careful rendering, in a new perspective. Kissinger emerges as a kind of Frankenstein's monster: a presidential invention whose position in government depended not upon intellectual alignment or personal affinity, nor even upon shared policy commitments, but upon sheer political necessity. "Nixinger," as some have called the hybrid, was an invention of necessity. Kissinger, Schwartz argues, disagreed with the president on some of the administration's crucial foreign policy dilemmas, including the question of whether progress in arms control negotiations should be "linked" to other priorities in U.S.-Soviet relations, especially the enlistment of Soviet assistance to end the war in Vietnam.

Kissinger lost many of the key debates, Schwartz notes, but he nonetheless made himself vital to the administration and to President Nixon as the public face and, in the public's mind, the presumptive architect of the administration's foreign policy. For Nixon, the consequences were exasperating. Kissinger was "Nixon's creation," Schwartz writes, "an extension of his authority and political power as president," but Kissinger became the recipient of praise and credit for the administration's achievements. Ultimately, it was Kissinger and not Nixon who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973, a recognition that left the president fuming.

Nixon's disgrace in the Watergate scandal thrust Kissinger into a new role for which American political history reveals few precedents, opening Schwartz's second act. Kissinger became in 1973 both secretary of state and, in effect, "chief executive" for U.S. foreign policy. Other historians have explained this extraordinary role as a consequence of the power vacuum that Watergate created. Schwartz goes further and emphasizes Kissinger's self-conscious cultivation of a "positive media narrative" that made the secretary of state himself the indispensable man in the execution of foreign policy, Watergate's self-designated survivor.

To an extraordinary degree, Schwartz shows, Kissinger harnessed his personal prestige that he had burnished during Nixon's first time to advance a geopolitical vision. His strategy aimed to preserve U.S. primacy in the "jigsaw puzzle of world politics" through the cultivation of close relationships between allies and adversaries alike, an approach that recalled Otto von Bismarck, the chancellor who had sought to dominate Europe through diplomatic engagement. In the Middle East, which became a preoccupation after the October War of 1973, Kissinger sought to position the United States as the region's power broker, as the closest intermediary to each of its warring protagonists. The ambition also resembled Bismarck's, but whereas Bismarck's power had depended, in the end, upon the favor of Wilhelm II, Kissinger's power derived, Schwartz argues, from the approbation of a news media that he played like a maestro.

So controversial has Kissinger become in more recent times that it may be difficult today to recall the breadth of enthusiasm and approbation that he enjoyed in his heyday. Positioning himself, quite self-consciously, as a responsible alternative to neo-isolationists on the Left and neo-conservatives on the Right, Kissinger became a paragon of reasonableness and responsibility—one of the few great figures in American political history to command a true breadth of public support. But this balancing act, Schwartz argues, began to break down under President Ford, as critics on both the Left and Right gathered strength. Kissinger strove to mobilize a broad political center in support of his foreign policy division—delivering a series of "Heartland Speeches" in 1975 to explain his vision to the American people—but his efforts to galvanize a base of support for

his centrist vision of an international order fell flat.

By 1976, Kissinger was flailing—and not only in the arena of electoral politics, where progressives and neoconservatives rallied in opposition to what critics from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan called Kissinger's amoral approach to foreign policy. Suspicious that Kissinger was pursuing a second SALT agreement with the Soviet Union for essentially political reasons, James Schlesinger's Defense Department worked to undercut the secretary of state's talks with Brezhnev and Gromyko, exhibiting in the process an impressive command over the inter-agency bureaucratic process, the mastery of which had been the key to Kissinger and Nixon's consolidation of presidential control over foreign policy in the first place.

Henry Kissinger's influence over American foreign policy did not end with Gerald Ford's defeat, though. In a remarkable chapter—itsself worth the price of admission—Schwartz shows how Kissinger has remained a central figure down to the present day. "American foreign policy after Kissinger," Schwartz writes, "would constitute a sustained dialogue with the policies and ideas he had propounded." As his legacies have been debated, Kissinger has, of course, become a more controversial figure. The process of Kissinger's vilification began, as Schwartz notes, with the publication of William Shawcross's *Sideshow* in 1979 and culminated, decades later, in leaden and derivative tomes from Christopher Hitchens and Greg Grandin.

