

2008

h-diplo

H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews

www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables

Volume IX, No. 7 (2008)

17 April 2008

Jeremi Suri. *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, July 2007. 368 pp. \$27.95 (hardback). ISBN: 978-0-674-02579-0.

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Barbara Keys, Priscilla Roberts, James Sparrow, Yafeng Xia

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Kissinger-AmericanCentury-Roundtable.pdf>

Review by Barbara Keys, University of Melbourne

Kissinger as "One of Us"

If academia has superstars, Jeremi Suri is surely one of them. On the heels of his prize-winning first book, hailed as "an instant classic," he was made a full professor at one of the nation's top universities. The *Smithsonian Magazine* recently named him one of the nation's 37 top "innovators" in arts and sciences under the age of 36.¹ Not only is Suri one of the rare academics who has a literary agent, he has the best known and most respected agent in the United States and Europe: Andrew Wylie, whose other clients have included such luminaries as Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Salman Rushdie, and Martin Amis.² Stanford's David Kennedy lauds Suri as "the premier scholar of a wholly original—and unusually demanding—approach to the study of international affairs."³ The acclaim is well-deserved: Suri's first book, *Power and Protest*, with

Barbara Keys teaches U.S. history at the University of Melbourne. She received her Ph.D. in International History from Harvard University. She is currently writing two books, on the origins of the "human rights revolution" of the 1970s and on the United States and torture in the 1970s. In the longer term she is planning a study of Soviet views of Henry Kissinger in the era of detente, using Russian archives and interviews. She has previously written extensively on sport and international relations. Her first book, *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Harvard University Press, 2006), examined the cultural and political ramifications of the rise of international sports competitions before the Second World War. She has also published on sport in the Cold War.

¹ Brian Mattmiller, "UW Historian Named One of Smithsonian's Top Young Innovators," *University of Wisconsin-Madison News*, 4 October 2007, at <http://www.news.wisc.edu/14260> [accessed 12/1/07].

² "Andrew Wylie, 'Je plaiderai toujours pour la complexité,'" Interview in *Le Monde*, 6 October 2006. On Wylie's other clients, see Emma Brockes, "A Poacher with Great Snob Value," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December 2003.

³ Quoted in Heather Laroi, "The Big Picture," *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2007.

its bold new reading of détente as a conservative response to the domestic upheavals of the 1960s, was a tour de force that has reshaped the landscape of international history.

Although Henry Kissinger took a low profile in *Power and Protest*, the architect of détente was unhappy with the way Suri had portrayed his achievement. After reading the book and learning that Suri was now working on a study of his career, Kissinger issued an unusual summons: he invited the young historian to come to his Park Avenue office to talk. According to Suri's description of the meeting, Kissinger grilled him for an hour and a half on his research. Suri argued and, he says, "lost every point." The relationship might have ended there, if not for Suri's boldness and a bit of luck. A few months later, when Suri was doing research in Kissinger's hometown of Fürth, Germany, he learned that Kissinger, too, was coming to town. On a hunch, Suri parked himself in front of the old Kissinger family apartment, sat on the stoop, and waited. His persistence paid off, for Kissinger did show up; the former globetrotting diplomat recognized Suri and invited him to chat at a local restaurant. The encounter in Fürth marked the beginning of a process in which the aging statesman wooed the young scholar with lunch dates every few months in New York.⁴

What Suri has now produced is, as he bills it, "the first stab at trying to understand [Kissinger]," one that was "deeply influenced" by all those lunch conversations.⁵ "Understanding" Kissinger means that Suri has attempted to situate the statesman's career, views, and policies in the context of his times. Just as, in his first book, Suri explained détente as driven by larger social forces, in this book he sees Kissinger's beliefs and policy decisions as the products of deep social and political developments.

