Jeremi Suri’s new study of Henry Kissinger is not a biography, but a fascinating yet ultimately rather frustrating interpretive essay, which raises at least as many questions as it answers. Suri is one of the brightest and most provocative of a new generation of young American historians who have no personal memories of the turmoil, upheavals, and sometimes inexpungeable conflicts and legacy of bitterness that the turbulent decade of the 1960s generated for those who lived through it, in the United States and beyond.

Kissinger, now well into his ninth decade but still a prolific writer and commentator on current affairs, remains one of the most controversial figures in recent US history. He was—unless one counts Dean Rusk, a former dean of Mills College during the 1930s—the first academic to serve as US secretary of state. Often lionized during the Nixon administration as the one saving grace in a presidency otherwise...
deeply mired in corruption and scandal, by many his reputation is nonetheless viewed as ineradicably tarnished. Right and left alike deplored what they often perceived as his failure to recognize any considerations other than those of realpolitik. Even during his tenure as secretary of state under Gerald R. Ford, conservatives already charged Kissinger of being willing to compromise with communism in both China and, most saliently, Russia, and to trade US security and compromise his country’s ideological and moral principles in the search for détente with the Soviet Union. Liberals, for their part, assailed what they saw as the unscrupulous means Kissinger used to pursue what he defined as American national interests: his readiness to continue the war in Vietnam for four years after he became national security adviser and even to broaden it by bombing and invading Cambodia and Laos; his unconcern for human rights; and his embrace of unsavory and dictatorial regimes in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Such accusations reached their acme in 2001, when the British journalist Christopher Hitchens published The Trial of Henry Kissinger, a volume arguing that Kissinger was a war criminal who should face prosecution before an international tribunal for crimes against humanity. His reputation was sufficiently controversial that he was forced to withdraw from the chairmanship of a US government commission to investigate the events of September 11, 2001. Yet Kissinger also possesses many admirers, both within and outside the United States. In Asia especially, his diplomatic accomplishments have made him, as one young Hong Kong Chinese academic described him, a “hero” to many.

Besides publishing voluminously since he left office, Kissinger has parlayed his abilities and connections into founding a global consulting firm, Kissinger Associates, known for its wide network of ties to political and business elites throughout the world. In three massive volumes of memoirs and several other books, he has tried to give his own version of his time in power, an undertaking many view as an attempt by Kissinger to pre-empt and even pervert the historical record. Yet such efforts can prove counter-productive, and Kissinger’s highly detailed account of his years in office has given enemies a tempting target several thousand pages long. At times, indeed, it might seem that testing Kissinger’s descriptions of past episodes against the revelations of newly opened materials from that period’s archives, both in the United States and abroad, has become something of a new academic cottage industry. “Oh that mine enemy would write a book,” the afflicted Job once pleaded. Kissinger has given his antagonists at least five narratives of his own career.

The polarized views of Kissinger, especially in his own country, are perhaps one of the many still lingering legacies from the bitter political and social disputes of the 1960s and the Vietnam War. For many, especially Americans, who remember the battles of that period, the memories have had an intense and lifelong impact. Feelings against Kissinger perhaps run particularly high in part because he has never expressed any remorse for the policies he followed while in power, and also because, in career terms, he emerged

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unscathed from his service under Nixon and Ford, which proved a springboard for further worldly gains. While he never again held public office after 1977, Kissinger has regularly given advice to political and business leaders, and parlayed his government service into worldly success, winning both wealth and influence among global power brokers, as well as public respect, even honor and esteem. He is a regular fixture at the Trilateral, Bilderberg, and Aspen meetings of the international great and good. Robert McNamara, a figure who provokes passions equally intense among contemporaries from the 1960s, has engaged in very public soul searching and regrets over Vietnam over the past two decades, and was well known to have tormented himself over the war far earlier. Kissinger, by contrast, doggedly, even cheerfully, defends his own policies toward Vietnam and on other matters as justified by the situation at the time. And, unlike such contemporaries as Dean Rusk, Walt W. Rostow, or the brothers William and McGeorge Bundy, he did not emerge from office with his career permanently blighted by Vietnam, or in Richard Nixon’s case by Watergate. Rather, Kissinger—by then perceived as one of the few assets of the Nixon administration—won the Nobel Peace Prize for his share in negotiating at least a shaky truce in hostilities and extricating the United States from that entanglement.