Thomas Schwartz, among his many achievements, helps us to understand the vituperative style that Kissinger revisionism has embraced. He notes, echoing an observation that Niall Ferguson once made, that we have for the most part been spared Hitchens-style takedowns of other Cold

War luminaries: literary trials of Dean Acheson, John Foster Dulles, and Dean Rusk, not to mention Chou Enlai and Andrei Gromyko. That Kissinger's severest critics have succumbed, repeatedly, to their own prosecutorial temptations may reflect, Schwartz wisely suggests, the enduring success of Kissinger's own efforts, initially effected in partnership with Nixon, to make himself into a personification of foreign policy: an effort that gave U.S. foreign policy a patina of coherence, for a time, but also made Kissinger a foil for its failures and hypocrisies. In some sense, Schwartz shows, Kissinger's harshest critics in fact pay him an ironic tribute.

What results from Schwartz's perfectly calibrated analysis is not a milquetoast compromise between establishment orthodoxy and radical revision but something far more valuable: a truly *historical* interpretation that situates our understanding of Kissinger *in history*. With this accomplishment, Thomas Schwartz has given us an expanded appreciation, I think, for Kissinger's achievement Schwartz shows, with insight and verve, how Kissinger commanded organs of public opinion in order to build for himself a celebrity that enabled him, for a time, to invest American foreign policy with both direction and purpose. That Kissinger remains, in our time, an object of such intense fascination and controversy attests not only to the magnitude of his achievement but also, perhaps, to the essential incapacity of our political institutions to sustain, over the long-term, the kind of international strategy that Kissinger worked to enact. Our fascination thus reveals much about ourselves—and our government.

Thomas Schwartz's achievement is to achieve novel vantage in a crowded field, permitting us to see Kissinger—perhaps for the first time—as neither villain nor victor but as something altogether more interesting, as a historical figure like Machiavelli and Bismarck before him, who strived, for a time, to effect creative strategy amid formidable international challenges and, even

more important, circumstances of severe political and institutional limitation. This is a seminal contribution, and it should reshape not only our understanding of Henry Kissinger as a historical figure but also our understanding of U.S. foreign policy's achievements and, more often, limitations in the post-Vietnam era.

Power and Democracy

Jeremi Suri

The American Foreign Service trains its recruits to avoid politics. For at least a century, the United States has expected its professional diplomats to reject partisanship and focus on the objective interests of their country. Their job is to cultivate partnerships abroad, reduce the influence of adversaries, and report useful insights to policymakers. In our survey of ten major diplomatic services around the globe, Robert Hutchings and I found that these goals were widely shared. Every country wants foreign professionals who are highly skilled and rigorously non-partisan.¹

This is an impossible ambition. Foreign policy, like military affairs, involves frequent and inevitable political judgments. Daily behavior is framed by subjective assessments of friend and foe, threat and interest. If war is the extension of politics by other means, diplomacy is surely the internationalization of domestic politics.² For better or worse, diplomats are political operatives, and that is perhaps why American presidents have relied more and more on explicit political allies, rather than professional diplomats, for their key ambassador appointments abroad. They need representatives they can trust.

When Congress passed the National Security Act in 1947, creating the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Council, it expected that these new foreign policy bodies would be run by professionals, not politicians. President Dwight Eisenhower followed the military staffing model when he appointed Robert Cutler as national security advisor in 1953. Cutler's job was not to take policy positions influenced by politics. He was to offer Eisenhower an objective assessment of international conditions and make certain that diverse policy options reached the president's attention. Cutler the professional was to offer facts and options; Eisenhower the politician was to make choices based, in part, on opinions in Congress, the wider public, and, yes, Republican circles. Most historians agree that this system worked as intended.³

Thomas Schwartz's deeply researched book, *Henry Kissinger and American Power*, is a close study of the national security system under Eisenhower's two Republican successors, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Schwartz, of course, focuses on the figure who dominated that system, Henry Kissinger. He would have been unthinkable in Eisenhower's time, but it is impossible to consider policy one decade later without him. A refugee, veteran, academic, and public intellectual before he entered the Nixon White House, Kissinger quickly placed himself at the center of most major U.S. foreign policy decisions, often replacing the president, as Schwartz shows in detail, during the months when Nixon faced the most intensive Watergate investigations. At times, Kissinger was the "president for foreign policy" and Schwartz shows that he contemplated taking over the entire job, if the constitutional limit on foreign-born citizens could be changed.⁴

How did this disheveled and gravelly voiced immigrant gain so much power? Schwartz's book offers

a compelling explanation. Kissinger combined his exaggerated credibility as an expert with a remarkable collection of political skills, including personal charm, manipulateness, persistence, deviousness, and sycophancy. He cleverly and tirelessly outmaneuvered everyone else and made himself indispensable to a flawed commander-in-chief, Richard Nixon, who distrusted Kissinger but needed him ever more desperately as his presidency crumbled. When Gerald Ford took over, he needed Kissinger to rebuild the presidency.