The author devotes successive chapters to Kissinger's formative experiences as a Jew in Nazi Germany, an immigrant in the U.S. Army in postwar occupied Germany, and a rising star in the context of the "Cold War University" that put intellectuals at the service of policymakers. The longest chapter showcases Suri's deft grasp of Cold War nuclear policy and ends by concisely laying out what Suri sees as the core elements of Kissinger's worldview and the factors (such as the rise of nonstate actors) it overlooked. The final 70 or so pages survey Kissinger's eight years in office. Along the way Suri tosses out virtuosic summaries of an extraordinary range of historical events and developments, from the Marshall Plan to Konrad Adenauer's career.

Suri develops a remarkable range of useful insights with his usual finesse. Discussions of the role that Kissinger's Jewishness played in his career, of the social and political changes that enabled a Jewish immigrant to rise to such heights of power, and of Kissinger's role as

⁴ Jeremi Suri, "Encounters with Henry Kissinger," *University of Wisconsin-Madison History Department News*, Fall 2007, 3; Brian Mattmiller, "Historian Takes on a Weighty Task: Understanding Kissinger," 15 November 2005, *University of Wisconsin-Madison News*, 15 November 2005, at <http://www.news.wisc.edu/11839> [accessed 12/15/07]. According to one source, Suri had "over a dozen" interviews with Kissinger; "Global Villain or Strategic Genius? Neither, Asserts New Book on Henry Kissinger," *University of Wisconsin-Madison News*, June 18, 2007, at <http://www.news.wisc.edu/13875>. In his newsletter contribution, Suri says it was "more than half a dozen": Suri, "Encounters," 3.

⁵ The "first stab" quotation comes from Mattmiller, "Historian." The "deeply influenced" remark is in Suri's account of the origins of his relationship with Kissinger; Suri, "Encounters," 3.

a “bridge figure,” for example, are perceptive and compelling. Many of the hallmarks of Suri’s brilliant first book are evident in the second: bold thinking, originality, and dazzling breadth. The book succeeds admirably in illuminating some of the key “experiences and influences [that] shaped [Kissinger’s] worldview and provided the framework for his approach to international relations,” as Suri describes one of the book’s aims on the dustjacket.

In title and conception, the book claims to be as much about “the American century” as about Henry Kissinger. The book, Suri explains, “is a narrative of global change, a study of how social and political transformations across multiple societies created our contemporary world.” Kissinger is relevant to this undertaking because he provides “a window into the complex international vectors of the period” and “a natural focus for understanding the intersection of different, seemingly contradictory, developments.” “The main argument of the book,” Suri writes, “is that we must understand the experiences of Henry Kissinger and American power as processes of *globalization*” (p. 4).

But the book also promises to explain Kissinger’s policies—indeed it promises to explain them better than previous studies that have focused on Kissinger’s years in power, where, according to Suri, one “loses the forest for the trees” (p. 5). Taking advantage of the division of labor the roundtable format offers, I would like to leave extended discussion of other aspects of the book in the capable hands of my fellow reviewers, and focus my attention on one issue: how much does the book help us to understand the particular choices Kissinger made while in office? Does the book help us answer the question that Suri says he set out to answer: “how can someone who is so smart—and entered politics for moral reasons, because the experience of the Holocaust loomed so large in his life—how does someone like that produce results such as the bombing of Vietnam?”⁶

It is unquestionably true that Kissinger’s experiences—as a Jew in Nazi Germany, for example—played an important role in shaping his views. Suri is quite right to place emphasis on these experiences, and as an examination of “the social history that influenced [Kissinger’s] policies,” as Suri described his aim to Kissinger himself, the book offers valuable insights.⁷ But on the whole the book’s approach to understanding why Kissinger did what he did greatly overemphasizes historical circumstances and sweeps the role of personality, contingency, and choice under the rug. Both its framework and its contents minimize Kissinger’s personal failings; indeed Suri says Kissinger’s failures “were rarely personal” (p. 7). The result is a portrayal of Kissinger that has a strangely deterministic feel and an overwhelmingly exculpatory net result. By focusing on historical experience and circumstance and diminishing the role of individual choice and agency, Suri gives us a Kissinger who looks like a product, even a mere victim, of sweeping historical processes.