Although several American journalists, including Marvin and Bernard Kalb and Walter Isaacson, have provided relatively evenhanded pictures of Kissinger, for many other American journalists, Seymour Hersh, for example, and such academics as Robert Schulzinger and Jeffrey Kimball, both Kissinger and Nixon are apparently irretrievably tainted figures, whom they find it very difficult to regard with any degree of dispassion. Yet it is at least arguable that, in terms of policies and behavior, Kissinger differed very little—if at all—from any other Cold War statesman. Throughout the Cold War, endorsing or even organizing destabilizing coups against left-wing governments, support for unsavory authoritarian regimes allied with the United States, covert operations, and targeting innocent civilians during military operations were all standard practice for American policymakers, not to mention top officials of other nations. While there may be serious inaccuracies in Kissinger’s memoirs, few historians read the recollections of any president, prime minister, secretary of state, or other top government leader—perhaps not even those of Saint Jimmy Carter—with the expectation of being told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Fixing the historical record in one’s own favor is almost a given when a statesman pens his or her memoirs. The acrimonious condemnation Kissinger so often attracts is perhaps as much about the past half-century of American history as it is about the man himself. It is far from coincidental that the scholar who has provided the most detached and coolly analytical study of Kissinger’s policies to date is a European academic, Jussi Hanhimäki.

Suri’s provocative and original new study is therefore particularly welcome. Suri delves deeply into Kissinger’s background, a full understanding of which he considers vital to any

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informed assessment of Kissinger's intellectual outlook and policies. Suri—himself from a family of recent immigrants—views Kissinger’s German Jewish roots as fundamental to the formulation of his entire worldview. Much influenced by the German cultural tradition of Bildung, a heritage he passed on to his son, in the 1930s Kissinger’s schoolteacher father nonetheless lost his job under the Nazis and ultimately chose exile in the United States, settling in Brooklyn with his family. Kissinger, who always retained his German accent, was acculturated by wartime service in the US army, which brought him back to Germany as a youthful American administrator of territories under occupation. After the war Kissinger embarked on undergraduate and then graduate study at Harvard University, an institution where he won intellectual respect but was largely excluded from its top social circles. Suri argues that the developing Cold War gave new academic opportunities to Jewish (often refugee) intellectuals, whose cosmopolitan expertise made them particularly valuable to American elites who—as with Kissinger’s military career—utilized their services as intermediaries and interpreters between the United States and its new European allies and clients. Eschewing traditional university career goals of becoming a department head, dean, or president, Kissinger focused instead on winning recognition and friends among American and international policymakers, existing or potential. His ability to make such connections was greatly facilitated through the International Seminar he ran at Harvard throughout the 1950s, an annual CIA-funded gathering of selected rising foreign leaders in various fields, who gathered together, under Kissinger’s tutelage, to listen to leading political and other figures and to network with each other and with their American counterparts. By the mid-1950s, the still youthful Kissinger already possessed a remarkably broad web of connections, especially among transatlantic elites, that would stand him in good stead for the rest of his life.

Well into his forties, much of Kissinger’s influence depended upon his ability to win powerful patrons who respected his undoubted intellectual skills. He acquired his first mentor while serving in the army, an eccentric German émigré named Fritz Kraemer. At Harvard Kissinger became a protégé of William Yarnell Elliott, a professor of government with close ties to officials in Washington and such establishment institutions as the Council on Foreign Relations. Like many academics writing about politics and government, Kissinger longed not merely to comment on policies but to make them. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, his ability to do so depended on attracting the right patrons and putting his formidable talents, intellectual, analytical, and administrative, at their service. By the mid-1950s, he had made himself almost indispensable to the wealthy Republican politician Nelson A. Rockefeller, who depended on Kissinger to organize major foreign policy studies for him, financed and run through the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. On behalf of the elite think tank the Council on Foreign Relations, in the mid-1950s Kissinger also headed up a major study group on nuclear weapons and policy, whose disturbing report, written by him, became an unlikely bestseller. Intellectually formidable but socially insecure, his obvious Jewishness still effectively a barrier to him in the most rarefied circles of power, Kissinger was, Suri suggests, modifying the traditional tactics of the “court Jews” of the nineteenth century by making himself indispensable to elite leaders. Seen by them as an “exotic,” he was also allowed a certain latitude in his behavior. Notoriously vain, thin-skinned, and self-centered, for close to forty years Kissinger has deliberately courted public
attention, and during his time in office drew media coverage of himself by ostentatiously squiring an assortment of highly photogenic Hollywood starlets.

