

The Cold War

Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy

by Jeremi Suri

Henry Kissinger is one of the most controversial figures to emerge from the Cold War. He participated as a soldier, scholar, and statesman in many of the most significant policy debates of the period. He acted as an intellectual, diplomat, and White House official, implementing some of the most enduring shifts in international affairs. Most of all, Henry Kissinger appeared throughout the global media as a genius, villain, and consummate manipulator who wielded power at the most important points in recent history. Kissinger's diverse experiences, and the varied public perceptions of them, captured many of the contradictions at the center of the Cold War. He remains influential and infamous in the early twenty-first century because those Cold War contradictions continue to characterize American discussions of foreign policy, from Iraq and Afghanistan to Israel and China.



President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger, 1974. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

Kissinger's life in the United States began as a refugee, arriving in New York City, along with his parents and younger brother, at age 15. The family fled Nazi Germany just weeks before the *Kristallnacht* pogrom against Jews. The Kissingers were Orthodox Jews from Bavaria, descendants of rabbis and cattle merchants in the region. They considered themselves patriotic Germans who were proud of their country's achievements, but they suffered the extremes of fascist anti-Semitism. Soon after they fled Germany, Nazi crowds attacked Henry Kissinger's maternal grandparents. They both died at the hands of the Nazis, as did many other members of the Kissinger family who could not escape Europe.

Henry Kissinger could never erase his memories of the Holocaust. As was the case for so many other refugees, the United States was a "savior" nation for those suffering the extreme hatreds of the era. New York City in the late 1930s was filled with prejudices and tensions between ethnic groups, but German Jewish refugees, like the Kissingers, could at least establish new roots and make new lives for themselves. As a teenager, Kissinger attended George Washington High School and then night school at City College—an institution that educated many poor immigrants. To help support his family, Kissinger worked in a brush factory during the day. Life in the United States on the eve of the Second World War was difficult, but it was livable for a family that faced certain death in its original home.

HIDE FULL ESSAY ▲

In the weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Henry Kissinger joined the US Army, which is where his foreign policy career began. Kissinger worked in counterintelligence, charged with helping American soldiers understand German society, identifying Nazi figures in Europe, and eventually managing postwar German society. Kissinger's German language skills, his quick mind, and his Jewishness made him perfect for this job. He understood German society, he could master incredible amounts of work, and there was little chance (because of his Jewish heritage) that he would sympathize with the Nazi leaders the United States sought to capture. As Kissinger remembers, his time

in the army was the period when he first felt “American,” with a special role to play in helping his newfound society. Kissinger was helping defend humanity and civilization, he believed, against its gravest threats.

This was the first contradiction of Kissinger’s career, and of the Cold War: the United States established itself at the end of the Second World War as a defender of humanity and civilization through the use of overwhelming military force. As never before, American soldiers like Kissinger were deployed around the globe to enforce freedom, order, and democracy as the United States developed a large, permanent peacetime military force to police distant lands. Kissinger was a pioneer of this phenomenon, helping to bring American military power to Europe, rebuild Germany under American guidance, and establish new intelligence capabilities for the United States. Americans like Kissinger promoted American ideals with unprecedented force. This seemed necessary at the time, but many would later question whether this approach was appropriate in places like Korea, Vietnam, and post-Cold War Iraq.

On his return from his army service in Germany, Kissinger enrolled at Harvard University as a late undergraduate. He quickly moved through his undergraduate and graduate studies, earning a PhD in government. Kissinger drew on his military and political contacts from the Second World War, and he quickly established a name for himself as a leading “Cold War intellectual.” This was a second contradiction of the period: as never before, the most advanced research in American universities was tied directly to foreign policy concerns. The federal government funded research in scientific and humanities subjects that had potential to contribute to the struggle against Soviet power. One of the most important fields for government-sponsored research was international relations. Young émigré scholars, including Kissinger, received aid and encouragement to examine two pressing policy questions: First, how could the United States attract the support of other societies, particularly European societies, to the anti-communist cause? Second, how could the United States use new weapons, especially nuclear weapons, to increase its security?

By background, experience, and training, Kissinger was well suited to address both these questions. He became part of a new group of Cold War “experts” who used their knowledge and access to influence policy. They were bipartisan policy advisors who helped forge the Cold War consensus in American society around many of the basic but unprecedented American commitments to foreign intervention, particularly in Europe and Asia. They were unelected figures who emphasized stability and American power as ballasts for a world that they feared could careen back to the horrors of the Second World War, especially if Stalin’s Russia continued to expand. This was the third and perhaps most difficult contradiction of the Cold War: Kissinger and his fellow Cold War intellectuals defended democracy abroad by limiting democracy at home. They were not elected to office, they did not subject their assumptions to open public debate, and they did not encourage alternative points of view. They believed in democracy, but they emphasized strong leadership, consensus, and consistency in confronting communism.

Kissinger’s background and his experiences influenced the content of his policies when he became Richard Nixon’s and Gerald Ford’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, and then Secretary of State, from 1969 to 1977. Above all, Kissinger emphasized the centralized use of American power for the defense of national interests. He believed that through the middle decades of the Cold War the United States had misused its power. Instead of pursuing vague ideas of “development” or allying with weak regimes, like South Vietnam, Kissinger called for the United States to focus on security and negotiations with the biggest states. He wanted to increase American leverage by choosing American battles more carefully and committing American resources more wisely. He hoped to limit domestic acrimony after the protests of the late 1960s and focus on American interests abroad, even if they violated the principles of

human rights that many citizens advocated. Kissinger, in this sense, was a believer in classic *Realpolitik*. For Kissinger, moral value came in securing national interests, not abstract principles of justice and rights.