⁶ “Global Villain.”

⁷ Suri, “Encounters,” 3.

Suri is careful not to call his book a biography, and in fact the book is something of an anti-biography.⁸ Biography, as Robert Darnton has defined it, “by focusing on one life ... eliminates the complications that weigh down accounts of entire societies, and it adheres to a narrative line that shows individuals in action. It restores agency to history, giving readers a sense of closeness to the men and women who shaped events. It deals with motivations and emotions. It even answers a voyeuristic desire to see through keyholes and into private lives.”⁹ Biography is about the relationship between the circumstances of an individual’s life and what the individual did, with the emphasis on what is unique about the individual.

Suri’s aim is the opposite: it is to show us what is not unique about Kissinger. It is a kind of realist approach applied to intellectual biography, one that seems to imply that individuals are rational, almost interchangeable beings whose views and choices are conditioned by externalities. In Suri’s view “historical context matter[s] enormously” (p. 3)--so enormously that it is all that needs to be discussed. Psychology is irrelevant; the assumption is that people react to the same circumstances in the same way. Suri acknowledges the importance of Kissinger’s talent and hard work, but the emphasis is on Kissinger as product, not agent. We can understand Kissinger, Suri tells us, as “part of” the American century (p. 10). “Kissinger was a child of his times” (p. 55); Kissinger was a “product of his times” (p. 2); Kissinger “was a tragic figure of his times” (p. 144). “Attacks on Kissinger are attacks on a generation formed from the experiences and lessons of the Second World War” (p. 91), Suri writes, referring to challenges to the primacy of transatlantic ties. The book is peppered with phrases such as “Kissinger and others,” “Kissinger and many others,” “Kissinger, like most people,” and “Kissinger, like many others.”

In perhaps the book’s most telling phrase, Suri claims that “for all his distinctive characteristics, Kissinger is one of us—a product of the remarkable social and political transformations since the 1930s” (p. 14). In one sense, this statement is banal: everyone everywhere is shaped in important ways by the era they live in. In a deeper sense, though, to suggest that Kissinger is a “product” just like the rest of “us” is to elide any distinction between those who had power and those who were killed by the application of that power. It is to deny the significance of agency in human affairs and to abjure the task of assigning responsibility to individuals for their actions.

The same forces that “produced” Kissinger also shaped people whose views were very different from his. The human rights movement, for example, was partly a reaction to Kissinger and his disdain for “universal codes of good and evil,” but it was also spawned by some of the same events that Suri sees as ineluctably bringing Kissinger to his worldview, including the Holocaust and the struggle against communism. Indeed in many ways what is striking about Kissinger is not how well he “reflects” the “American century,” but what an

⁸ Suri himself has described the book as “an international history of Kissinger’s career.” *Palgrave Advances in International History*, ed. Patrick Finney (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), x.

⁹ Robert Darnton, “Looking the Devil in the Face,” *New York Review of Books*, 10 February 2000, 14.

anomaly he was in the American tradition of foreign policymaking, with its hunger for the kind of moral absolutes that Kissinger railed against.

In contrast to scholars who see personality, psychology, and emotion as critical to understanding the choices policymakers make, Suri ignores such factors. Kissinger's career, Suri claims, "like the American Century as a whole, was not inwardly driven" (p. 2). As a result, we get to know Kissinger as a person very little in this book. "Emotions, faiths, and sentiments" are the stuff of politics, Suri writes, noting that Kissinger failed to take account of them (p. 196). Yet Suri fails to take account of Kissinger's emotional life, of the irrational, subterranean impulses that shaped his choices. Only once do we see Kissinger as emotional: in the two-page description of his elevation to Secretary of State, when his voice cracked with emotion (pp. 250-1). But Kissinger's often brutal policies were shaped not just by "rational" calculations of the national interest but also by his inability to empathize with the people who would be affected—sometimes killed or tortured—as a result of their implementation. Again and again Kissinger privately professed sympathy with dictators who cold-bloodedly murdered their own citizens. "We are sympathetic with what you are trying to do," he told Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. Never did he show such sympathy to the victims. Suri's account sees Kissinger's "moral" quest for "global stability" as what mattered, but self-interest, vanity, and a willingness to pursue fame and glory at the expense of the suffering of others mattered just as much.

