

# JEREMI SURI



**H**enry Kissinger lived an extraordinary life at the center of the last century. He was in many of the places that witnessed the most wrenching changes: interwar Germany, midcentury New York City, and Washington D.C., during the height of the Cold War. His career overlapped with the extraordinary rise of American power and Washington's unmatched efforts to make the world safe for democracy. He also lived through a bloody era of mass killings, political extremism, and great-power rivalries.

Kissinger witnessed the Nazi seizure of power and the brutality of the Holocaust firsthand, and he participated in American efforts to prevent those atrocities from occurring again. He fought in the U.S. Army during World War II, and he helped rebuild the European cities and governments flattened by bombs. Less than three decades later, he ordered the bombing of North Vietnam. This contradiction has confounded many observers, but it reflects the most profound challenge of the last century: deciding when and how to deploy overwhelming force in the hope of preventing worse destruction.

More than almost any other figure, Kissinger influenced American decisions about the use of the military's most destructive weapons. He sought to build international order from an ever-changing mix of threats, promises, agreements, and uses of force. His seminal contribution was to promote a stable system of relations among the United States, its allies, and its adversaries that protected the most vital American interests, especially the country's security, amid the most dangerous conflicts of the

Cold War.

After the experiences of his early years, Kissinger maneuvered to ensure that he was the user rather than the victim of force. Like his contemporaries, he struggled to make sense of diverse and often antithetical ideological movements—including fascism, communism, and various fundamentalisms. He learned to work across national boundaries and partisan divisions because he had no other choice, particularly as a Jewish refugee in the shadow of extreme anti-Semitism. Kissinger quickly understood that a successful statesman had to pursue lesser evils rather than policy perfection.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has renewed interest in Kissinger and other figures who managed similar conflicts in the past. Is there a way to end the terrible fighting and preserve Ukrainian independence while also addressing some of Russia's security concerns? Kissinger's career offers valuable lessons for current policymakers.

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Kissinger was not initially welcomed to the United States. His early years as a refugee in the secluded Washington Heights section of northern Manhattan were difficult. He did not speak English. His parents had little money, his father was underemployed, and his mother had to cook for others to keep his family fed. Kissinger worked nights as he studied to become an accountant.

The United States' entrance into World War II changed everything. Kissinger left his Orthodox Jewish community when he joined the U.S. Army. It was the first time, at age 19, that he ate non-kosher food. As a rapidly promoted counterintelligence officer, Kissinger gained American

citizenship and then returned to Germany as a victorious occupier. He quickly transitioned from a victim of Nazism to a builder of the new Germany. Young Kissinger gained precious experience in leadership and military affairs, made powerful political connections, and, most important, acquired status as an emerging foreign policy expert. He had been present at the destruction of the old order, and now he participated in the birth of the new.

But he still had to work hard to gain acceptance among his new American mentors, who treated him as an outsider. Admitted to Harvard as an older undergraduate in 1947, Kissinger was segregated in a Jewish-only dormitory. He was locked out of the elite clubs that had Roosevelts and Kennedys on their membership lists. And he studied a very nontraditional subject for Americans: European diplomacy and great-power politics.

That said, Kissinger was a potentially useful outsider for traditional elites who needed new knowledge and connections abroad. His eccentricity—his European obsessions, his military ties, and his gravelly German accent—made him stand out as a figure of unique and valuable insights, even to those who treated him as an exotic. Kissinger knew the European theater of postwar conflict intimately and had personal experience as a refugee and a military officer in that terrain. He had proved his loyalty to the U.S. government, even as he seemed not to fit into American society. Most of all, Kissinger was driven to ceaseless work for his own advancement and for those who sponsored him. He was a reliable operator who sought belonging in the United States, like many other Jewish refugees, by demonstrating his value to powerful figures—including Harvard Professor William Yandell Elliott, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and eventually President Richard Nixon.

In the early years of the Cold War, Kissinger helped develop the foundational concepts about how to prevent another apocalypse in Europe, which was now threatened by Soviet armies and nuclear weapons. He was the youngest figure in the emerging group of American strategic “wise men,” but he quickly became one of the most famous for his prolific writings and frequent media appearances. Kissinger’s 1957 book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, became a national bestseller, popularizing the need for a vibrant, diverse arsenal of nuclear weapons. He helped formulate more flexible military options for dealing with Soviet and Chinese aggression. He applied the same logic to the war in Vietnam a decade later.

