Kissinger’s Shadow: The Long Reach of America’s Most Controversial Statesman

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It is hard to write a genuinely new and intellectually stimulating book about Henry Kissinger, one of the most studied and debated figures in the history of American foreign relations. That Greg Grandin has done so is to his great credit. Kissinger’s Shadow should be required reading, alongside more favourable works, for students, academics and policymakers seeking to understand one of the United States’ most high-profile diplomats.

Recapitulating many of the allegations against Kissinger, stretching from Southeast Asia, to Africa and Latin America, Grandin goes beyond previous accounts by using them as a plank for a genuinely new interpretation of Kissinger’s place within the history of American foreign policy. While highly influential during his time in office, most argue that Kissinger’s style of realpolitik was definitively rejected by subsequent administrations. Drawing on his pre- and post-government writings, Grandin posits that ‘Kissinger’s shadow’ stretches much further. In doing so, he questions the nature of Kissinger’s realism, which, Grandin argues, is far more relativistic than generally considered. Kissinger’s belief that ‘hunches, conjecture, will, and intuition are as important as facts and hard intelligence in guiding policy’, Grandin claims, helped to defend executive dominance of national security policymaking during the 1970s, served as a guide for neoconservative arguments in favour of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and continue to resonate in Barack Obama’s conduct of the global war on terrorism. In doing so, Grandin points to parallels in language between Kissinger and his supposed neocon antagonists, including the famous quotation from an anonymous George W. Bush administration aide asserting that, ‘when we [the United States] act, we create our own reality’. Grandin points out that Kissinger seemingly endorsed such an approach when he argued, ‘The West requires nothing so much as men able to create their own reality’, in a 1963 Foreign Affairs essay (p. 16).
Grandin’s book is a very creative problematisation of Kissinger’s legacy that all future historians must take into account. Anyone witnessing Hillary Clinton positively name-checking Kissinger during the 2016 Democratic primary race may wonder whether his legacy is indeed far more enduring than we generally acknowledge. Nevertheless, this reviewer has a number of reservations regarding the thesis of Kissinger’s Shadow. Such a short review can hardly do justice to Grandin’s argument, so a few doubts and questions that might serve as bases for future exploration will have to suffice.

Firstly, in making the case for Kissinger’s legacy, Grandin may underplay the extent to which his continuous self-reinvention has been a response to, rather than a cause of, changes in US national security thought. Kissinger has authored 16 books, including three bulky volumes of memoirs, as well as countless articles, op-eds and chapters. Over seven decades of output, stretching from the 1950s to the 2010s, one element of Kissinger’s writing shines through: his ability to marshal a huge amount of specialist knowledge, distil it with admirable clarity and place it in a broader context in a way that can reach a generalist readership of the Foreign Affairs type. (1) This was a skill Kissinger deployed to great effect, both in his public writings and as Nixon and Ford’s national security advisor and secretary of state.

This ability made Kissinger an influential figure, but meant that, in Lawrence Freedman’s words, he was more ‘a weather vane for changes in the intellectual climate’ than an initiator of new departures in foreign-policy thinking. In the early 1960s Kissinger focused on the demonstrative aspects of US national security policy, including need ‘to “test” power’ by acting in extra-European conflicts. This, Grandin argues, drew Kissinger ‘into a whirlpool … we can’t defend our interests until we know what are our interests are and we can’t know what our interests are until we defend them’ (p. 29). (2) Yet this circularity was not unique to Kissinger, but totally of a piece with broader developments in the logic of containment that drew the Kennedy and Johnson administrations into Vietnam, a decision in which Kissinger played no part. In this context, it is not surprising that Kissinger’s writing on ‘men able to create their own reality’ in 1963, on the cusp of US escalation in Southeast Asia, would be echoed by a White House staffer 40 years later, just after the United States’ hubristic plunge into Iraq. The phrase encapsulates certain structural failings in the logic of American national security policy that waxes and wanes in positive correlation with the United States’ sense of its own power, but also goes beyond one man, however influential.

With his mixture of public support and private doubts regarding the conduct of the war in Southeast Asia, Kissinger’s penchant for the centre ground continued to make itself evident throughout the 1960s. His double-dealing during the Johnson administration’s 1968 negotiations to end the war in Vietnam surely facilitated his move to the White House. Yet such manoeuvrings would not have been possible unless Kissinger was politically middle-of-the-road enough to be acceptable to both presidential candidates. This is not to exculpate Kissinger for his personal role in attempts to sabotage the Paris peace negotiations, prosecuting the secret bombing of Cambodia, or any of his other actions. Yet a focus on the national security advisor has somewhat obscured the fact that it was Nixon who made the fundamental political calls – including those for the aerial assault on Cambodia in 1969 and its invasion a year later, but also the summitry with the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union in 1972. Kissinger grew in influence over the first Nixon administration, but he only really got into the driving seat once Watergate took on power-threatening proportions in 1973. Kissinger pulled off a few major achievements essentially on his own, making best use of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War to solidify American influence in the Middle East. However, in general US grand strategy stalled without Nixon’s presidential imprimatur and hardly regained much lustre under Gerald Ford. As with many accounts that focus on Kissinger, Grandin plays down the centrality of Nixon, who was ultimately responsible for what went on in the White House, for both good and bad, between 1969 and 1974 – and indeed took the leading role in deciding the fundamentals of policy. Again, Kissinger was a central figure, but nevertheless acted in a broader context that shaped him as much as he shaped it.

