Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Powers
Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World
Roundtable Review

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23 September 2007
Robert Dallek’s Partial Synthesis of Nixon-Kissinger Scholarship

The dust jacket summary of *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* identifies Robert Dallek as “one of the greatest historians of our time” and describes this, his latest book, as an “epic joint biography” in which the author “offers a provocative, groundbreaking portrait of a pair of outsize leaders whose unlikely partnership dominated the world stage and changed the course of history. . . . Tapping into a wealth of recently declassified archives, . . . Dallek uncovers fascinating details about Nixon and Kissinger’s tumultuous personal relationship . . . [and] also brilliantly analyzes their dealings with power brokers at home and abroad.” In his preface and acknowledgments, the author more modestly expresses his “hope” that his “recounting” of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s lives in this “political biography . . . will cast fresh light on who they were and why and how they collaborated.” His plumbing of the archives has helped him provide “authoritative answers to a number of enduring questions” about Nixon’s psychology, the Vietnam War, rapprochement with China, détente with the Soviet Union, the Indo-Pakistan War, the Yom Kippur War, the army coup in Chile and accompanying murders of General Rene Schneider and President Salvador Allende, the Watergate scandal, and the relevance of this history for the present. Similar comments were part of a pre- and post-publication advertising blitz in print, radio, and television venues. On PBS’s 21 May 2007 *NewsHour*, for example, Dallek particularly stressed his use of the newly declassified textual and audio documentation, as though other historians had not previously used this trove to provide “authoritative answers.”

Few books fully live up to their trumpeting publicity, but the claims made for *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* are unusually extravagant, especially for a book by an academic historian who embraces his credentials. What is startling in this respect is the stark disconnect between hype and substance and the disconcerting failure by the author to cite the rich literature on his subject and especially the seminal works of other scholars, upon which he has built his partial and flawed recounting of some of the history of the Nixon-Kissinger partnership. Because of this, I am reluctantly and regrettably compelled to explain what I think is wrong with the book before I comment on what is right with it.

To begin with, Dallek’s synthesis is not a true political biography, which normally describes an account of the life, deeds, and times of a mover and shaker set in the context of political
motives, events, and forces. *Nixon and Kissinger* is primarily a diplomatic history of Nixinger foreign policies vis-à-vis selected topics, in which the author explains Nixon’s and Kissinger’s goals, tactics, and strategies mostly in terms of their political considerations and to a lesser extent in terms of their peculiar psychologies. If it were a true political biography, the book would cover not only foreign affairs but also--and primarily--domestic affairs. Nixon’s other “partners in power” would then include H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, John Connally, and possibly a few others. Furthermore, although the Nixon-Kissinger partnership is a valid subject and theme in and of itself, Dallek does not squarely confront the core questions about that relationship: Who of the two directed U.S. foreign policy? Who determined its prime objectives? Who was the grand-strategist? Dallek does not formally explicate what he appears to imply through his quotes and storytelling narrative that Kissinger was the dominant figure. If this is what he thinks, it is a view with which I disagree, except perhaps for the 1973-1974 period; other historians no doubt agree with him (or he with them). But in order to have made an authoritative statement on the subject, Dallek should have explained and justified his position more forthrightly. Perhaps then he could have convinced me.

Even as a diplomatic history and not a political biography, and despite its 740 pages of text and endnotes, Dallek pays too little attention to other figures who--even if not “partners in power” in the sense Dallek means this phrase--played critically influential roles in shaping Nixinger foreign policy: Haldeman, Melvin Laird, and even William Rogers. Dallek's joint-biographical approach to the subject and his focus on political causation leads him to omit a viable account or analysis of significant legislative, ideological, bureaucratic, advisory, military, international, and socio-cultural influences on Nixinger foreign policy -- for example, Congress; the State, Defense, Treasury, and Commerce Departments; Kissinger's NSC staffers; the antiwar movement; the military-political conditions on the ground in Vietnam; the globally overstretched military and economic power of the United States; the erosion of the Cold War paradigm; and, last but not least, the ideologies or world-views of Nixon and Kissinger themselves. It was, after all, their particular world-views about international relations, *realpolitik*, the Cold War, the Vietnamese revolution, Third-World peoples, and hegemony that more often than not trumped politics, or at least meshed with their political considerations and psyches.