Schwartz's portrait of Kissinger is both flattering and critical. He emphasizes the countless issues and personalities that Kissinger juggled, as well as the creative, improvisational risks he took in various regions of the world, often to major effect. At the same time, Kissinger was not a team player, and he personalized all policymaking to such an extent that his errors were hard to correct and his achievements difficult to sustain. Schwartz notes the irony that although Kissinger's writings consistently emphasize "impersonal" international forces and interests, his policymaking was always driven by an intensive, often narcissistic, "personal lens." That was how he climbed to power, and it defined his time in office.⁵

In Schwartz's account, Kissinger appears as more of a political tactician than a strategic visionary. This raises a question: what did he do with his power? The simple answer, according to Schwartz, is that he tried to increase the influence of the United States, undermine perceived adversaries, and boost himself. He was ruthless in isolating the Soviet Union from its former allies in China, Egypt, and other regions, often at the expense of loyal friends to the

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United States (Japan) and long-standing commitments to democratic principles and human rights. In regions where the United States was embroiled in difficult conflicts, especially Vietnam, he was unsentimental about cutting ties to old partners and negotiating agreements that allowed the United States to evade further on-the-ground responsibility. In Latin America, particularly Chile and Argentina, Schwartz shows that Kissinger callously condoned military repression that served America's short-term interests, at grave costs to these

societies and their citizens.

Although Schwartz credits Kissinger with a rare ability to integrate the details of each region into a larger, coherent policy, he does not see a consistent plan or scheme. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Kissinger was not pursuing some objective balance of power or a carefully constructed model for international stability. He was conducting politics—managing various crises to increase his power. Every time he found leverage for the United States in a foreign dispute, he increased his own standing as the master manipulator, the indispensable diplomat. More than any other author, Schwartz shows in detail how the politics, national and personal, drove the policy, and not vice-versa.

Schwartz's most unique contribution is the integration of media into his analysis. He makes extensive use of the rich Vanderbilt Television News Archive to chronicle how Kissinger sold his actions to the American public—and the wider world—through the evening news, which was the most influential news source of his time. Kissinger's ceaseless travels, his countless meetings with foreign leaders, and his public articulateness made him a natural go-to source for television reporters seeking interesting color. He was the athlete on a team of stars who gets the most interviews and shapes the narrative, because he knows how to answer the questions at the end of the game.

Not content with star-athlete status, Kissinger made

himself sound like the quarterback, the running back, the wide receiver, the linebacker, and the place kicker, all in one. When things went wrong, he blamed his teammates, and sometimes the president. By controlling the narrative he gained more political leverage over events as his stature rose, and he gained more fame and recognition, which he obviously craved. Politics were both a source and an end for his diplomacy. Schwartz's last chapter chronicles this story for the decades after Kissinger left office, when his influence remained almost unmatched.

There is, of course, an enormous historiography on Henry Kissinger, which continues to grow. Schwartz is in the camp of many historians, myself included, who reject both the condemnations and glorifications of Kissinger. His account aims at balance by undermining claims about Kissinger's strategic brilliance and showing the many inconsistencies and reactive elements of his policymaking. Schwartz is, however, laudatory of Kissinger's energetic and creative efforts to improve the American position in the world, especially as it related to regimes that sought to do harm to the United States and its interests. In this sense, Kissinger was an effective Cold Warrior, with all the benefits and harms one might associate with that term.⁶

The limitation of Schwartz's important book comes in his hesitance to interrogate the political ideas and assumptions that were so central to Kissinger's policymaking. If objective interests and non-partisan goals were not at the root of his actions, how should we characterize the behavior of America's most influential Cold War diplomat? Is Schwartz's emphasis on personal ambition and ego, although very persuasive, sufficient?