Suri is not unaware of the role of personality in history. He characterizes Nixon as a "gangster" prone to "angry outbursts" and handicapped by "fragile self-esteem" (p. 206). Reading emotion into a transcript that tells us nothing about tone of voice, Suri tells us that Nixon "thundered" at Kissinger (p. 208). He says nothing, however, about Kissinger's own deep insecurities or his own angry outbursts. We learn that Kissinger had a difficult boss, but not that he was himself a notoriously difficult boss. Instead, he is likened to "a skilled business manager" (p. 206). His famous temper, his manipulateness, his overweening vanity: these traits simply do not appear. We learn again and again that Kissinger was an outsider but not that this status induced in him a powerful craving for acceptance. For Kissinger at least, personality is erased from the picture; only cold, hard historical circumstances matter.

Morality is the issue on which Kissinger has been subjected to the most vigorous criticism, both in office and after. Suri has little sympathy for Kissinger's critics on this score. He dismisses outright the idea that Kissinger is a "war criminal," labeling the notion "intellectually bankrupt" (p. 6). His efforts to grapple with Kissinger's morality, however, are the most problematic aspects of the book. In contrast to standard portrayals of the man as a practitioner of a cold-blooded Realpolitik that explicitly excluded moral considerations, Suri sees Kissinger as deeply moral. In Suri's view, Kissinger was a good man with a strong "moral compass" who "sought to do good in the world" (pp. 7, 14). He implicitly endorses Kissinger's version of morality: "not a universal code for right and wrong" but a flexible set of "basic principles" admirably suited to the "real world," where life is too complex for "abstract ethical standards" (p. 186).

Suri dismisses critiques of Kissinger's "morally questionable deeds" as simplistic and self-serving. "Of course," Suri says impatiently, "the brutalities committed in Vietnam, Cambodia, Chile, and Angola during Kissinger's time in office deserve condemnation. Of course his policies in these areas frequently failed to limit, and sometimes exacerbated, local suffering." Such criticisms are "easy judgments," scoffs Suri (p. 5). The real question, however, is not whether we should condemn "brutalities"—that surely *is* an easy judgment—but how to assess the responsibility of a man who abetted, encouraged, directed, or funded them, and who surely was not trying to "limit ... local suffering" when he bombed Cambodia and Vietnam, winked at Pinochet's torture and murder, and fueled civil war in Angola.

Suri quotes a remarkable exchange in one of his interviews. "What are your core moral principles—the principles you would not violate?" Suri asked. Kissinger replied, "I am not prepared to share that yet" (p. 15). Here is a breathtaking response: a man hailed as one of the 20th century's greatest statesman, a man who spent nearly a decade making life-and-death decisions affecting millions of people across the globe, who in his eighties has yet to articulate core moral principles? Suri's take on Kissinger's admission is sympathetic:

"Kissinger is a man struggling with this question. He entered politics for moral reasons, and he worked feverishly to make the world a better place. His actions, however, did not always contribute to a world of greater freedom and justice. Frequently, the opposite was the case. Like all of us, Kissinger confronts the realization that good intentions often produce bad results. He contends with his own complicity in unintended consequences" (p. 15).

Like all of us? Surely historians must make moral distinctions between ordinary people and statesmen whose decisions affect the lives of millions. The thrust of Suri's remarks—"good intentions often produce bad results"—suggests that Kissinger's intentions were always good. Perhaps they were, in the sense that he could always justify to himself that he was pursuing some larger good. But this can be said of anyone. The idea that no one does wrong intentionally, but only out of ignorance or delusion, has ancient philosophical roots.¹⁰ To have good intentions, in itself, tells us nothing meaningful. Nor were the nasty, brutal consequences of Kissinger's actions always "unintended." The goal of large-scale bombing is precisely to kill many people.