Nor does Dallek make any serious attempt to discuss the “mainsprings” of U.S. policy or to place Nixinger policies in the context of the continuities and discontinuities of the history of American foreign relations -- for example, such things as *realpolitik*, Wilsonianism, idealism v. self-interest, hegemonism, open-door imperialism, militarism, racism, machismo, and the reasons for their and others’ fixation on particular ways of maintaining U.S. global credibility. There are other critical omissions of this kind. The author, for instance, often nonchalantly states that Nixon and Kissinger's foreign policy motives included “national security” concerns and a desire for “peace,” yet he neglects to tell readers how these men understood these concepts. After all, their understandings were quite different that those of other Americans, whether among the elite or the hoi polloi--not to mention the views of foreign allies and adversaries.
Dallek’s coverage of his chosen topic for this big book--foreign policy--is often superficial in other ways. Important contextual facts and issues are missing. There is too little, for example, on a long list of important topics: Ostpolitik in relation to U.S.-Soviet détente; the real meaning of détente (as explained, e.g., by Raymond Garthoff); the role of Mao Zedong, State Department planners, and liberals in launching rapprochement between the United States and China; the relationship between Nixon’s détente/rapprochement policies and their effort to resolve their Vietnam problem; the impact upon the SALT talks of Nixon and Kissinger’s desire to maintain U.S. nuclear advantages; their use of nuclear threats in foreign policy crises; Nixon’s madman theory; the origin and purpose of the public relations policy illusorily known as the Nixon Doctrine. Diplomatic and military stalemates are poorly explained: rarely does the reader find a clear, coherent description of the specific core issues that divided warring parties, such as those separating Washington and Hanoi or Israel and the Palestinians. Key foreign policy topics are missing almost altogether: Africa, Japan, and, except for the coup against Allende, Latin America. Also missing is anything on economic foreign policy, which, as historian Allen J. Matusow has demonstrated, was one of Nixon’s main concerns. The international monetary system that Nixon willy-nilly helped to bring about transformed international trade balances and finance.

Even Dallek’s psychological interpretation of Nixon’s behavior--a focus of this joint biography--is lacking, both in his diagnosis and in the author’s failure to cite previous works on the subject. His not-very-new analysis of Nixon’s psyche, for example, boils down to popular layman’s observations: low self-esteem, search for validation, mood swings, alcoholism, and paranoia (which in professional psychological circles is a highly technical term requiring careful explication). Regarding Kissinger, there is even less of a diagnosis. Of course, no professional psychologist would seriously attempt to diagnose a patient from a distance, without having the patient “on a couch,” so to speak. But Dallek could at least have attempted to compare what we have known and what little he has since learned about Nixon’s and Kissinger’s minds and behaviors with the diagnostic criteria of the non-Freudian American Psychiatric Association. This would have provided him with a more authoritative basis on which to speculate.

As for other publicity claims for the book, Dallek writes in a clear but not an “epic” style. His narrative consists mainly of myriad cherry-picked documentary quotations of Nixon and Kissinger and a few other persons that are strung together in sentence after sentence without a sustained and consistent analytic context. Dallek’s writing resembles what we often regard as journalism--that is, a story told in quotations taken from the *dramatis personae*, usually without accompanying and logically legitimate analysis by a knowledgeable narrator, with occasional references to “experts” in order to convey a “balanced” perspective and a focus on personality by way of explaining events. Oddly, too, Dallek repeatedly refers to Kissinger throughout the book as “Henry”--not in the sarcastic or condescending way Nixon, Haldeman, and Haig sometimes seemed to do, but in the informal way that Kissinger’s aides and colleagues sometimes did. If he did not want to refer to Nixon as “Dick” or Haig as “Al” or Brezhnev as “Leonid,” and so on, and since the
book is not entitled  *Dick and Henry*, what is the point of calling Kissinger “Henry” throughout the narrative? It is an odd stylistic habit that distracts readers and also detracts and from the epic aspirations of this joint biography. (Where were the copy editors on this one?)