Near the end of his book, Schwartz comments that Kissinger was "quite successful in overcoming the procedural weaknesses and dilemmas that American democracy created for the conduct of foreign policy." He emphasizes the "centralized decision-making" and "pragmatic and flexible foreign policy" pursued by the Nixon administration.⁷ *Henry Kissinger and American Power* chronicles what this meant in practice: secret White House decision-making with little accountability, the deployment of American resources far and wide, also with little accountability, and frequent public prevarication. At times, especially when raising the United States nuclear alert to DEFCON 3, Kissinger was acting less like a president for foreign policy and more like a dictator.

At its core, the Nixon administration's national security system was built around a presumption that democracy was at best a hindrance, at worst an illness of American governance. Both Nixon and Kissinger displayed pervasive disdain for basic procedures of oversight and transparency. The standards for careful bureaucratic examination of information and policy were too slow for them. The congressional reporting necessary for checks and balances jeopardized their maneuverability. And the press coverage of policy was valuable only when it reinforced their preferences; they targeted press critics for retaliation.

These observations explain why the domestic politics at the core of Schwartz's account do not sound like the United States of the early 1970s, filled with vibrant debates about war, civil rights, imperialism, and social justice. The discussions dominating American society then are absent from Schwartz's book, and Congress plays a marginal role in his narrative. Curiously, this is the way Kissinger would like us to see his world and define domestic politics.

The American foreign policy establishment emerged in the early twentieth century as an elite part of society,

but it was filled with men, and later women, who believed they were defending not just American power, but also the particular values associated with democracy. The expertise taught in the Foreign Service was meant to embody those values. The U.S. Foreign Service was neither morally consistent nor inclusive, but it gave American foreign policy a content beyond raw power. Schwartz's book leads readers to think that Kissinger severed the connection between foreign policy and values, and perhaps that was a consequence of not just his ambition, but also his profound discomfort with and pessimism about democracy. That is an argument I made in an earlier book, and I think Schwartz's insightful account provides many reasons for returning to that analysis.⁸

Henry Kissinger and American Power is deeply revealing about the politics of American diplomacy in the 1970s. It is also a cogent assessment of how those politics ran against presumptions of expertise and democracy, at the very time that both were emphasized strongly among activists at home. Thomas Schwartz has given us a valuable history, therefore, of more than foreign policy. This is a history of our nation's struggle to merge power and democracy—a struggle that has acquired a new urgency in recent years.

Notes:

1. Robert Hutchings and Jeremi Suri, eds., *Modern Diplomacy in Practice* (New York, 2020).
2. This sentence, of course, draws from the seminal text on politics and war (as well as diplomacy), Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard, trans. Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976).
3. See, among many others, William I. Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s* (New York, 2018); Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (Oxford, UK, 1998).
4. Thomas A. Schwartz, *Henry Kissinger and American Power: A Political Biography* (New York, 2020), 211, 252.
5. Schwartz, 411–12.
6. I would group Schwartz's balanced interpretation of Kissinger with other scholarship that emphasizes his incredible efficacy, his moments of creative insight, and his recurring flaws. See, among many others, John Lewis Gaddis, "Rescuing Choice from Circumstance: The Statecraft of Henry Kissinger," in *The Diplomats, 1939–1979*, ed. Gordon A. Craig and Francis L. Loewenheim (Princeton, 1994), 564–92; Jussi Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford, UK, 2004); Mario Del Pero, *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY, 2006); Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).
7. Schwartz, *Henry Kissinger and American Power*, 407.
8. See Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, especially 16–51. Niall Ferguson rejects this argument in his book, defining Kissinger in strangely "idealist" terms. See Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger: The Idealist, 1923–1968* (New York, 2015).