Suri makes similar claims about Kissinger's morality, and draws similar parallels to "us," in relating a revealing incident in which Kissinger, heading the International Seminar at Harvard in 1953, broke the law by opening a participant's mail. When Kissinger found a flyer criticizing "the American atomic bomb project and the broader military policies of the country" and calling for dedication to peaceful endeavor, he reported it to the FBI. It was an act one might easily attribute to unique aspects of Kissinger's personality, in particular his driving ambition, his penchant for subterfuge, and his willingness to cause others to suffer in his quest for power. Yet Suri explains Kissinger's lawbreaking as patriotic and

¹⁰ See Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler* (New York: Random House, 1998), xxii.

entirely understandable, again likening Kissinger to the rest of us: Kissinger, Suri says, “did what one would expect from almost anyone in his time and place” (p. 128).

Suri’s unwillingness to question Kissinger’s moral framework becomes especially problematic when he discusses specific policy choices. Suri criticizes Kissinger’s disregard for democratization and notes that racial and cultural prejudices helped produce Kissinger’s hierarchical view of the international system, in which the Third World ranked at the bottom (p. 185). But often Suri’s accounts of Kissinger’s policies are described in ways that minimize their negative effects or explain them away in deterministic fashion. Suri chides Kissinger for his “neglect” of concerns about human rights, for example, but then goes on to explain that the statesman’s “basic assumptions and experiences” had not “prepared” him for such ideas (p. 248).

In Suri’s portrayal, Kissinger was a courageous and hard-nosed “revolutionary” who made tough choices based on admirably flexible moral criteria. In words that elide any distinction between his analysis and Kissinger’s own views, Suri repeatedly draws a sharp contrast between fluffy ideals and cold, hard, messy reality. Kissinger had to make “imperfect, sometimes distasteful, decisions” (p. 70) instead of espousing “high-minded proclamations,” because power requires “compromise and choices among lesser evils” (p. 76). Talk of human rights is “somewhat simplistic,” Suri says (p. 246), whereas Kissinger “provided a path for policy beyond slogans” (p. 274). Suri repeatedly contrasts Kissinger’s “tough choices” with straw-man alternatives. On Angola, for example, Suri suggests that Kissinger’s push to fund two sides in a three-way civil war was the logical result of a choice between keeping U.S. leverage in the region, on the one hand, and “hinging policy on abstract notions of democracy or good government,” on the other (p. 238). In fact there were other options consonant with a hard-nosed assessment of U.S. interests, such as the nonengagement Defense Secretary James Schlesinger proposed. Suri summarizes the issue—one that became a major concern of Kissinger’s tenure as Secretary of State—as part of a discussion about Africa in general:

“When the Portuguese finally retreated from Angola and other parts of southern Africa in 1975, Kissinger encouraged President Ford to use covert aid as a mechanism for encouraging a ‘peaceful transition’ to independent governments.... Kissinger made it clear that, in the case of Angola, this approach involved supporting a thuggish nationalist fighter, Jonas Savimbi Africa had become a cockpit of international conflict.... Amidst this postcolonial chaos, Kissinger felt compelled to identify a friendly influence. Hinging policy on abstract notions of democracy or good government made little sense. Kissinger acted to ensure that the United States did not lose leverage in the region as violence spread” (pp. 237-238).

