

“Defending Henry Kissinger”

Niall Ferguson and “Idealist” History

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One of the most lamentable features of international relations courses remains the continued, and looming presence, not merely of Henry Kissinger the statesman but Henry Kissinger the theorist. Whatever one may think of old Heinz, he shaped geopolitics and counselled the movements of US hegemony with ruthless, even cynical fashion. In engaging the politics of the pirate, and the practices of plunder, he gave such practices the deceptively neat term “realism”.

This did not shore up well with a certain strand of US political tradition which sentimentalises liberty even as it ravishes it. The realist cannot purport to be an exceptionalist, precisely because such a statement is absurd. There are powers and non-powers, brutes and the brutalised.

Even if we accept the heavily battered realist credentials, restoring, let alone lifting Kissinger, from the darkness of his record is a tall order. Nefarious, calculating, war-mongering, and expansively self-delusional, it is hard to go past such works as Christopher Hitchens’ *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (2001) without feeling that the fellow did not cut the mustard in a range of areas. Even weightier accounts such as Seymour Hersh’s *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (1983), and Walter Isaacson’s *Kissinger: A Biographer* (1992) prove muddying and gory.

Niall Ferguson, himself an apologist of imperial projects past and current, has decided to come to the already crowded party of Kissinger biographies with his first volume of his Life. Ferguson tends to be allergic to modesty, and duly claims that Kissinger begged him to engage the project. This should immediately trouble the reader: reading the copy of “embedded” journalists is to be regarded with as much suspicion as the biographer with an exclusive dinner invitation. Such proximity, notably to an individual so prone to flattery and flattering, exerts its corrupting pull.

Ferguson’s point, rather, is do ditch the view that Kissinger was the realist history accords him, and attempt to dislodge him from the reliquary of a certain political tradition. Flipping the ideological cards, he suggests a dominant streak of idealism, one fed by European precedent. But what, exactly, does this act of flipping actually accomplish?

Certainly, Ferguson wishes to show a Kissinger more attuned, more sceptical about American engagements, despite being himself instrumental in them. American adventurism in Vietnam, for instance, was questionable, though such views were not to be expressed too loudly – Kissinger always prized the career path and hedged his bets.

Privately, he would take the Kennedy administration to task for its role behind the assassination of South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem. "The honour and moral standing of the United States require that a relationship exists between ends and means.... Our historical role has been to identify ourselves with the ideals and deepest hopes of mankind." He would also object to making use of small states as "pawns".

Such views tend to be meaningless, largely because they never factored in Kissinger's own actions. Whether such behaviour can be put down to an overwhelming sense of moral cowardice, or calculation, vanishes before the bloody details. When it mattered, Kissinger supported the most ruthless regimes in the broader cause against Communism, with an enormous cost to human life. Democratic causes were enfeebled; elected governments, such as that of Allende in Chile, were overthrown with his blessing.

Ferguson the biographer duly becomes Ferguson the apologist, taking his own dump on smaller states and reducing them to geopolitical excreta that have little to do with the idealist he so desperately wishes to find: "[A]rguments that focus on loss of life in strategically marginal countries - and there is no other way of describing Argentina, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Chile, Cyprus, and East Timor - must be tested against the question: how, in each case, would an alternative decision have affected US relations with strategically important countries like the Soviet Union, China, and the major Western European powers?"

Then there is the fallback every admiring biographer tends to find about a subject he wishes to lionise. Ferguson needs to put his finger on the reason why his subject was so detested. No, not because of his role behind the surveillance state, failed wars, deadly policies in Latin America, pro-White government policies in Africa, and a general destabilising disposition to states, but because people were envious. He had a way with women; he charmed in the manner of an experienced courtesan. And he was, well, a Jew, which grated with establishment anti-Semitism.

Yet for all that, Kissinger's official biographer cannot get away from a cluttered mind that legitimised such doctrines as "limited" nuclear war, tantamount to suggesting that a state can engage in "mild" exterminatory practices. The "balance of power" as Greg Grandin explained in his own biography *Kissinger's Shadow*, is something "constantly tested through gesture and deed." To be relevant, the grand state must perform with vicious virility. Stillness is death.

Hegemons can lay waste to the earth, but eventually, some restoring balance can be attained - there will be survivors; every cast of power needs a maniacal Dr. Strangelove. Now, if that is a form of mad idealism, then so be it. It does not detract, nor revise, Kissinger's role in history.

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