Starring Henry Kissinger

Chester Pach

In February 1973, something quite unusual happened to Henry Kissinger. He had traveled to Hanoi to complain about North Vietnamese violations of the Paris Peace Accords, and after a walk through the city with his staff prior to the first official meeting, a guard prevented him from re-entering his elegant guesthouse. Kissinger lacked the necessary identification card, and the guard had no idea who he was. He later joked that the guard's ignorance reflected the deficiencies of the gossip columns in Hanoi's newspapers.¹¹

Kissinger was a global celebrity whose improbable reputation as a “swinger” fascinated tabloid columnists around the world, if not in Hanoi. He achieved his pop icon status in an unlikely manner—by becoming the world’s most famous diplomat. His exploits as a rock star negotiator put his name in the headlines and his face on magazine covers. His authoritative voice and distinctive accent became familiar to television viewers and radio listeners after his sensational, if premature, declaration in October 1972 that peace was at hand in the Vietnam War. Millions of Americans considered Kissinger the “president for foreign policy,” much to the consternation of President Richard Nixon. The North Vietnamese functionary who blocked his entrance to the guesthouse may have been one of a very few government officials in any nation who had never heard of Henry Kissinger.

In this engaging and deeply researched political biography, Thomas Schwartz extracts new insight from these familiar facts about Kissinger: he assiduously courted journalists and became a media superstar. As Hamilton Jordan, the White House chief of staff during Jimmy Carter’s presidency, remarked about Kissinger, “He fed the press like they were a flock of birds. They ate well and they ate regularly, and they sang . . . Henry’s song” (354). What Schwartz adds to this well-known information is that “Kissinger cultivated, nourished, and charmed journalists, reporters, and media executives” because achieving “worldwide celebrity contributed to the power and influence he had as an American representative” to negotiate peace or advance U.S. interests (412).

Schwartz’s central argument is that “to fully understand Henry Kissinger, it is important to see him as a political actor, a politician, and a man who understood that American foreign policy is fundamentally shaped and determined by the struggles and battles of American domestic politics” (9). Kissinger luxuriated in the fawning media portraits of him as a miracle worker in foreign policy who was as welcome in Cairo as he was in Tel Aviv because he “understood how his celebrity status brought with it a form of political power” (413). He sought political power not only to satisfy his outsized ego, but also “to enact his preferred policies and to defend his perception of America’s national interest” (10).

Schwartz starts each chapter with a story from television news as a way of understanding how Kissinger’s career unfolded in American living rooms. By the time Kissinger became Nixon’s national security advisor in 1969, a majority of Americans got most of their news from television, a medium they considered more believable than newspapers or magazines. Both Nixon and Kissinger appreciated the power of TV to shape public thinking about foreign policy, but they reacted to its influence in fundamentally different ways. Nixon believed that he had “entered the Presidency with less support from the major publications and TV networks than any President in history” and warned aides not to cooperate with reporters. “Don’t help the bastards ever,” he insisted, “because they’re trying to stick the knife right in our groin.”²²

Kissinger saw reporters not as enemies but as potential allies who could raise his stature and burnish his reputation through favorable stories. While Nixon and Vice President Spiro T. Agnew stoked public resentment against supposedly biased television network executives who deliberately gave the news an anti-Nixon slant, Kissinger cultivated TV and newspaper correspondents with detailed background briefings, strategic leaks, and

exclusive interviews. The result was reporting that extolled Kissinger, after the signing of the first SALT agreement, as a “legend” (185). A resentful Nixon took solace in the spiteful comment of aide John Ehrlichman, who sneered that the reporters were “Henry’s world” because he had “no family, no personal life” and needed “some psychotherapy” (157).

A distinguished professor of history at Vanderbilt University, Schwartz draws extensively on an important but underutilized resource at his home campus, the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive. That repository’s recordings of network evening news programs show how Kissinger became a familiar presence in U.S. homes, convincing the American people that he could “do something”—maybe even achieve the seemingly impossible, like securing Egyptian, Syrian, and Israeli acceptance of disengagement agreements after the Yom Kippur War—while Vietnam came to a jarring end and Watergate destroyed Nixon’s presidency (409).

Schwartz meticulously traces the rising trajectory of Kissinger’s celebrity as Nixon wallowed in Watergate and Ford struggled to disprove critics who doubted that he could walk and chew gum at the same time. His careful, innovative research proves the wisdom of David Greenberg’s sage advice that historians should study television if they want to understand how “Americans learn about and interpret public events” (8).

