

Henry Kissinger: Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy

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What is leadership, and by what characteristics do we measure whether someone is a true leader? To answer these questions, Henry Kissinger once more debunks the past to show towering figures in international statecraft in a new light. In his latest book, *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy*, the author brings a distilled vision of the 20th-century political figures that embodied “authentic leadership”. Against the background of Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, Richard Nixon, Anwar Sadat, Lee Kuan Yew, and Margaret Thatcher, the author further explores his lifetime theme – the art of leadership. According to Kissinger, history is made neither by masses nor concrete events but by a few highly influential individuals who can rise above historical circumstances to shape their destinies.

As one of the most substantial personalities in US diplomacy and statecraft, Henry Kissinger himself has been the subject of multiple literary attempts. Yet still, both American and European authors are eager to explore insights from Kissinger’s tenures as National Security Adviser and Foreign Secretary in the administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Along with his undoubted renown as a bright expert on foreign policy issues, he provokes opposing views among scholars to this day. Niall Ferguson (2015), for example, describes Kissinger in the period from 1923 to 1968 as a “*Kantian idealist [rather than a] Machiavellist realist*”, whereas the Finnish historian Jussi Hanhimäki (2004) portrays Kissinger as a “*superb tactician and flawed strategist*”. Either way, Kissinger can still produce an in-depth view into the minds of historical figures and their role in international politics. Pointing to the leaders’ common feature of “*transforming their society and contributing to the emergence of a new world order*” (p. 395), all the leaders’ portraits are done in a vivid and illuminating way. The author’s encounters with all the described politicians makes this phrase insightful, but also varnished in the case of Richard Nixon and unimaginative in the case of Margaret Thatcher. Furthermore, the book fails to bring forward any analysis of strategy in the 21st century. Under today’s challenges in world politics, there was an enormous potential for the book to bring forth a valuable and timely response to contemporary politics based on a historical exposé, but this does not happen. Despite these drawbacks, *Leadership* offers a solid background of the main historical currents in the period from the early post-WW2 period until the 1980s, and as such, it should not be missed by anyone who is interested in international history and politics.

As he draws from his vast experience, the biggest contribution of Kissinger's latest book lies mainly in examining the characteristics of true leaders and dissecting what made them so effective. The author describes good leaders as those who have the ability to appreciate the past and imagine future perspectives. Following this logic, in each of the six chapters the author deals with one leader and their set of analytical skills that were projected in the milieu of world politics, and he calls this projection a "strategy".

The first chapter discusses Konrad Adenauer in the prime of his life as the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. Kissinger views Adenauer as a shrewd statesman whose rudimentary goal was to restore "*dignity and legitimacy to [German] society*" (p. 5) through the newly established federation. For Kissinger, a former Jewish emigrant and a scholar interested in the 19th-century balance of power, Adenauer's attempt to create a federative model for post-war Germany was even more critical.

In foreign policy, the author rightfully observes three main principles of the German restoration and the role of Adenauer in achieving them. Firstly, there was the aim to strengthen ties with the West, especially with the United States. Kissinger further explains that by accepting the Marshall Plan speech, Adenauer acquiesced to the 1949 Ruhr Agreement, which enabled the Allies to retain control over German industry. The second aim was to reconcile with France. Kissinger implies here that the success in this was mainly due to Adenauer's agility in dealing with the French foreign minister Robert Schuman, which led to the number of Occupation Forces being reduced and ultimately created a path to the Council of Europe and later to the European Coal and Steel Community. And the third aim was to challenge the Soviet Union by rebuilding the West German economy and establishing progressive institutions, and the efforts in this regard were prompted by Adenauer's endeavor, Kissinger notes.

The second chapter deals with Charles de Gaulle. Kissinger views this French president as a man with great military insights, political gifts, and historical knowledge when these qualities were so rare in the 20th century (p. 117). Despite his aloofness and pettiness, de Gaulle was, in Kissinger's eyes, almost a mythic leader with a brilliant intuition and a spirit of encouraging the enforcement of often unpopular beliefs. As

a sheer follower of Richelieu's 17th-century statecraft, de Gaulle continued on a similar track when trying to place France in a position where its acceptance of uncomfortable international policies would be prevented while arrangements beneficial for France would simultaneously be fostered (p. 114).

In an almost picturesque way, Kissinger describes de Gaulle's path to achieving political power, as he went from being a decorated officer in WW1 to being the leader of the in-exile government called Free France to finally establishing the Fifth Republic in 1958. With his combination of "*extraordinary prescience [which] was matched by the courage to act on his intuition, even when the consequences appeared to be political suicide*" (p. 118), Kissinger writes, de Gaulle catapulted France into the orbit of successful states. As in the case of Konrad Adenauer, the legacy of Charles de Gaulle proved to be inspirational throughout the whole 20th century, and even today, as Kissinger points out, French foreign policy can be described as "Gaullist".

In the following chapter, Kissinger shows the foreign-policy skills of Richard Nixon. As he was Nixon's indispensable counselor on foreign policy as well as a considerable asset in this president's reelection campaign (DALLEK 2007), Kissinger's memories of Richard Nixon remain fairly positive. In the context of Nixon's presidency, its notorious "Realpolitik" is viewed as a canny approach under the given historical circumstances. Kissinger also takes an uncritical approach to his own role during Nixon's presidency. He cites the US involvement in South-East Asia and the alignment with Mao Zedong's régime as undoubted successes with no willingness to answer to any controversy surrounding these decisions. Instead, Kissinger (1979, 1982, 1999, 2014) only restates his positions from his previous books.