In any case, previous biographies have come much closer to eloquent, epic styles, more penetrating insights, and thematic plot lines that match the tragedy, comedy, pathos, and hubris of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s public and private lives, not to mention their impact on the nation, the world, and history. Much of what there is of analysis in this book takes the form of normative judgments on the moral goodness or badness of Nixon policies as opposed to the historical examination, explanation, and elucidation of key issues in historiography. At times, too, the author is maddeningly inconsistent—criticizing Nixon or Kissinger on one failing but equivocating on another but similar failing.

One of the best examples for me of the absence of sustained, integrated analysis is Dallek’s treatment of the “decent-interval” exit strategy regarding the Vietnam War. To his credit, he draws on some of the latest declassified evidence in support of the thesis that Nixon sought a sufficient time interval between a negotiated agreement and the fall of Saigon, the pursuit of which resulted in a prolonged war. But Dallek never incorporates his evidence (or others’ evidence and explanation) into an argument demonstrating that the decent-interval option was indeed one of Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy options—that is, an option that organically shaped their policies vis-à-vis the negotiations and the war. Vietnamization, which Dallek conventionally identifies as the central Nixon war strategy, was—as the new evidence reveals—the byproduct of the decent-interval exit option. The casual or nonprofessional reader could easily miss the point, as Dallek seems to do.

The book does not live up to its promise of being provocative and groundbreaking—at least for fellow and sister professionals. Dallek’s thesis (such as it is and to the extent it can be extrapolated from his storytelling narrative) more or less restates some of the past and much of the current historiographic conventional wisdom about the Nixon-Kissinger relationship and selected Nixinger foreign policies. Dallek has not himself uncovered all of the fascinating details he relates. Nor has he plumbed all of the important, relevant U.S. documents. He does not draw on available Soviet, Chinese, and Vietnamese documents. He relies too frequently on Kissinger’s and other Americans’ characterizations of Soviet, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Palestinian attitudes and positions.

Although Dallek rightly claims that the history he has recounted has great relevance for the present, he does not develop this argument. He could, for example, have briefly explained how the vaulted claims Nixon and Kissinger made about their foreign policy successes, their scapegoating of others for the Vietnam debacle, and the lessons they drew from the Vietnam War adversely influenced and embittered American policy and politics to this day. He could have discussed how the opportunities Nixon and Kissinger willfully and selfishly missed in resolving Israeli-Arab differences compounded the difficulties we all faced in the
decades that followed. He could have discussed the profound impact that Nixon’s international monetary policy has had on the U.S. economy and the course of globalization.

It is not uncommon to find one or two minor factual errors and copyediting lapses in even the most carefully written and edited books, but there are some doozies in this one. Among them are a photograph identifying an unknown Soviet official as Dobrynin (who it is plainly not); Dallek’s misunderstanding of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s reaction to the Moratorium and New Mobilization of October-November 1969 and of the provenance of the 3 November 1969 “silent majority” speech; the author’s repetition of Kissinger’s demonstrably false claim that it was Le Duc Tho and not Kissinger who first suggested the 15 October 1972 target date for a negotiated settlement; his implication that Moscow and Beijing caused Hanoi to make its (minor) compromise in the negotiations; and other errors of this kind.

Well, what is right with the book? If we ignore the disconnect between hype and substance, put aside concerns that Dallek does not properly cite the work of his professional peers from whom he has borrowed, disregard the difficulties caused by his nonstandard citation method, and allow that he has a perfect right to write about the Nixon-Kissinger relationship and ignore some significant and relevant context, then it can then be said that this is a good read. It is also a book that approaches the status of a popular synthesis of much of what is known about the Nixon-Kissinger relationship and selected topics in U.S. foreign policy for the period. It is a good read especially for non-specialist professionals and the non-academic public, for whom the book was mainly written. For me, the most important interpretive contribution Dallek makes is to develop the thesis -- which is not new or groundbreaking -- that contrary to the Nixon-Kissinger claim, the Watergate scandal did not adversely affect Nixon’s foreign policy. Indeed, the scandal spurred Nixon and Kissinger to make greater efforts to achieve foreign policy successes. When they failed--for example, in failing to save the Saigon regime--it was because of objective circumstances beyond their control or because of their own flawed policies. Dallek gets that right.