
Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

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

What is Policy?

I want to thank Barbara Keys, Priscilla Roberts, James Sparrow, and Yafeng Xia for their careful readings of my book and their very insightful comments. I agree with much of what they say. In particular, I share their fascination with the complexities of Kissinger’s personality and its often damaging effects on his policies. Kissinger’s vanity, insecurity, self-righteousness, and callousness were surely at work in the expansion of the Vietnam War, the Chilean coup, the civil war in Angola, and the U.S. toleration of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. Similarly, Yafeng Xia reminds us that even Sino-American relations stagnated, in part, because of Kissinger’s personal failings. Kissinger was a deeply flawed decision-maker.

Keys and Roberts would clearly like to read more about Kissinger’s flaws and the details of their workings through the policy process in the 1970s. As they know, Jussi Hanhimäki, Jeffrey Kimball, and others have covered much of this ground. Many other historians – especially a very

*Henry Kissinger and the American Century* is an effort to analyze the roots of policy, not the day-to-day practice. Both, it seems to me, are legitimate and necessary topics. One cannot understand why governments do certain things if one neglects the daily interplay of action and reaction. Anyone who has spent significant time in government archives recognizes the overwhelming pressures of crises, meetings, telephone conversations, and now emails that dominate the modern policy-maker’s waking hours. As a professor I feel this myself, and I am struck by how much worse it is for a president, a foreign minister, and a national security advisor.

I would not, however, want anyone to judge me solely by my reactions to the pressures of my daily life. Professors and policy-makers are moved by big ideas and ambitious strategies, as much as immediate stimuli. The most interesting question for me is not why someone did something mistaken or foolish – everyone does those things – but how mistaken and foolish actions fit into a larger pattern of thought. What are the assumptions that guided action under pressure? What are the insights and blind spots that recurred in diverse circumstances? What can we learn from these insights and blind spots?

Those are the questions in the case of Henry Kissinger, and the Cold War more generally, that my book seeks to address. James Sparrow appropriately suggests that a broader “cohort-oriented analysis” might offer great insight on these questions. Priscilla Roberts makes a similar point in her well-researched reflections on the “foreign policy Establishment.” I agree, and I hope my work on Kissinger opens new perspectives on the commonalities among the many figures, like him, who transformed policy after the Second World War. That is what biographical analysis in the context of both diplomatic and social history can offer. How did the context of society at a given time shape policy-makers? How did policy-makers shape society? I am struck by how infrequently historians ask those questions about the figures – diplomats or subalterns – that they study.

Barbara Keys provocatively calls this “anti-biography” because it allegedly asserts a “deterministic feel” when the individual under study is made to appear “rational” and “conditioned by externalities.” Here I must disagree. To argue that a figure like Kissinger is a product of his time, as I do indeed argue, is not to say that his actions were predetermined. Context explains; it does not predict. Kissinger’s self-conscious experiences as a German-Jewish refugee, an “outsider” in American society (a “marginal man” as Sparrow calls him, invoking Robert Park), and a Cold War policy intellectual shaped his assumptions about power. They made certain choices – militant anti-communism, reliance on nuclear posturing, and military escalation in Vietnam – attractive.
They made other choices – respect for student protesters, promotion of racial diversity, and acceptance of anti-American regimes in the “third world” – less attractive. In the end, Kissinger and others like him made choices and they often disagreed. The point is not that choices were determined, but that they were biased by experience and context in certain directions. Although it took a man of great fortitude and intelligence to rise from refugee to secretary of state, it would have taken an individual of even greater introspection and insight to avoid the temptations of excessive anti-communism and militarism in the Cold War. Perhaps such people existed, and perhaps they would have been better policy-makers. Kissinger was not one of them.

Should we condemn Kissinger for flawed – maybe even criminal – acts that reflected his experiences and his understanding of them? Maybe we should. If we adopt that approach (it seems so easy, doesn’t it?), we might pause at least briefly to assess causes. Did Kissinger make bad decisions because he was a bad person? Or did he make bad decisions because his intellectual and experiential background prepared him to acquire power, but not exercise it successfully in a world of decolonization, declining political legitimacy, and Middle East disaster?

My book chooses to focus on the reasons rather than the actions, not because the actions are unimportant or excusable. Kissinger’s reasons, it seems to me, tells us a lot about why his mistakes recurred so often in the history of the American Century. Good reasons produced bad policies because they were poorly attuned to the world they sought to navigate. Good reasons encouraged inattention to other important perspectives and alternatives. Good reasons frequently became self-defeating. Those are the useful historical and contemporary lessons that I draw from Kissinger’s career, as much as the chest-thumping outrage at his misdeeds.

As the thoughtful reviews in this roundtable note, I do praise Kissinger’s intellectual rigor and his policy efforts as a whole. That is because I strongly believe that one can only make policy if one begins with good reasons – before the chaos of daily pressures takes over. Kissinger’s good reasons gave his actions a focus and a practical direction that allowed him to operate consistently and sometimes effectively. His good reasons did not insure positive outcomes, and they often allowed him to explain away the suffering he caused. (In response to Barbara Keys, yes, of course I know that many thousands of people suffered.) Nonetheless, good reasons are better than bad reasons or poorly formulated reasons. Policy requires articulate purpose and skilled application. If we get beyond condemnation alone, I am convinced that attention to Kissinger’s career as whole can offer useful lessons for a better translation of purpose into application, or as Kissinger would put it, strategy into tactics.

My interest in policy-making from experience and concept to application and action explains why I wrote *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*. It is the source of the passion that I am happy the reviewers observed in the book. It is also the reason I focused on Kissinger’s life – rather than Richard Nixon’s or someone else’s. Kissinger should have done better, but he didn’t. I believe he is haunted by this realization, even on his own
terms. Understanding where he went wrong in concept as well as daily detail is absolutely vital if we, as an international society, hope to do better in the future.

We have not begun the twenty-first century very well. I wrote *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* because I believe historical understanding can improve policy. I tried to make the book accessible to a broad audience – not just scholars and Kissinger junkies – so that people could actually read it and think about it. I sincerely thank the reviewers for doing just that.