Kissinger keenly understood that in Washington “the appearance of power is . . . almost as important as the reality of it; in fact the appearance is frequently its essential reality” (87). Aides estimated that he devoted somewhere between one-third and one-half of his time as national security advisor to press matters. Although the Nixon White House at first didn’t allow him to speak on television for fear that his German accent might not “play in Peoria” (88), Kissinger wowed reporters with background briefings that CBS reporter Dan Rather described as “brilliant, fair,

and persuasive” (185). He also spent endless hours on the telephone with sympathetic friends in the media, such as Max Frankel and James Reston of the *New York Times*. Media contacts helped Kissinger realize that his unusual image—Ivy League expert by day and “secret swinger” by night—made him more interesting to many Americans than Nixon.

Kissinger relied on profuse flattery to forestall or assuage Nixon’s discontent with his rising media profile. Most of the examples that

Schwartz uses are familiar to anybody who has sampled the extensive secondary literature on Kissinger. But a reader can still cringe at the cloying and transparent effort to mollify Nixon’s insecurities with favorable comparisons to John F. Kennedy that a biased news media supposedly refused to acknowledge. Kissinger’s claim that one couldn’t survive in the Nixon White House without paying lip service to “the conspiracy of the press, the hostility of the Establishment” provides dubious justification for his obsequiousness (64). To his credit, though, Kissinger maintained a dialogue with antiwar students and former Harvard colleagues, even at the price of painful accusations that he was “tearing the country apart” (98).

Kissinger’s dramatic trip to China in July 1971 created his new role as superstar diplomat, the secret agent who could transform world politics with “dazzling intellect... [and] beguiling aplomb” (143). Columnist Russell Baker dubbed Kissinger “Mr. Professident,” someone who “transcended academia” to become “something new in American life” (159). Kissinger’s stature increased during Nixon’s trip to China in February 1972, a summit meeting

with such elaborate and extensive TV coverage that 98 percent of the American public was aware of it, a record at that time in the Gallup Poll. Once the Nixon administration lifted its earlier restriction on recording his voice, Kissinger became, according to Schwartz, “a regular fixture on the nightly news” and a frequent presence in American living rooms (185). By the beginning of 1973, Kissinger and Nixon—in that order, it seemed, to millions of TV viewers—had pulled off a diplomatic trifecta: the opening to China, the conclusion of the first SALT agreement, and the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, which ended U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Kissinger and Nixon became *Time* magazine’s Men of the Year for changing “the shape of the world, [and] accomplishing the most profound rearrangement of the earth’s political powers since the beginning of the cold war” (204).

Kissinger reached the apex of his global celebrity during the end of Nixon’s presidency by pulling off dazzling feats of diplomacy while taking control of foreign policy from a compromised president consumed by the Watergate scandal. “Henry Kissinger did it,” NBC news anchor John Chancellor exclaimed after weeks of shuttle diplomacy culminated in a disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria (211). Kissinger was determined to use the negotiations after the Yom Kippur War to put the United States in “the catbird seat” in the Middle East while diminishing Soviet influence in the region (240).

However, when Nixon blurted out to reporters that he had outmaneuvered Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, Kissinger exploded. “The crazy bastard really made a mess with the Russians,” he shrieked (242). Schwartz shows that the Yom Kippur War “marked a turning point in the Nixon-Kissinger relationship, with Kissinger now acting essentially as the chief executive while Nixon struggled to survive” Watergate (242). Kissinger, who added the position of secretary of state to his national security advisor portfolio in September 1973, later claimed that he was the “glue that held it together” while Nixon brooded over Watergate (228).

Kissinger continued to be the adult in the room during the Ford presidency, not to protect against depression or rage, as he had with Nixon, but to deal with Ford’s inexperience. The new president was at first content to leave foreign policy to Kissinger, even telling his secretary of state prior to the Vladivostok meeting with Brezhnev in November 1974, “If you see things heading the wrong way, don’t hesitate to set it straight” (282). Such unlimited authority didn’t last, as Kissinger went from the most admired American in the Gallup Poll in 1974 to “everybody’s favorite target” a year later (269).

Schwartz shrewdly explains that “Kissinger’s personalization of ‘his’ foreign policy and his insistence on maintaining tight control over it proved counterproductive” (308). Rising conservative discontent with Kissinger’s foreign policy eventually persuaded Ford to purge the word “détente” from his vocabulary, even as he continued to adhere to that policy. The collapse of South Vietnam in April 1975 also dimmed the luster of Kissinger’s reputation. Almost three years earlier, Kissinger predicted that if a decent interval passed between the signing of a peace agreement and the demise of South Vietnam, the public wouldn’t “give a damn” (187). That was a stunning error for someone so keenly aware of the connections between domestic politics and foreign policy.

