

New, more complex global problems call out for a new generation of synoptic thinkers who understand power and who dare to act **BY JEREMI SURI**

**H**ENRY KISSINGER never attended a public policy school, he never took an economics course, and he never worked for a law firm, a large corporation, or a traditional government bureaucracy. His career belies the assumptions about professionalization that dominate our twenty-first century discussions of leadership. Kissinger was never really certified as an “expert” of anything. His famous Ph.D. dissertation on the Congress of Vienna, for example, was a work of History written in a Department of Government. The historians considered him a dilettante; the political scientists believed he was too unscientific. Kissinger only found a permanent academic position

Leadership, at its core, is about connections and calculated risk-taking. Kissinger excelled at both. He was a big picture thinker who drew actively on the work of people with diverse areas of expertise. Kissinger might not have done the original research, but he knew how to identify and exploit valuable new knowledge. He brilliantly synthesized the talent around him to address pressing problems in pragmatic ways. In the decades after the Second World War Kissinger guided policy-makers in their responses to the challenges of postwar reconstruction, communist containment, the nuclear arms race, limited warfare, third world revolutions, and détente. He mastered these subjects and he kept a clear focus on the strategic need to expand American foreign influence while limiting direct commitments.

Kissinger understood that leadership in a complex international environment frequently offers a first mover advantage. He had lived through a decade in the 1930s when the powerful democratic states were paralyzed by their hesitance to take action against emerging threats. Kissinger was driven to prevent a recurrence of those conditions. As he put it, the successful statesman must anticipate as well as react; he or she must “rescue an element of choice from the pressure of circumstance.” Leaders, Kissinger recognized, must define their times, rather than let their times define them. He succeeded in those terms as almost no one else has in recent memory.

Kissinger made many mistakes, but he managed to transform major regions of the world in ways that served American interests. The enduring peace agreement between Israel and Egypt and the uninterrupted Western access to Middle East oil were negotiated by Kissinger personally during his famous “shuttle diplomacy.” The U.S. opening to China was also orchestrated by Kissinger through a series of personal overtures that challenged conventional wisdom. Nearly every major international politician of the last two generations – from Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong to George W. Bush and Hu Jintao – has recognized that if you want to initiate international change, Henry Kissinger is a key catalyst. That is why he remains so influential, more than thirty years since he ended his term as Secretary of State under President Gerald Ford.

Whether one approves of Kissinger’s policies or not, the challenges of the twenty-first century require new Henry Kissingers. The problems – from

## WHERE ARE THE KISSINGERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY?

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at Harvard University when the dean of the college, McGeorge Bundy, created a controversial and experimental new home – the Center for International Affairs – to nurture interdisciplinary projects and acquire large grants from foundations, the federal government, and the intelligence agencies.

Kissinger was a cosmopolitan generalist with an eye for pragmatic policy, living in a time of hyper-specialization and growing separation between thinkers and doers. That is what made Kissinger so special. He lived between separated worlds, and he brought those worlds together for concerted action on behalf of clearly defined national purposes. This was not just a form of work for Kissinger; it was his life story. As an Orthodox Jew in Nazi Germany, an immigrant in the U.S. Army, a non-traditional scholar at Harvard, and an unelected White House advisor, Kissinger always operated on the edge of respectability. He was always the eccentric, the pusher, and the climber. Among respectable and smug pin-striped specialists, these were the qualities that allowed Kissinger to be more creative and daring in his policy advice. These were the qualities that also made him attractive to powerful figures in search of new initiatives.



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failed states and the proliferation of violence, to environmental degradation, fossil fuel depletion, and global disease – require leaders who can synthesize gigabytes of information without getting lost in the details. Leaders will have to connect apparently incompatible ideas and people, and they will have to take calculated risks. The early crises of the twenty-first century – terrorist attacks, North Korean nuclear saber-rattling, the near collapse of the global economy, and the devastating earthquake in Haiti – have shown that creativity and vision are at a premium. The old language of “deterrence,” “development,” and “democracy” does not offer much help. The leaders of the twenty-first century will have to invent new intellectual anchors for action.

So far, the required international leadership has been in short supply. The most decorated economists around the world have mobilized to address the global financial crisis, and yet the structure of the international financial system remains largely unchanged. Where are the inspiring reform ideas? The same can be said for global energy, health, and the environment. Experts have held countless international meetings, the latest in Copenhagen, and they have had the ear of many powerful politicians. Despite these opportunities, where is an inspiring program for new energy production, improved human health, and environmental sustenance? The international community has lots of pet projects and powerful ideas floating around, but where are the figures who can bring all of them together and implement a coherent strategy?