Suri gives a perceptive analysis of Kissinger’s thinking and writing on foreign policy, using as an epigraph Kissinger’s own well-known words: “The convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office.” Suri is at pains to depict Kissinger as an honest and moral man who believed deeply in western civilization and the need to defend it at almost all costs, even when the means used were unpleasant and seemingly immoral. He traces Kissinger’s own emphasis on realpolitik, the need for nations to make difficult and sometimes unpalatable choices, and his preoccupation above all else to maintain stability and order, to Kissinger’s early experiences in Germany, where he encountered firsthand and very personally, as a child and then a decade later as a young soldier-administrator, the consequences for all involved when instability and disorder took hold. Throughout his career, Kissinger preferred to work with elite leaders, sometimes as an adviser to such figures, later as partners, while demonstrating considerable suspicion of democracy and popular participation in diplomacy. Kissinger’s predilection for counseling top officials and others and his fondness for back-channels sprang at least in part from the methods he used to win power and influence people, while his distaste for democracy is related, in Suri’s analysis, to his early exposure to the brutality of anti-semitic popular politics while still in Germany.

Suri delves in depth into Kissinger’s own writings, which he has read with close attention. These won him broad public attention and ultimately gave him the credentials to enter policymaking circles in his own right, not just as a counselor to influential politicians. Suri points to Kissinger’s studies on nuclear policy, in which he recommended the development and if necessary use of small-scale—what would now be called “tactical”—nuclear weapons as a means of breaking out of the strategic stalemate consequent on practical unusability of large-scale nuclear weapons. Given the reservations the majority of strategists expressed over employing nuclear force under even the most limited conditions, one has to wonder whether here, pure ivory tower logic trumped political pragmatism, something that might go far to explain both Kissinger’s ordering of at least two nuclear alerts while in office, and his readiness to expand the Vietnam War into Cambodia and Laos in order to end it.

Suri also highlights Kissinger’s admiration for several conservative statesmen whom he nonetheless considered revolutionaries in their ability to meet existing challenges and when appropriate to reorder the existing international system: the Austrian Prince Klement von Metternich, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. In Suri’s opinion, these figures served as Kissinger’s own models while he was in power. Kissinger’s world was one in need of enlightened leadership from a dynamic, perceptive, and charismatic statesman. Suri considers Kissinger a “revolutionary statesman,” one who sought to be a “transcendent leader” (p. 194) who could manage and remodel the existing international system. His failures sprang from the limitation that, facing multiple crises and demands, from Vietnam, Russia, China, the Middle East, and elsewhere, it was physically impossible
for one man to deal with and juggle all the policy and other elements involved. Suri also criticizes Kissinger for sharing many of the underlying “conventional assumptions” (p. 192) of other Cold War thinkers and officials, while failing to appreciate the growing importance in international affairs of non-state actors and movements, and considering only a narrow range of policy options, most of them derived from European models. Kissinger’s horizons were largely limited to the Atlantic world, and he had little understanding or sympathy for new developments in Asia, Latin America, or Africa, viewing these from a European perspective.

Unfortunately, Suri fails to cover Kissinger’s time in office in anything like the detail he gives to the making of Henry Kissinger. To devote two-thirds of his book to the pre-1969 Kissinger seems somewhat perverse. Suri gallops through Kissinger’s time in power at breakneck speed, making rather little effort to relate the themes he so ably highlights for Kissinger’s early decades to the man’s eight years in office. His two chapters on Kissinger’s official career are skimpy and rely far too heavily on assertions. Was Kissinger indeed a “revolutionary statesman,” as Suri avers? More evidence for or against would be welcome. And—given his work for détente, not to mention the opening to China, and his efforts to adjust US foreign policy to a time of limits—should we really consider Kissinger’s Middle Eastern policies his greatest achievement, even if they laid the foundation for subsequent Arab-Israeli agreements under Jimmy Carter and beyond? Here, the focus on Kissinger’s Jewish antecedents, though interesting in terms of the details Suri provides of his position during negotiations, perhaps becomes excessive. Suri may well be correct in arguing that the upheavals of Kissinger’s early years, which forced him to flee Germany, and the ringside seat from which he viewed the consequences for Germany itself immediately after the war, instilled in him a permanent, perhaps even obsessive, concern to preserve stability and order at almost any cost. Yet other German Jewish refugees, the Realist political scientist Hans Morgenthau being one notable example, endured similar formative experiences yet became outspoken critics of the Vietnam War. Can one genuinely ascribe to Kissinger by far the greatest responsibility for the foreign policies embraced by Richard Nixon, a president Suri blithely characterizes as a “gangster” (p. 206)? It is at least arguable that Nixon was as complex and intellectually interesting a character as Kissinger, and that each man contributed a great deal to policies sometimes been described as “Nixingerism.” Given Suri’s earlier analysis of Kissinger’s adaptation of the role of “court Jew” in his dealings with such powerful patrons as Rockefeller, would it not be useful to discuss at greater length how he modified or continued such behavioral patterns when dealing with the abuse, much of it anti-semitic, that he tolerated as the price of power when working with Nixon, and the psychological impact of this upon both men?

