



## The man who loved power

Patrick Porter

30 November, 2023

Henry Kissinger is dead. Let us speak ill of him. He was a man who, having studied and practised power, came to love it. From that failure, bad things flowed. We should not only speak ill — his legacy is a mixed one, so this is not a straightforward Philippic. But some excoriation is due.

First, let's cast aside the bogus morality of speak-not-ill-of-the-dead. It is a non-sequitur that permits only reverence for the atrocious deceased. People who held high office and exercised its privileges and immunities get to bid for a place in history. In return, they are not entitled posthumous immunity from inquest. Conversely, there are many whose lives are shaped by the legacy of elite figures, and some people they put in the ground, some too early, by carelessness or design. In practice, no-one really believes the proposition that dead people are beyond reproach. Those who invoke it almost always do so in self-serving ways, to shut down critical discussion that the shut-downer doesn't feel like hearing. The foreign policy establishment figures who demanded that all criticism of the late Madeleine Albright cease were not so censorious when, say, Yasser Arafat bit the dust. They will gladly suffer denunciations of

intellectuals they despise, whether John Mearsheimer or Noam Chomsky. So people, including hagiographers, have no inherent right never to be offended.

If you believe otherwise, no one is forcing you to read further. There are many outlets praising Kissinger to the skies, and giving you what you want to hear: a bed-time story about America as the innocent hegemon. The rest of us have serious things to discuss.

Kissinger's career in government and afterwards was full to the brim

Kissinger's career in government and afterwards was full to the brim. Amidst all that detail, one act at least must receive maximal attention. This is the Chennault affair and Kissinger's knowing part in it. In 1968, in a tightening race for the presidency, the Nixon/Agnew Republican camp sabotaged the Paris peace negotiations over the bloody Vietnam war, by covertly persuading the South Vietnamese regime to stall and boycott the peace talks. Kissinger was President Johnson's consultant in Paris, but secretly Nixon's spy. There is now overwhelming evidence that this happened, and that Kissinger was complicit. In a painstaking work, historian Ken Hughes pulled together the FBI transcripts, the notes of Nixon's campaign chief of staff H.R. Haldeman, memoirs of officials from the Johnson administration, and from Kissinger himself in his own words, on the Nixon tape of 17 June 1971. Later discussing the bombing halt negotiations and his access to Johnson's instructions to his Ambassador, W. Averell Harriman, Kissinger reminded Nixon "You remember, I used to give you information about it at the time." We know too from Richard V. Allen, Nixon's campaign foreign policy advisor, that Kissinger had planted a spy in

the peace talks, and that Kissinger would then call from a pay phone and pass on information in German. He “offloaded mostly every night what had happened that day in Paris.”

Counterfactually speaking, it is not clear that absent this sabotage, the Paris talks would have succeeded. They may not have gone on to suspend the fighting at length, let alone settle the war. War termination short of decisive battlefield breakthroughs is always difficult, and we might doubt whether North Vietnam, with the balance of resolve in its favour, would have settled for permanent partition. Regardless, it matters that Kissinger and his party knowingly tried. It violated the Logan Act, that prohibits private diplomacy on behalf of the United States, and thus was an act of constitutional vandalism. It was an unambiguous case of putting party interests above the national interest, not to mention the welfare of the species. This was not reason of state, with which Kissinger publicly identified, the morality of serving the country even if that involves moral compromise. It was undermining the state, with contempt for all that was at stake in order to achieve office.

A similar excess runs through much of his career. Kissingerists will say that the violent or illicit forces Kissinger helped unleash — the coups, the bombings, the massacres — were tragically necessary or forgivable, given the pressures the United States was under. But did that really warrant winking at Indonesia’s rapacious invasion of East Timor? Given America’s preponderance of power in the region, and Kissinger’s fondness for coercion, why not tell a genocidal ally, like the one in Jakarta, to cut it out and get in line, for once? The Carter administration tried to walk that line with the military despotism in Argentina, maintaining alignment while coercing it to behave, but having left office recently, Kissinger helpfully turned up to shower it with unalloyed praise. Did it really help Nato’s cohesion, to encourage the

attempted assassination of Archbishop Karameikos in Cyprus, precipitating civil war then Turkey's invasion and occupation? Did the carpet bombing of Cambodia do more to stabilise or destabilise the wider region, constrain or accelerate the rise of the Khmer Rouge?

Try this another way. Let's take the Kissinger *apologias* at their strongest. Most of his ruthless acts in office, some will say, were lesser evils, cold acts but justified by reason of state, given all that was at stake. Moreover, Kissinger's unflinching realism was a necessary corrective to the flawed Wilsonian tradition with its crusading, overreaching visions of world transformation, whether in the form of outlawing war to making war ambitiously. Just as he transmitted the wisdom of the Congress of Vienna, about the prudent use of power as the basis for peace, so too did the détente he and Nixon held with Mao's China mark a lasting historical achievement.

But even if these claims are priced in, that is hardly a warrant for some of the things he did next. Was it really to the republic's benefit that on leaving office, he made off with thousands of state documents in the form of telephone call transcripts (telecons)?