The revolt of the new right during the Nixon-Ford term complicates Grandin’s story further. Far from being staunch defenders of executive dominance during those years, as they would later become, figureheads of
the nascent neoconservative movement sought to undermine the White House through congressional action. This is clearest in the case of Henry Jackson’s assault on détente through the Jackson amendment to the joint congressional resolution on SALT of 1972, that future strategic arms limitation negotiations be conducted on the basis of equality with the USSR, and the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the 1974 Trade Act, which tied freedom of emigration to the granting of Most Favored Nation status for the Soviet Union. Far from cementing executive dominance, Nixon and Kissinger did a very poor job of shielding the White House from extensive scrutiny during these years. Nixon’s ignominious resignation left those outside the executive branch dissatisfied with the direction of détente in an even stronger position to attack the administration, not only on strategic but moral grounds. At root, there was a real tension between Nixonian conservatives and their opponents over the extent to which the United States should compromise with the Soviet Union. The personal animosity that existed between the Nixon-Ford administrations and their neoconservative antagonists was so deep that Kissinger could not quite disguise it in the final volume of his memoirs, written more than 20 years after the events they describe. (3)

In this context, Grandin’s case regarding Kissinger’s shadow after leaving Foggy Bottom in January 1977 should be treated with some caution. Now out of office, Kissinger shifted yet again, criticizing key planks of his own détente policy, such as strategic arms limitation, which his successors pursued in much the same way that he had done. He became a staunch supporter of Ronald Reagan and spoke at the 1980 Republican Convention. By the publication of 1999’s Years of Renewal, the final volume of his memoirs, Kissinger had reinvented himself as a statesman grappling not only with the Cold War, but with the “overture to … the “new world order””, including ethnic strife, the Middle East and human rights during the Ford administration. (4) After the attacks of September 11, 2001, he became a strong supporter of the Global War on Terror. As that crusade ran into the ground and new centres of power appeared to be on the rise, the familiar practitioner of pragmatic great power politics has re-emerged in On China and World Order. To borrow Grandin’s metaphor, a shadow is strongest when it is cast in one direction. With light shining on him from so many different positions, the multiple shadows cast by Kissinger have become diluted to the extent that it is difficult to know where his legacy truly lies.

What drove this series of changes in Kissinger’s position? It is hard to escape the conclusion that a continuing desire to be readmitted to the heart of government lay at the root of many of them, even to the point of making his peace with his erstwhile neoconservative antagonists. Despite a highly successful business career – itself somewhat of a template for many of his successors – Kissinger has never been invited back into the inner circle of decision-making, relegated to a chairman of commissions, covert and overt advisor to multiple administrations.

Perhaps ironically for a book that has made the case for Kissinger’s influential legacy in shaping American foreign relations, Grandin probably comes closest to the truth in his conclusion, in which he quotes Hannah Arendt on the officers of the British Empire:

… once he has entered the maelstrom of an unending process of expansion, he will, as it were, cease to be what he was and obey the laws of the process, identify himself with anonymous forces that he is supposed to serve in order to keep the whole process in motion; he will think of himself as mere function, and eventually consider such functionality, such an incarnation of the dynamic trend, his highest achievement (p. 229).

Concluding that Kissinger has identified himself with the process of exercising power at the expense of a consistent position should give little comfort to those worried about the way policy is formulated in Washington. What does it say about the national security debate in the United States if even one of its most important contributors has spent much of his career shifting with its prevailing trends? Placing Kissinger in this context makes one question exactly who or what drives US foreign policy as it barrels along, further into the 21st century.
Again, these questions should not detract from what is a highly ambitious, very stimulating and extremely readable work. Grandin has done a great service by raising these broader issues through his attempt to come to a cohesive view of Kissinger’s life across the seven decades of his career as a major figure in American foreign policy. While this reviewer may differ on the interpretation, Grandin’s book should help to reignite an important debate on Kissinger’s legacy and the questions it raises for US national security policy today.

Notes

2. Ibid, p. 324. Back to (2)

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