Kissinger's *Realpolitik* became most evident in Vietnam. The long American war in Southeast Asia had inspired widespread dissent within the United States and among allies. Since 1965, the United States had escalated its military intervention in defense of a weak, corrupt, and unpopular South Vietnamese regime. President Lyndon Johnson and other American leaders in the 1960s felt compelled to continue and expand Washington's intervention for the sake of justifying past commitments.

President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were determined to shed the American entanglement with South Vietnam. They were also determined to preserve the credibility of American power, proving that the United States could withdraw without showing weakness to adversaries in the region and around the world. This meant mixing de-escalation with conspicuous evidence of continued force. It meant negotiating with Vietnamese communists for face-saving terms surrounding American departure, while simultaneously threatening bombings and other attacks if negotiations did not produce desired compromises. This policy continued the conflict in Vietnam until 1973—to the serious consternation of war opponents—but it allowed American soldiers to leave the region with at least the image of a “decent interval” before communist advances. At a very high cost in lives and treasure, Nixon and Kissinger indeed succeeded in ending the Vietnam War while preserving American power and its image abroad.

This American *Realpolitik* carried over into relations with China. In 1971 Henry Kissinger opened secret negotiations with Mao Zedong's government in Beijing, despite more than twenty years of American policy that denied the legitimacy of communist authorities and condemned their violent behavior. Both Nixon and Kissinger recognized that China was a major power in Asia and that the United States would benefit from negotiations with Mao's regime. They also recognized that Chinese tensions with the Soviet Union created an opening for Washington to play one communist government against the other for American interests. President Nixon's famous visit to Beijing in February 1972 stunned the world with the success of this policy, providing the United States with a renewed image of power in Asia, and new leverage over regional events. Nixon and Kissinger scored a big victory for American interests by self-consciously compromising on longstanding anti-communist principles.

Negotiations with the Soviet Union moved in a similar direction, in part because of the pressure Moscow now felt from American overtures to China. The Soviets did not want to see themselves encircled by hostile Chinese and American activities. Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and his advisors sought to scuttle Kissinger's overtures to Beijing by offering their own concessions to Washington. Between 1972 and 1977 the United States and the Soviet Union entered a period of remarkable cooperation, known at the time as “détente,” that produced major agreements on nuclear arms control (SALT 1 and the ABM Treaty), basic principles of international stability (the Basic Principles Agreement), and even human rights (the Helsinki Accords.) Détente encouraged stability, mutual security, and cooperation. It emphasized common national interests and it avoided ideological disputes. Kissinger's efforts in this period stabilized the Cold War, reducing the horrific threat of a third world war. Kissinger's efforts also encouraged Americans and their allies to accept the very communist powers they had long condemned as newfound partners. This was not an easy transition.

The transition was particularly difficult because it was not evenly applied—a fourth contradiction in American Cold War policies. Kissinger continued to harbor strong ideological presumptions against negotiations with socialist and communist regimes in Latin America and Africa. In part, this reflected a racist judgment that people in these societies were more susceptible to communist propaganda and less

capable of ruling themselves. It also grew from his ignorance of these regions. Kissinger's energetic efforts to pursue American national interests often blinded him to the very negative effects of his policies in "third world" societies that harbored distrust and animosity toward a long history of foreign imperialism.

This dynamic was most evident in Chile. Despite the movement toward détente in American relations with the Soviet Union and China, Kissinger remained deeply concerned about what he perceived as the spread of communist influences south of the American border. When Chilean socialist Salvador Allende won a plurality of the presidential vote in his country in 1971, Kissinger moved quickly to undermine his rule. This initially involved the sponsorship of opposition parties and media, and sanctions against the Chilean economy. By 1973 American actions included support for a bloody military coup against Allende. The government that replaced Salvador Allende, with American support, undertook a program of organized terror to imprison and murder all opposition—including non-communist figures. Outrage throughout the region and in Europe at American sponsorship of such brutality undermined America's international standing. It made Kissinger a target for war crimes accusations that persist into the twenty-first century.

The controversies surrounding Henry Kissinger are the key controversies surrounding American foreign policy in the Cold War and later decades. What are the appropriate uses of American force? How should the United States balance the pursuit of justice and democracy with the needs of security and national interests? What role should unelected experts play in policy-making? What are the appropriate expectations for loyalty to American policy? What are the appropriate avenues for dissent?

The answers to these questions were complicated and contradictory during the Cold War. Henry Kissinger's power came from his ability to use his background, experiences, and talents to offer compelling guidance at crucial moments. Kissinger's weaknesses reflected the limits of his background, experiences, and talents. No leader or country is perfect in its judgments. The Cold War greatly raised the stakes for the United States and its most capable figures. Shining successes mixed with dismal failures, but the latter always drew the most criticism.

Acting as a superpower was sometimes self-defeating. American leadership in the Cold War inspired both pride and regret. The same is true for the historical legacy of Henry Kissinger.

Jeremi Suri holds the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Global Leadership at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of five major books on contemporary politics and foreign policy, including *American Foreign Relations since 1898 (2010)* and *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama (2011)*.
