

Originally Processed With FOIA(s):
2006-0668-F[1]

FOIA Number:
2006-0668-F[1]

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Series: Porter, Roger, Files
Subseries:

OA/ID Number: 08861
Folder ID Number: 08861-058

Folder Title:
Kissinger, Henry A.

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HENRY KISSINGER

FINANCIAL TIMES THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 17 1992

BOOK REVIEW

The contradictory Dr K

In the annals of modern American statecraft, no one occupies a more prominent place than Henry A Kissinger. For eight years under Presidents Nixon and Ford he dominated the conception, formation and execution of US foreign policy, at times appearing to act with an authority more solid than that of the president himself. With Nixon, he extended, then terminated, America's disastrous entanglement in Indochina, and as the Nixon administration crumbled, he represented one of Washington's only anchors of stable government. He initiated détente with Moscow and made the historic opening to Beijing. Like some other-worldly chess player, he manipulated and managed foreign crises more single-handedly than any US government officer before or since.

Yet Kissinger's reputation remains as hotly contested today as it was when he departed office in 1976. Still admired for his dazzling intellect and sought after for his international expertise, he is also blamed for much unnecessary slaughter in far-flung places and held responsible for a lasting tendency towards duplicity in the US executive branch's handling of foreign affairs. To his many critics, he is enduringly tainted with the bad smell that stifled the Nixon presidency — the wire-taps, the petty in-fighting, the lies.

Walter Isaacson's book is an attempt to pin down this contradictory and elusive figure once and for all. It is, of course, not the first — if anything the task is complicated by the existence of Kissinger's own voluminous, highly readable but subjective memoirs, not to mention the large corpus of sycophantic and bitterly hostile literature that has appeared in the past 16 years. But it is undoubtedly the most successful. Isaacson, an editor with *Time* magazine, writes with wit and insight; he is also greatly helped by having had

KISSINGER: A BIOGRAPHY By Walter Isaacson

Faber & Faber. £25, 893 pages

extensive access to his subject without conceding any editorial control.

This is no hatchet job. The author has weighed the merits and the mistakes of Kissinger's career. Nevertheless, the portrait that emerges is of a deeply complex, even bizarre, personality: a mixture of preening arrogance and foot-stamping paranoia; of irresistible charm, vindictiveness and an almost pathetic desire to be liked; of strong, but highly changeable, convictions.

Isaacson plausibly attributes many of these traits to Kissinger's early life as a Jew in Nazi Germany, where 12 of his relatives perished. But in his case the refugee's desire for recognition was a mania. As a young academic at Harvard, he spent much time seeking to ingratiate himself with the powerful and famous, and from his army days he attached himself to a series of influential patrons who — recognising his brilliance — secured him advancement. Having been adopted by the most important patron of all, he craved celebrity, becoming the darling of the Georgetown dinner circuit, of TV talk shows, and of the Hollywood starlets whom he conspicuously but celibately dated.

These personality issues are central to an understanding of Kissinger's statesmanship. Partly as a result of his background, his world view was dark. He was heavily influenced by gloomy European thinkers such as Spengler, and more or less consciously modelled himself on Metternich, of whose aptitude for intrigue and manipulation he wrote approvingly while at university. He felt strongly the need for international order, and dismissed the moralistic or idealistic arguments that often prevail in US

foreign policy debates. This could lead to misjudgments: Kissinger's tendency to view all regional conflicts through the prism of the cold war, for example, even when there was no evidence of Moscow's hand, and his disregard for home-grown political forces in countries he perceived as friends or foes.

What Kissinger felt most strongly of all, however, was his urge both to command the stage and to direct the performance. His style was devious; he preferred "back channels" to formal diplomatic communication, stealth to openness. On occasion this paid dividends by enabling Kissinger to cut through the conventional wisdom. As Isaacson argues, the stunning China initiative would not have been possible had it been conducted through regular state department channels. But at other times, Kissinger seemed to choose the cloak and dagger for their own sake. To quote Napoleon on Metternich, he tended to "confuse policy with intrigue". As often as not, the intrigue was directed at rivals within the administration.

Kissinger might respond to these charges by saying that the means were justified by the end, which was to steer the US out of its Vietnam débâcle and establish a new balance of global power. In that he succeeded, for a time. He was certainly more alive than most of his peers to the limits on American power in the 1970s, and that remains an important legacy at a time when the US may be on the brink of electing its first Vietnam-generation president. Where Kissinger erred most substantially, perhaps, was in failing to understand that Americans need a more compelling justification for an active involvement in the outside world than his calculating *realpolitik*.

Andrew Gowers