The term “civil war” never comes up; “violence [spreads]” of its own accord while Kissinger advocates “peaceful” transitions and is “compelled” to “support” thugs. Compare Jussi Hanhimäki’s assessment of the Angolan fiasco: “From almost any perspective—regional, global, domestic, moral, strategic—the course of action that Ford and Kissinger approved was the worst possible one. With each passing day, bloodshed in Angola increased and

foreign involvement escalated.”¹¹ Suri offers no hint that Kissinger’s policy of funneling tens of millions of dollars to the belligerents resulted in dramatic failure, one that undermined the very goals Kissinger sought to uphold. In Walter Isaacson’s unstinting judgment, the result of Kissinger’s policy was “a total Soviet-Cuban victory, an unnecessary loss of American credibility, a political debacle at home, and a costly program that pointlessly fueled a distant war.”¹² Suri’s desire to keep his eye on the big picture without getting bogged down in details is understandable, but too often the picture that emerges is misleadingly incomplete.

As to the widespread torture and murder committed by the “strong and reliable” military leaders Kissinger cultivated in Latin America, Suri tells us that Kissinger “did not extol” such practices, but he cannot bring himself to say that Kissinger condoned and encouraged them (p. 239). As in Kissinger’s own writings, policy choices are described in dispassionate terms, and while the human suffering that resulted is mentioned a couple of times, its extent is often minimized. “Thousands of people died because of Kissinger’s activities” is Suri’s tame assessment (p. 248). One might more accurately write: Kissinger’s activities led to the deaths of *hundreds* of thousands of people, and many more maimed, rendered homeless, uprooted, or tortured.

Suri’s silences are also telling. He approvingly quotes Kissinger’s critique of Nixon’s untrammelled use of executive power: “such tactics were inappropriate,” Kissinger commented, without apparent irony (p. 205). Suri, however, ignores Kissinger’s own role in the illegal wiretapping of White House staff. In discussing the Argentine junta, which was using electric shock on pregnant women and dropping innocents into the sea from helicopters, Suri quotes from Kissinger’s June 1976 conversation with the Argentine foreign minister but leaves out the more gut-churning remarks from an October meeting, at which Kissinger chillingly told his counterpart, “We would like you to succeed. We read about human rights problems but not the context. The quicker you succeed the better.... If you can finish before Congress gets back, the better.”¹³ Although the book finds room for an entire paragraph on Bavarian monarch Maximilian II, there is not a line on the 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor and the 200,000 East Timorese killed, although Kissinger and Ford gave the green light for the invasion and then worked to keep the arms flowing to Indonesia in contravention of U.S. law. (Kissinger could not find space for East Timor, either, in his 1151-page volume of memoirs on this period, *Years of Renewal*).

The overall picture Suri gives us is of a heroic statesman who accomplished much and whose failings were primarily the result of the very trying circumstances in which he operated. Depicting Kissinger almost as a victim, Suri notes: “He ended his career ... beset by multiplying crises that he could not satisfactorily resolve Kissinger and other statesmen remained subjects of larger revolutionary forces they could not control” (pp.

¹¹ Jussi Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 413.

¹² Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 685.

¹³ Memorandum of Conversation, “Secretary’s Meeting with Argentine Foreign Minister Guzzetti,” 7 October 1976, at the National Security Archive website: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB104/index.htm> [accessed 11/15/07].

H-Diplo Roundtables

200-1). “[Kissinger] was, like all strategists, a captive of his particular history.” He was, indeed, a victim: “a victim of his own limits” (p. 196).

It comes as no great surprise that Kissinger likes the book “quite a lot” (in Suri’s words). The former diplomat naturally has some quibbles, but as Suri reports, Kissinger thinks the book comes “closest to capturing his thinking” and is “fair” in its contextualization of his career.¹⁴ Coming from a man described as “almost maniacal” about guarding his reputation, this is high praise indeed.¹⁵ The book thus succeeds in one remarkable feat: it is one of the few whose publication has not resulted in an abrupt end to its author’s relationship with the great man. The New York lunch dates will presumably continue. Despite the insights this book offers, for the rest of “us,” so, too, will the quest to understand Kissinger, his policies, and his legacy.

Copyright © 2008 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

¹⁴ Harvard University Press Author Interview Podcasts, at <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/audio/index.html> [accessed 12/20/07].

¹⁵ Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect*, 458.