By the 1960s, Kissinger had emerged as one of the most visible Cold War strategists. He was consulted by famous leaders across the globe—including West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. During the 1968 U.S. presidential election, his status made him an obvious choice for the next president’s national security adviser. There is reason to believe that had Richard Nixon’s adversary, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, won, he would also have appointed Kissinger to the post. The former refugee had become an indispensable and widely respected source of foreign policy knowledge for Democrats and Republicans alike.

After his White House appointment, Kissinger put his ideas about the uses of power into practice. He challenged American democratic idealism and pushed for more acceptance of nondemocratic regimes as potential anchors of stability in regions filled with interstate violence and civil war. He negotiated with antagonistic governments—especially the Soviet Union and communist China—to preserve stability through compromise and the recognition of mutual interests. He emphasized the inherited values of Western civilization ahead of promises for progressive change.

And he defended the use of American force abroad (and sometimes at home) against those threatening revolutionary disruptions. He preserved power for international elites, and he nurtured trust among them; they were the negotiators of stability and the bulwarks against war.

Kissinger's presence at the pinnacle of power was magnified by his own writings and his unceasing efforts to share his insights. He used his fame to create a public legacy that emphasized not just his achievements but also a universal approach to power that was, in his description, "realistic" in "balancing" different interests, as it avoided "idealistic obsessions." He counseled for compromises that preserved the powerful, kept the powerless in their place, and prevented the disasters of wanting too much or too little. He nurtured a global dialogue that rejected both interventionism and isolationism in favor of great-power policing. According to Kissinger's vision, the United States president should be the international police chief. Every president from Richard Nixon through Joseph Biden has found this counsel useful and encouraging.

Even after leaving full-time government service, Kissinger remained the towering oracle of foreign policy wisdom for leaders across the globe. He has no parallel; no one else has played a similar role for so long. In recent decades, Kissinger has become the touchstone for those who want to show that they aspire to be serious international leaders. They come to sit by his feet, and they invoke his name in debates and discussions as a sign that they are well connected and informed. Democratic presidential candidates in the United States, Labour Party leaders in the United Kingdom, and Social Democrats in Germany have all praised Kissinger, despite his strong connections to Republicans, Tories, and Christian Democrats. He is the rare self-described conservative whose wisdom seems as relevant to those on the left as to those on the right.

This unique status did not come naturally to Kissinger. As I have shown in my book *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, he carefully cultivated his role as a universal strategist. This was a career project for a Jewish refugee fearful of the destruction he saw all around him and determined to make a difference for American society and for himself. Kissinger was unsurpassed in his zeal to create order and tireless in his determination to climb to the top and stay there—even in his later years. He was intensely political in appealing to powerful people across party lines and national boundaries; his skill in mixing those politics with useful policy ideas gave him influence others could not attain. He turned the challenges of his life and times into opportunities to lead. Kissinger left an enduring if controversial legacy, but few of those who came after him in government have matched his insights and experiences with the skills to maneuver as effectively across party and national lines.

For all his impressive experiences, Kissinger was never conventionally certified as an “expert” on anything. He never attended a public policy school, never took an economics course, and 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. His famous Ph.D. dissertation on the Congress of Vienna, for example, was a work of history written in a Department of Political Science. The historians considered him a dilettante; the political scientists believed he was too unscientific. Kissinger found a permanent academic position at Harvard only when the dean of the college, McGeorge Bundy, created a controversial new institute—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 generalist with an eye for pragmatic policy, living in a time of hyperspecialization and growing separation between thinkers and doers. That is what made him 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 Kissinger's work; it was his life story. As an Orthodox Jew in Nazi Germany, an immigrant in the U.S. Army, a nontraditional scholar at Harvard, and an unelected White House adviser, he operated on the edge of respectability. He was always the eccentric, the pusher, and the climber. These qualities made him more creative and daring in his policy advice than the smug pinstriped specialists, and more attractive to powerful figures in search of new initiatives.