Neither is it clear that the self-styled Metternich helped Americans, or the world, when he, through his geopolitical consulting firm, became a long-term advisor to the Chinese Communist Party. Beijing is now the largest, richest, near-peer adversary the United States has ever faced. Its imperial vision of a Sino-centric order points towards a techno-authoritarian empire which suppresses dissent. More must be made of the fact that it paid Kissinger Associates for his tuition. But this is symptomatic of a wider problem — a media ecosystem that treats the likes of Kissinger as disinterested authorities and vital intermediaries, not profiteering agents. When outlets cited Kissinger's views on China — for instance, his defence of the Tiananmen massacre,

or his advice that Biden moderate human rights criticism of Xi Jinping — they only rarely mentioned that he consulted for China. That fact didn't make him wrong. (Indeed, his views were often not even wrong, being vague but grandiloquent statements about “world order” that hinted at some kind of accommodating integration of Beijing into a “Pacific Community”, but didn't bother to get into specifics). But the news coverage ought to have mentioned this simple fact each time he dispensed his advice in public. He was not a dispassionate expert giving sage advice. He was a client with an interest.

Kissinger is a warning above all about power. Realism, the tradition from Thucydides to Morgenthau that he identified with, encourages an acceptance and respect for power, especially hard power, as the *ultima ratio* of international life. That respect demands some restraint and some sense of civic purpose, given the world's tendency towards hostile balancing, and given that power can corrupt its possessor. We cannot opt out of power politics. But that is no alibi to yield to its corruptions.

Kissinger, however, not only respected but loved wielding it. If Kissinger is to be remembered as a member of the realist family and its pursuit of *Realpolitik*, he embodied its darker form, crude and self-indulgent *Machtpolitik*. Kissinger's behaviour suggests so- trying to sabotage a nation's peace negotiations in order to advance one's career is the definition of power-loving. His sinister humour suggested so. And his gratuitous remarks suggested so. As reported by Bob Woodward, when asked by journalist Mike Gerson in 2005 why he had supported the invasion of Iraq, he replied “Because Afghanistan wasn't enough.” In the conflict with radical Islam, he said, they want to humiliate us. “And we need to humiliate them.” It's all there: the visceral attraction to displays of violence, the clambering aboard of the realist with neoconservative war hawks, the

know-nothing treatment of Iraqis, thousands of whom violently and needlessly died, as proxies for “radical Islam.” And the simple error of failing to recall that wading into such a war can easily humiliate the stronger party.

And he loved proximity to it ever after. Entirely consistent with his life’s arc was his continuous self-reinvention to suit the policies of whoever occupied the White House, from Bill Clinton’s marketising sunny neoliberalism to George W. Bush’s messianic warmaking to Donald Trump’s ethno-nationalist demagoguery. The one exception was Barack Obama, the only president to refuse him homage, which meant Kissinger for once let rip against the president without inhibition, the only point that he flashed up in his otherwise turgid work, *World Order*. He had rehearsed such behaviour for decades, dumping his long-term associate George Rockefeller and joining the Nixon camp, the man he and his former boss despised. He did not educate the powerful how to think. He changed his opinions to suit the powerful. He was less a tutor than a reed in the wind.

Kissinger practised power politics as much against his own republic as in the wider world. With his exotic accent and continuous harping on democracy’s frailties in the world of diplomacy, he knowingly trafficked on an American insecurity, the worry that the innocent young nation needs the guidance of the wised-up old world, as if America did not have its own exemplars of effective diplomacy long before Henry turned up. And his underlying impulse was not to tutor the republic. Hans Morgenthau, a civic-minded realist who knew Kissinger well, identified the actual motor: “Kissinger has done, during his adult life, very little that was not oriented toward a particular aim in terms of his personal service and particularly his personal power. And he has been eminently successful.” Full stop.

Not for him and his clear conscience the agonising memoirs and constructive self-analysis of his Vietnam contemporaries

Unsurprisingly, for the most part he got away with it. Not for him and his clear conscience the agonising memoirs and constructive self-analysis of his Vietnam contemporaries. Not for him, many awkward questions from the press. Some families of the victims of his policies brought lawsuits. He once fled Paris after a magistrate's order for his arrest. He once shared a box at Yankee Stadium with Samantha Power, the self-styled "idealist" who on principle could only accept an award in Kissinger's name, before going on to complain about an international recession of human rights. So there were occasional punishments.

But on the whole, Kissinger got to float in the acclaim, reverence and hefty fees of an admiring audience. Now his spirit can enjoy the outpouring of euphemistic tributes, including by people who privately know better. His life and death enjoyed this world because it could. The main problem was not his character. It was and is structural. In an anarchic world where there is no assurance of international justice, it is up to nations what to do with their own mandarins and grandees, including the ones who debauch public office. Kissinger thrived because he operated in a public life of fawning, immunity and gifting that his compatriots allowed to grow around him. Parlaying public office into lucrative consultancy work, even with regimes who violate U.S. interests, is normal practice. In his death, as in his life, Kissinger's dark charisma and closeness to power, the complicity of others who want their slice of the same pie, and his compatriots' appetite for being schooled by a master, got him a free pass. Kissinger's career, then, was a collective choice. The damage of his example is left undone, the corpses unavenged.