

Review: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, OCT 13 2010

It is often taken for granted that Henry Kissinger was (and remains) a text book example of a practitioner of *realpolitik*; both in his diplomatic and political record, and through his academic output. Mario Del Pero's chief task in his short monograph, *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy*, is to break up this image and paint a more nuanced picture of Kissinger's realism. In doing so he introduces a well structured argument to highlight the ever-present pragmatism and flexibility in Kissinger's daily workings – building on Hans Morgenthau's comment that Kissinger's greatest skill was via his operation as a many-sided Odysseus with multiple faces. This journey takes Del Pero into various areas of American Cold War history and in parallel examines the development of Kissinger the man – prior to his emergence in the Nixon administration after defecting from the defeated Rockefeller Presidential ticket in 1968. In that sense, the book is of potential use for both students and the general interest reader who want to access an informed, yet concise analysis of this period of American diplomatic history.

Central to Del Pero's thesis is to reinforce and add to a recently emerging revisionist position amongst historians that Kissinger was acutely aware of the often unpopular domestic implications of his various foreign policy paths. Traditional scholarship has previously judged that Kissinger was both ignorant and unconcerned with the aforementioned, contributing to the eventual electoral defeat of the Ford administration in 1976 and the steady loss of

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public and Congressional support sometime earlier. Yet, recent archival declassifications have allowed for a different picture to be painted – and in Del Pero’s words, highlight Kissinger’s carefully considered and often obsessive attempts to both understand and influence the domestic reception to his words and deeds. This leads to a fascinating reappraisal of the history of the period, which Del Pero conducts skilfully.

Del Pero’s analysis of Kissinger’s ideology is also of benefit to those interested in a critique of realism itself, particularly as it applied to the Cold War and the American political establishment’s structural perception of that conflict. He notes that Kissinger was not a transformationalist, rather that he operated on the firm belief that bipolarity was permanent, and therefore the Cold War could not be ‘won’. Kissinger and Nixon therefore proceeded with a strategy of masking this unpalatable fact from the domestic political discourse by appearing duplicitously to the contrary in public statements, with significant success early in the administration’s tenure.

Interestingly, this sets up an analysis of Détente as a pessimistic, yet pragmatic endeavour firmly rooted in the maintenance of the status quo. Détente was then, a deliberate move from conflictual to consensual bipolarism. Thus, setting Kissinger at odds with the then emerging neoconservative movement which would find its feet in the Reagan administration’s transformational ‘Rambo’-esque foreign policy – and to which Del Pero devotes a significant amount of attention as a counterfoil for the analysis of Kissinger’s realism. Perhaps controversially, Del Pero concludes that neoconservatism is more in tune with the legacy of American foreign policy than Kissinger’s brand of realism, which is certainly food for thought.

Where the analysis is partially problematic is beyond the biographical and historical realms, which are excellent. Breaking up and analysing something as diverse as realism feels underdone and presents a weakness in the analysis, particularly to specialists of international relations. This is evident in several areas of the book, such as in the assertion that Kissinger’s view of the world was non-ideological and merely derived from his belief in bipolarity. This seems to suggest that realism is not an ideology in and of itself, complete with its own set of constructions and beliefs, harking back to the vastly oversimplified realist/idealist post-war E.H Carr inspired debates. Similarly, the analysis seems to be pointing towards a judgement that this supposed realist/idealist debate has made way for a realist/neoconservative debate in the wake of 9/11 and the end of the Cold War. Both positions invite a much deeper theoretical analysis. Yet, within the scope of this monograph, the theoretical analysis does have a fair degree of utility in charting a path of the evolving American approach to foreign policy through the Cold War and into the 21st Century, beyond the 2008 Presidential elections.

In summary, Del Pero’s monograph packs an incredible amount into a concise space, yet does so in a generally fulfilling, non jargon loaded, and highly readable way. The reader will find themselves richer regarding Cold War and diplomatic history, reminded of the complex turn in American domestic political history in the 1970’s in the wake of Vietnam, and will gain a partially satisfactory take on realism and its enduring legacy in international politics – particularly in the face of the challenge presented by neoconservatism in the post 9/11 era. In that sense, Kissinger himself feels more of a means than an end in this particular study, which is in truth much broader than its title suggests.

About the author:

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