Leadership, at its core, is about making connections and taking calculated risks. 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 World War II, Kissinger guided policymakers in their responses to the challenges of 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 influence abroad while limiting direct military commitments.

Kissinger understood that leadership in a complex international environment frequently offers an advantage to first movers. He had lived through a decade in the 1930s when the largest democratic states were paralyzed by their hesitation to act against emerging threats. Kissinger was driven to prevent a repeat of that experience. 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, as has almost no one else in recent memory.

Kissinger made many mistakes, but he managed to transform major regions of the world in ways that served U.S. interests. The enduring peace agreement between Israel and Egypt and the uninterrupted Western access to Middle Eastern oil were negotiated by Kissinger 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 global leader of the last two generations—from Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong to Joseph Biden and Xi Jinping—has recognized that if you want to initiate international change, Henry Kissinger is a key catalyst. That is why he remains so influential at 100 years of age, almost a half century after he ended his term as secretary of state under President Gerald Ford.

Kissinger no longer makes daily policy decisions for presidents as he did in the past, but he continues to work tirelessly behind the scenes to connect business and policy leaders. Through his consulting firm, Kissinger Associates, he organizes business transactions and lobbies governments to open opportunities for trade, investment, or even the management of disputed territories. All of these activities and his weighty writings on the People’s Republic of China explain why he’s had long relationships with every Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping.

Kissinger’s most important source of influence, however, is public opinion. He has remained a prolific writer and lecturer, even in his later years. No one has written more about foreign policy in the last century than he has: his extraordinary body of work includes nearly 4,000 pages of detailed memoirs, many more pages of thick history and policy books, and



thousands of op-eds and other essays in leading journals around the world.

In his writing, Kissinger offers guidance to political and business leaders about expanding their interests and defusing crises. He wrote frequently in support of the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and he also wrote to justify trade with China and diplomatic compromise with Russia. Kissinger's policy advice in newspapers attracts unparalleled attention because readers respect his experience, and they are aware that he maintains relations with the figures he writes about. Kissinger's elite connections to power give his writing more influence, and his writing, in turn, deepens his elite network. The people he knows want to know him better for the insights he can offer. The people who do not yet know him want to know him so they can learn from him and become part of his network. The people who have no chance of ever knowing him want to say they have read his words and learned from him, even from a distance.

Power is always perceptual. When people believe that an individual should have influence, they allow that person to influence them. Over his long and ubiquitous career, Kissinger has created a public record that provides many reasons why he should have influence. Although there are as many critics of Kissinger's positions as supporters, most political observers believe that he matters. That is enough to make him relevant for partisans of all stripes. He is often not seen as one of them—and in this sense, he remains a Jewish outsider to many traditional insider groups. But Kissinger even influences those who remain uncomfortable with him, because they believe he matters so much. He just cannot be ignored, and he has worked throughout his career to make certain that is true. Kissinger will be remembered not as a saint, a hero, or a villain but as a man of enormous historical impact in many of the most important settings of the last century.

Whether one approves of Kissinger's legacy or not, the challenges of

the twenty-first century demand new Henry Kissingers. The problems—from failed states and the proliferation of violence to environmental degradation, global disease, and renewed warfare in the heart of Europe—require leaders who can synthesize gigabytes of information without getting lost in the details. Leaders will have to connect apparently incompatible ideas and groups of people, and they will have to take calculated risks. Figures like Henry Kissinger will be necessary to do this work. The hypernationalist xenophobia of many twenty-first-century autocrats is best combated by figures who can bring societies together through compromise, maneuver, and even manipulation.

Idealism will not defeat aggression and terror; political cooperation will. This is the work of leaders who use power to preserve order and defeat threats. The pursuit of justice builds on—but does not substitute for—statesmanship. Henry Kissinger was one of the great builders of the last century's world order, and although his career is often a warning against excessive ambition, it remains instructive for the international coordination that will be necessary to improve our troubled world. Kissinger's cosmopolitanism is as compelling an alternative to aggressive nationalism or shallow globalism today as it was at the start of his long career. His biography is an essential part of our history, our present, and our future.



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