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Book Review: Will the Real Henry Kissinger Please Stand Up?

Leonid Heretz

Bridgewater State University, lheretz@bridgew.edu

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Will the Real Henry Kissinger Please Stand Up?

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Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).

Consider the design of the cover of Henry Kissinger's most recent book. How many individuals' names could stand up to a placement and juxtaposition like that? Thanks to half a century of promotion, Henry Kissinger's can. Blurbs on the back of the book remind us of the author's "intimate firsthand knowledge" of the high and mighty, his ability to offer "incisive strategic analysis" spanning continents and centuries and, not least, his role in shaping foreign policy and international relations. "No one can lay claim to so much influence ... over the past 50 years," according to the authoritative *Financial Times*. It is no secret that Kissinger is getting on in years, so we might hope that *World Order* is his political testament, a place where he finally tells the inside story of why things are the way they are, and how they might be fixed.

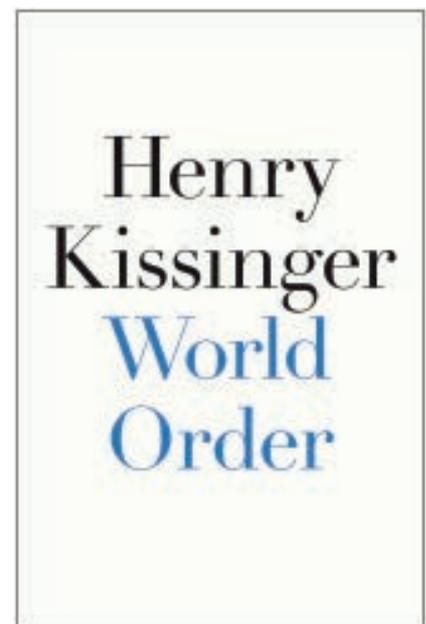
Fittingly enough for the man who is credited with bringing *Realpolitik* to the rubes, Kissinger begins with a lengthy disquisition on the grand old European system of Richelieu ("sophisticated and ruthless") and Bismarck ("master manipulator of the balance of power"). While most of the world has had too much order (empires with universal claims) or too little (authorities incapable of exercising control beyond the local level), Europe for a time had the optimal order: mutually recognized sovereign states that enjoyed unchallenged control over their own territories and pursued secular, defined goals through rational diplomacy and limited warfare. Regrettably, the European system drove itself into the ground in

the world wars, and that happened just before it was imperfectly established in the rest of the world during decolonization. According to Kissinger, the challenge and tragedy of our times is that there is no international order, and "if order cannot be achieved by consensus or imposed by force, it will be wrought, at disastrous and dehumanizing cost, from the experience of chaos" (129).

To those who have forgotten (or never took) their old-fashioned Western Civ or International Relations courses, all of this might sound rather profound, as might Kissinger's observations about the essential characteristics of the different parts of the world beyond Europe: Russia, ominously (or is it comically?) styling itself the Third Rome,

combining "globe-spanning ambitions" with "the insecurities of the parvenu" (55). The Middle East supplies the "stern landscape [from which] have issued conquerors and prophets holding aloft banners of universal aspirations" (96). China is the Middle Kingdom, viewing itself as the center of a "universal hierarchy" (213). India, secure in its "timeless matrix," measures the comings and goings of empires and epochs "against the perspective of the infinite" (193). America is characterized by an irresistible combination of pragmatism and idealism.

Most of what Kissinger writes about the contemporary scene would be familiar to anyone who follows the news. His recommendations are also unremarkable, although he does throw in bits of his trademark Machiavellianism (for example, he suggests dumping responsibility for Afghanistan on that country's neighbors). In recent years, Kissinger has positioned himself as the godfather (in the intellectual rather than the organized crime sense) of the 'realist' school of foreign policy, which argues for restraint and against the militant interventionism of the neoconservative and 'humanitarian' factions.



Unfortunately, there is little of this Kissingerian realism in *World Order*, and most of the book reads like the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Washington Post*. This is particularly true of the treatment of America's role. Kissinger raises hopes that he will offer a realist critique of U.S. policy when he gives Woodrow Wilson credit for bequeathing "to the twentieth century's decisive power an elevated foreign policy doctrine unmoored from a sense of history or geopolitics" (269). Instead, he provides a reverent apology for successive U.S. administrations, justifying virtually all of the major decisions made up to the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq (but not the 'nation-building' that followed), and showing that Wilsonianism is actually a good thing because it has inspired Americans to achieve even more than they would have otherwise.

By way of consolation, the book is full of Kissingerian aphorisms struggling to be born. "For nations, history plays the role that character confers on human beings" (167) and "[I]n international affairs, a reputation for reliability is a more important asset than demonstrations of tactical cleverness" (73) are just two of many. Kissinger was on TV a lot when I was a child, so I can see his deadpan expression and hear his grave

monotone when I read "[H]istory punishes strategic frivolity sooner or later" (80). We are no longer in the realm of "Power is the greatest aphrodisiac," but that would be a lot to expect of a 91-year old.

Inspired by this example, I will try my own hand at maxim-making: "A statesman is not a pedant." *World Order* is shot through with sloppy quotation and even contains factual errors. To cite only two of them: first, Kissinger helps us appreciate the role of the Saudi king by likening it to that of the Holy Roman Emperor in his capacity as "Defender of the Faith." That honorific belongs, of course, to the English monarch, and does not illuminate Middle Eastern affairs in the slightest. Elsewhere, we learn that Eugene of Savoy led a European army that saved Vienna and Europe from the Turks in 1683. Prince Eugene of Savoy, King Jan Sobieski of Poland—what difference does it make? The confusion is very roughly equivalent to saying that George Patton and not John Pershing led the American Expeditionary Force to France in World War I. It would not matter that much if these were the memoirs of a practical politician who makes no pretense of intellectualism, but Kissinger bases his authority on a stereotypically Central European erudition and precision.

Another aphorism that suggests itself: "A statesman never plays it straight." Kissinger gets very murky and uncharacteristically self-effacing when he comes to the Nixon and Ford administrations, the only time when he actually had any power. This is how he deals with the invasion of Cambodia and the escalation of bombing in North Vietnam (which are nowhere mentioned explicitly): "The military actions that President Nixon ordered, and that as his National Security Advisor I supported, together with the policy of diplomatic flexibility, brought about a settlement in 1973" (301).

It would seem that Henry Kissinger is not yet ready to give up his secrets, at least not in a setting where an obscure college professor might get at them.



Leonid Heretz is Professor in the Department of History.

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