Suri is by no means uncritical of Kissinger’s policies, especially his readiness to support exceptionally unsavory dictatorships in numerous developing countries and his tolerance of racism in South Africa and elsewhere. He is perhaps too accepting of Kissinger’s widening of the war in Vietnam to Cambodia and his readiness to fight more aggressively in order to end the conflict, a tactic he relates to Kissinger’s own writings on the need to employ force when force is not expected. Suri does argue trenchantly that Kissinger’s faults were merely those writ large of the transatlantic elites to whom he aspired to belong, and that criticisms of Kissinger’s policies from the 1970s onward reflected a larger
dissatisfaction among those voicing them with the policies of the largely Atlantic-oriented foreign policy establishment that had directed US foreign affairs since World War II. In a SHAFR conference panel last June, Suri also spoke eloquently on this theme, arguing that those who sought to attack Kissinger in particular were making him the scapegoat for all those American Cold War policymakers who had pushed policies closely resembling those Kissinger espoused. Such personification of the evils of American foreign policy and demonization of one among many protagonists was, he suggested, both unfair and counterproductive. On this occasion, Suri also strongly defended Kissinger against charges that he was a war criminal. In this volume, Suri further suggests that persistent allegations that, in the run-up to the presidential election of 1968, in order to facilitate a Republican victory Kissinger deliberately undercut Vietnamese peace negotiations then in progress have been overblown, since it was most unlikely that the South Vietnamese, fully aware that they might receive a better deal under a new incumbent, would have made any meaningful commitments prior to the election.

Many of Suri’s points are valid. Yet—especially given his focus on Kissinger’s rise to power and the methods he used to ingratiate himself with the powerful—one feels that more extended discussion of the methods Kissinger used to further his ambitions might be useful. Perhaps the only two individuals of whom Kissinger always spoke warmly, not just to their faces but behind their backs, were his patron Nelson Rockefeller, who in 1968 gave him $50,000 in gratitude for his services over the years, and David Bruce, an eminent diplomat of impeccable elite credentials who genuinely admired and liked Kissinger, and whose wife’s Georgetown salon provided Kissinger with the entrée to the Establishment social circles whose acceptance he craved. In his memoirs, Kissinger wrote with considerable admiration of the "the American foreign policy Establishment . . . . [t]he leadership group in America that had won the battle against isolationism in the 1940s and sustained a responsible American involvement in the world throughout the postwar period." Later commentators on the foreign policy Establishment, however, highlighted how the blatant and naked ambition of Kissinger and other power-hungry non-elite figures undermined many of the practices and values of the old-line Establishment, especially the personal standards, mores, and loyalties of the group Kissinger and similar rising intellectuals aspired to join. Kissinger’s assiduous flattery of those whose favor he needed to court, not least Richard Nixon throughout the latter’s presidency, balanced with simultaneous denigration of such individuals behind their backs, and his often abusive treatment of inferiors, is not just a subject for interesting gossip and warrants further discussion.

Given the context, Suri might have focused rather more upon some of these admittedly unattractive behavioral patterns that Kissinger displayed while attaining and exercising power, and discussed at greater length whether they played their part in vitiating his effectiveness in office. Were the methods Kissinger chose to employ themselves self-defeating in denying him the real greatness as a statesman that he coveted?

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5 Kissinger, Years of Upheaval, 86-87.
Ultimately, however, one regrets that Suri has only written half a book. His work is invariably stimulating, insightful, and original. He has given us the best, fullest, and most perceptive account to date of Kissinger’s early career and thinking and the strategies he followed to attain power. It is all the more unfortunate that, after so ably setting the stage for his hero’s big moments and setpieces, Suri scrambles through a few high points and sends the disappointed audience out with far more than enough time to catch the last train home. Many books would benefit greatly if cut by half. With Jeremi Suri, my complaint is that his book should have been longer.