The only exception to this is the author's discussion of the 1971 crisis between the separated parts of West and East Pakistan, which he here gives more attention to than in his previous books. The gradually increasing desire of the East Pakistanis to become independent from their Western counterparts resulted in a tremendous death toll, with increasing numbers of refugees crossing the sub-region border. Here Kissinger's viewpoint aligns with the US official strategy at the time: the goal was to supply Pakistan with military equipment to stop the flood of refugees and not allow the partition of Pakistan into two political units. When India, backboned by

the Soviet Union, finally intervened, the result was the creation of a new state called Bangladesh. Here Kissinger laments the lack of a US response and quite convincingly argues that the India-USSR intervention transformed the conflict “*from a regional and humanitarian challenge into a crisis of global strategic dimensions*” (p. 200).

In his overall remarks, Kissinger duly highlights the national interest, the importance of maintaining the global equilibrium, and the utilization of intense discussions between major countries as key principles of the Nixon administration. According to the author, these principles should be further followed, regardless of the moral dimension of the related decisions.

The following two chapters focus on Anwar Sadat and Lee Kuan Yew. Portrayed as the architects of post-war Egypt and modern Singapore, respectively, Sadat and Lee Kuan Yew are admired by Kissinger for their willingness to change their somewhat rigid states into open modern societies. Unlike the legacies of the other leaders described in this publication, Sadat’s legacy is characterized mainly by the “moral value” of his approach toward changing the political climate between Arab states, and, most notably, his policy towards Israel.

Emerging as a successor to Gamal Nasir, Sadat played a crucial role in the Camp David Accords in 1973. When describing the historical process leading to this crowning yet tentative achievement, Kissinger makes an important distinction between Sadat and Nasir when he emphasizes Sadat’s diplomatic manner, which was almost of a Western fashion. This was, according to the author, a decisive approach that resulted in the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. Although Kissinger admits that the Middle East contest is still very much present, he adds that “*Sadat’s vision of international order among sovereign states, based on national interests defined in moral terms*” (p. 273), could potentially limit the regional calamity to its minimum.

Lee Kuan Yew, on the other hand, is the only Asian representative in this book. His biggest achievement was transforming Singapore’s once isolated and poor island state into a modern Western-oriented country with the highest per capita income in Asia. The excellence of his leadership lies in many factors. The most notable was his handling of the splintered

population that consisted of Malays, Indians, and Chinese. Kissinger underscores how Lee Kuan Yew effectively merged these groups that shared no common history, language or traditions into one stable state, and subsequently set the stage for the world-class economy and technological hub we see today.

Kissinger expresses no doubt when he emphasizes Lee Kuan Yew's ability to handle such challenges. Yet he also adds that economic growth alone is insufficient to cover the ongoing problem of a democratic deficit. The author concludes that Singapore is still in the phase of finding the proper balance between "*popular democracy and modern elitism*" (p. 315), and issues of social cohesion and the one-party ethnic rule remain Singapore's biggest challenge.

The sixth chapter renders a portrait of Margaret Thatcher as the first woman ever to become a British prime minister. Kissinger highlights her personal fortitude as the greatest resource she could have had for the leadership. Being equipped with such a resource, Thatcher made her way up in the predominantly male Conservative Party, and enforced several free market policies heralded by individualism that were, as Kissinger cleverly observes, in contradiction to classical conservative thinking. In essence, Thatcher was less conservative than many people might have thought.

Kissinger pays much attention to her role in foreign policy, which was, according to him, a "*crucial testament to the importance of British-American partnership within the Anglo-American alliance*" (p. 393). It was her actions towards the Falklands, her staunch position on the communist threat during the Cold War, and her approach to the IRA that empowered the relationship between the US and the UK at the time. According to Kissinger, what Thatcher managed to achieve in international affairs was the preservation of the United Kingdom despite any major setbacks, and an international engagement based on democratic principles, prerogatives and domestic governance, all based on the post-war consensus on having a stable health and welfare state (p. 392).

Sadly, the portrayal of Margaret Thatcher mainly derives from what the author retold many times before, and as such, it lacks any new or original commentary on her political career. For Kissinger, the "Iron Lady"

prevailed as a statesman “*whose ideas echoed those of the greatest Conservative leaders since Disraeli*” (Ibid.) and who rescued Great Britain from moral decay, and this view of her still applies today.

In the conclusion, the author contemplates the evolution of leadership. Interestingly, he sees the imminent problem of today in the struggle over a meritocratic model in both Western and non-Western countries. As he points out, none of the leaders discussed in the book came from an upper-class background. The author argues that the leaders’ lower-class or middle-class upbringing molded their perception of political categories, moral values, and the overt venues of international relations, such as world issues or statecraft. He asserts that societies should pay more attention to education, and schools should focus more on humanities in their curricula. The trend nowadays is to produce more and more activists and technicians for the sake of producing humanistically educated potential statesmen (p. 408), as were all of the six leaders portrayed in the book.

Leadership is an intellectually stimulating analysis of some of the main political figures of the 20th century. The reader gets to know each of the towering individuals by learning about them from the horse’s mouth. Most of the given portraits are rigorous in thought and explore the leaders’ personal lives and political development through a particular asset of their abilities – namely strategy. Conversely, however, Kissinger might be overly biased in his vision of past events and thus offers only a limited vision of contemporary realities. As he is in the position of an undisputed academic and policymaker, one would expect his observations to unfold more of today’s issues, and explain them through historical evidence. Given the world’s current challenges, it would be appropriate for Kissinger to emphasize the present crisis and the historical lessons leaders can learn from it. The war in Ukraine can be a demonstrative case. Is there any “historical pattern” derived from the past that can be useful for today’s leaders in their dealings with Russia? Can we find any modern versions of the figures discussed in the book? Unfortunately, none of these questions are addressed, which makes the book rather a “reminder of the good old days” with little value for modern world politics.

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