Ford relieved Kissinger of his position as national security advisor in October 1975, but the secretary of state stayed on and helped prepare the president for debates with Democratic nominee Jimmy Carter. Ford remembered many of his tutor’s words verbatim. But he proved himself

to be the worst of Kissinger’s students with the notorious assertion that there was no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. “I seem destined to work for losers,” Kissinger indiscreetly told friends (324).

One of the best parts of the book is the final chapter about Kissinger’s enduring status as Cold War icon while serving during the past forty-five years as an international consultant, media commentator, and advisor to prominent Republicans as respected as John McCain and reviled as Donald Trump. “I’ve never known a man so admired and distrusted at the same time,” declared foreign policy expert Leslie Gelb (388). It’s not hard to understand why. For example, Kissinger praised Ronald Reagan publicly

One of the best parts of the book is the final chapter about Kissinger’s enduring status as Cold War icon while serving during the past forty-five years as an international consultant, media commentator, and advisor to prominent Republicans as respected as John McCain and reviled as Donald Trump.

during the campaign of 1980, but then privately told his friend Arthur Schlesinger Jr. that Reagan “tries to understand, in so far as he is capable . . . but I don’t have the impression that he ever ingests anything you tell him” (367). No wonder that Kissinger didn’t return to government in 1981, since, as one presidential aide explained, they wanted Reagan, not Kissinger, on the cover of *Time* magazine.

Schwartz shows that Kissinger used “the language of realism” to explain “the real limits of American foreign policy” (118). His reputation as an expert—someone positioned above politics—made him a compelling advocate. Kissinger talked about an architecture of foreign policy that structured great power diplomacy.

Schwartz is at his best in demolishing this caricature of Kissinger as a cold-blooded, realist expert who offered strategic prescriptions based on apolitical national interests. As the British government understood, Kissinger had no “coherent master plan aimed at promoting” U.S. international interests (412). He was instead an emotional and “chronically insecure” political tactician who improvised, sometimes brilliantly, in response to events as they unfolded (311). Kissinger often overreacted and sometimes misunderstood North Vietnamese actions that suggested there would be progress in negotiations, even believing in February 1970 that an agreement to end the war was only months away. When the Saigon government rejected the peace accords Kissinger had negotiated in Paris in October 1972 and the North Vietnamese refused to make further concessions, Kissinger reacted not with a sober assessment of U.S. interests, but instead with a denunciation of the North Vietnamese as “shits, tawdry, miserable filthy people” (200) and a recommendation to “start bombing the bejeezus out of them” (201). Schwartz’s analysis should deal a final, fatal blow to the enduring stereotype of the foreign policy realist—think George F. Kennan as well as Kissinger—who assessed the realities of power in detached, unemotional terms.

Schwartz analyzes Kissinger in calm, reasoned prose. Missing are the encomiums of Super K or the indictments of Kissinger as a war criminal. Nevertheless, Schwartz reaches significant, critical judgments. He reminds readers that Kissinger did not have as much control over many policies or actions as his “celebrity status and . . . personalization of foreign policy” suggest. He also cautions against reviling Kissinger for “uniquely evil” policies that were “not substantially different from those carried out during the Eisenhower, Kennedy, or Johnson years, when Cold War considerations fostered assassination plots and other covert actions” (414). Most important is his conclusion that “domestic political advantage and personal ambition” rather than grand strategy drove Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy (414).

Schwartz wrote this book to “reintroduce” a new generation of readers to someone who was “one of the most recognizable figures on the planet” fifty years ago (5). He

has succeeded admirably, while still providing those with vivid, first-hand memories of Kissinger with new ways of thinking about his power and celebrity. He helps readers of both generations understand that we should remember Kissinger both for his foreign policy accomplishments and failures and for his remarkable skill in an improbable starring role.

Notes:

1. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston, 1982), 27.
2. Chester Pach, "Our Worst Enemy Seems to Be the Press: TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969–1973," *Diplomatic History* 34 (June 2010): 555–65.