Politics within and among societies are clearly a hindrance to collective action. Resources are also in short supply, and citizens – especially in North America and Western Europe – are comfortably ensconced in self-defeating modes of behavior. All of these observations are valid, but they are only part of the story. They are more of an excuse, rather than an explanation for poor leadership. The political, resource, and habitual hindrances to effective policy in the twenty-first century are neither new nor overwhelming. They are, in fact, sources of creative opportunity that await a visionary transformation. Almost everyone recognizes that change is necessary, but no one has painted a persuasive picture of it yet.

The most advanced societies are, quite frankly, visually challenged in their approach to policy because they are so technically capable. Scientists and engineers have proven ingenious in developing machinery and medicine that allow societies to put off tough choices. Instead of addressing growing inequalities in access to basic resources, the impoverished get connected to the Internet. Instead of deliberating about the behavior changes necessary to improve human health, some of the sick get expensive new treatments while others languish

in Dickensian squalor. This cannot continue, but science and engineering have put off the day of reckoning, at least for a while.

**D**ESPITE THESE deep forebodings, there is cause for optimism. Human history is filled with remarkable examples of creative leadership in the face of imminent disaster. We might have reached a similar juncture in recent years. The new Kissingers of the twenty-first century do not look or sound like Kissinger. They do, however, share his talent for connection and calculated risk-taking. They are cosmopolitan generalists, not narrow specialists, and they congregate in the spaces between established professions, disciplines, and political institutions. Like Kissinger, the new leaders of the twenty-first century are thinkers and doers at the same time, eccentric and indispensable.

They are also young. Active leadership is, in fact, a youthful enterprise. The men and women who are devising and implementing a new vision for international change do not have fancy titles, large incomes, or even big offices. They work long hours, communicating with colleagues around the world and pushing for change within existing business and government institutions. They often disagree on details, but they see themselves as part of a larger, serious, world-historical enterprise.

Who are they? They are the restless academics and journalists who left universities and newspapers because they wanted to be more relevant. In some cases, they found their generalist interests made them unacceptable for professional gate-keepers. In other cases, they achieved professional success but quickly found themselves frustrated with the narcissistic combination of moral outrage and behavioral indifference that characterizes much of intellectual life in the most advanced societies. Like Kissinger, these new leaders have used hard work, eccentricity, and opportunism to build careers in-between institutions, often floating among think tanks, foundations, government appointments, non-governmental institutions, and temporary academic positions. These are the creative thinkers and doers of the twenty-first century, and they are evident in every major national capital.

What have these new leaders done? Quite a lot, in fact. They are the staffers who converted the 9/11 Commission Report into a stunning reevaluation of security and government organization in age of stateless threats. They are the writers who, working with General David Petraeus, re-designed American counterinsurgency doctrine on the eve of the “Surge” in Iraq. They are also the itinerant scholars around

Europe who are working every day to make the European Union into a new kind of transnational government. In China and India, these are the thinkers who are pushing for more openness to outside influences, and better adjustment to domestic needs. The youthful generalists in these and other settings are Kissingerian in their non-traditional efforts at connection, and their unwillingness to divorce ideas from action, as most bureaucracies require.

The problem is not finding these men and women, or encouraging them to continue their activities. They are highly motivated by the challenges and they are smart enough to find mechanisms for support in large and wealthy societies. What they lack is intellectual fertilization from the academy and the business community. Kissinger came of age in a more clubby face-to-face world, where people met frequently for discussions about the big problems of the day. The conversations emphasized understanding and empathy more than labels and political positioning. Despite differences and specializations, these discussions brought people together to listen, and they allowed generalists like Kissinger to acquire new ideas and nurture new supporters.

More often than not, the humanities communities at the great universities in the United States and Western Europe provided the inspiration and the infrastructure for these wide-ranging discussions. Major postwar figures in History, English, Language, and Arts departments saw it as their role to seed civic community around the pressing issues of the day. Scholars like Lionel Trilling at Columbia University, Raymond Aron at L’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, A.J.P. Taylor at Oxford University, and George Mosse at the University of Wisconsin brought in artists, policy-makers, business people, and the young Kissingers to enrich one another. To be a humanist was to be part of a society-wide conversation about the values of our civilization and the aspirations for the future. To be a humanist was to be in dialogue with the creative arts, the technical sciences, and the policy-makers of the day. Many of the latter group, including Kissinger, were the students of the humanists.

The cosmopolitan generalists of the twenty-first century need the humanities, and the humanities need them. The young men and women around each nation’s capital are poised to exert ever more influence, especially as global crises mount. They risk, however, becoming too much a part of the governing system. They must make policy, but they also must remain connected to the creative thinkers who do not make policy. In Kissinger’s later life one could argue that he lost this connection and his policies suffered.

The humanities are an incubator for the creativity and imagination that policy needs more than ever before. The humanities are also a natural connector for the arts, business, and policy. The new Kissingers will not be traditional scholars of literature and history, but they will draw on the discussions surrounding that vital work. They will pioneer new humanistic applications of the modern world’s incredible technical capabilities. | GB



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