Author's Response

Thomas A. Schwartz

After reading book reviews like these, from accomplished and respected scholars like Jeremi Suri, Daniel Sargent, and Chester Pach, the best course for me to take is to shut up. These reviews are extraordinarily generous and, I think, fair-minded; and each reviewer recognizes what I sought to accomplish in this political biography of Henry Kissinger, even when they have their own doubts or questions. Indeed, I also confess they made me sound so much smarter and more purposeful in the writing of this book than I really was!

As often happens at such moments, I am reminded of a Lyndon Johnson story. (Whatever you think of LBJ, he was colorful and often very funny.) After receiving a fulsome, over-the-top introduction at a campaign event, Johnson got up to speak. "This is a moment that I deeply wish my parents could have lived to share," he said. "My father would have enjoyed what you have so generously said of me—and my mother would have believed it." Had she read these reviews, my mother would have been equally credulous!

With the reviewers' generosity in mind, I won't shut up, but I will be brief. I would like to address two points that arose in the discussions of my book. First, all the reviewers note that I had something of a "home-field advantage" in having easy access to the Vanderbilt Television News Archive (VTNA). I readily admit that the archive greatly assisted my research, and I am grateful that the reviewers largely accepted my argument that television news is an important source for understanding the history of American foreign policy in this period.¹ Henry Kissinger's reputation as a diplomatic genius flowed, at least in part, from his manipulation of the media; and in the early 1970s, television news, then at its zenith, was instrumental in making Kissinger a household name.

Ironically enough, the VTNA owes its existence to the belief of a Nashville insurance man, Paul Simpson, that the network news had a strong liberal bias. I have written elsewhere about the complicated early years of the archive, with its use by adherents of Vice President Spiro Agnew to support his campaign against the "nattering nabobs of negativism" in the media.² Despite the efforts by Nixon and Agnew to discredit it, however, television news enjoyed high levels of trust during the 1970s and well into the 1980s.

A prominent government official who worked in both the Reagan administration and the second Bush presidency in the 2000s told me that one major difference between those two administrations was how closely they monitored the network news. During the Reagan years, it was still critical to an understanding of how Americans were seeing the world. But by the early twenty-first century, as alternative media sources proliferated, its importance had greatly diminished.

As I originally conceived of the Kissinger book, there would be an electronic edition that could connect directly to the broadcasts I cited, so that a reader could click on a link and see how television news portrayed the story. Unfortunately, there remain legal and copyright barriers to such a use of the archive. Also, for the most part using the VTNA still requires a trip to Nashville, an expense the internet should have made unnecessary. It is my fervent hope that future historians of American foreign relations who are studying the period between 1968 and the 1990s will be able to take full advantage of the archive from their home offices.

The other point I wish to address arises from Jeremi Suri's acute observation that "both Nixon and Kissinger displayed pervasive disdain for basic procedures of oversight and transparency" in their foreign policy. He relates this to Kissinger's "profound discomfort with and pessimism about democracy." I don't disagree with this, but I do think it is important to recognize some of the tradeoffs that are made when decision-makers are too enamored of seeking democratic approval and political advantage from their policy choices. The Biden administration seems to have genuinely believed that setting the date for a withdrawal from Afghanistan on the anniversary of the September 11 attacks would enable it to take a political victory lap, since public opinion polls showed Americans overwhelmingly in favor of a withdrawal. The result was a humiliating debacle that made the "decent interval" that Kissinger sought for American withdrawal from Vietnam look positively noble by comparison.

Alexis de Tocqueville had a point when he wrote of the problems that democracies have in conducting foreign policy with the necessary resolve, secrecy, and speed. In such political systems, public opinion is inclined toward short-term thinking and reluctant to embrace complicated solutions over a longer time horizon. In my view, it may be too easy to criticize Nixon and Kissinger for their excessive centralization, secrecy, and avoidance of the checks and balances in the system. Watching the clumsiness and incompetence of many of their successors over the last fifty years, and quite recently with Trump and Biden, reminds me that what Suri describes as "our nation's struggles to merge power and democracy" remains an ongoing dilemma.

Notes:

1. My article on the early history of the archive can be accessed at The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/a-conservative-activists-quest-to-preserve-all-network-news-broadcasts-92009>.
2. <https://politicaldictionary.com/words/nattering-nabobs-of-negativism/>. In the same speech, Agnew went on to accuse members of the media of having "formed their own 4-H club—the hopeless, hysterical hypochondriacs of history." Sometimes I think that line could be used to describe some history departments I have known.