

Henry Kissinger: Snake Oil Salesman of Gangster Realism

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"He'll have ye smilin'," an old Irish saying goes, "while he takes the gold out of your teeth'."
— Charles Glass, London Review of Books, Oct 20, 2022

The obituaries of criminals, masterful or otherwise, are always going to be sordid matters. Either one has time for the deeds, giving column space to their execution and legacy, or one focuses on the extraneous details: voice, accent, suit, demeanour. "He may have killed the odd person or two, but he did have *style*."

Much of the Henry Kissinger School of Idolatry is of the latter propensity. The nasty deeds are either misread or diminished – notably when they have to do with the global infliction of mass death, prolongation of conflict, or the overthrow of democratic governments. Instead, time is given to the perceptions of what is supposedly meant to have been the workings of an oversized brain in international relations. Rather than seeing the inside of a prison or being bothered to the gallows by overly fussy lawyers, Kissinger spent ample time at high level receptions receiving huge wads of cash for offering his inner expertise. He was admired, adulated and pampered; the critics kept at bay.

As former National Security Advisor and US Secretary of State, he was meant to be the great exponent of realism, which, rebadged, might simply be described as elevated gangsterism at play. His 1957 work, [A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822](#) studied the Europe of the admired diplomat Prince Clemens von Metternich, revealing a mind keen on keeping international power in fine equilibrium. Stability and order were primary goals; justice and human rights were concepts that had little to no role to play.

Metternich, alongside British Foreign Secretary, Viscount Robert Stewart Castlereagh, was to construct a post-Napoleonic order suspicious, even paranoid of revolutionary movements. It held social and political progress in check; doused the fires of freedom. As a result, Kissinger reasons, Europe maintained stability from Napoleon's defeat in 1815 to the

outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. For all that, Kissinger would write that Metternich lacked “the ability to contemplate an abyss, not with the detachment of a scientist, but as a challenge to overcome – or perish in the process.” As if envisaging his own future role in US diplomacy, he suggested that “men become myths, not by what they know, nor even by what they achieve, but the tasks they set themselves.”

This gnomic drivel was precisely the sort that fed a media illusion of the big-brained sage in command. His bloodied hands were washed on the international stage by such absurd titles as “Henry of Arabia,” one given to him by *Time Magazine* in 1974. The same magazine would give him [front-cover billing](#) in February 1969 as one keen on “New Approaches to Friends and Foes”, and repeat the treatment on no fewer than fourteen other occasions. Not to be outdone, *Newsweek* was positively crawling in depicting the German-Jewish émigré who made his name at Harvard and on the world stage as “Super K”.

As the Establishment Courtesan, Kissinger sought out such society reporters as Sally Quinn of *The Washington Post* to emetically [inquire](#) why she did not assume the master strategist to be “a secret swinger”. Sadistic touches to his curriculum vitae could thereby be ignored, including a butcher’s bill that would eventually run into roughly [3](#) million souls from the Vietnam War to Cambodia, East Timor, Bangladesh, the “dirty wars” of Latin America, and a number of encouragements and interventions in Africa.

This also meant that such abysmal contributions such as his spoiling role in prolonging the war in Vietnam by several years in order to satisfy the electoral lust of his eventual boss, Richard Nixon, could be overlooked in favour of “shuttle diplomacy ” in ending the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973. In this, he resembled, as Charles Glass [suggested](#) with striking salience, a certain “American frontier archetype: the pedlar whose wagonload of patent medicines promised to cure every ailment. By the time the rubes realised that his bottles contained snake oil, he had left town.”

A far better appreciation of the Kissinger legacy would be gained by consulting such publications as that ever reliable, if bleak source of primary documents, the National Security Archive. The Archive pursued the US government with admirable tenacity, alleging that Kissinger had sought to remove, retain and control some 30,000 pages of daily transcripts of his phone conversations (“telcons”) as “personal papers” when he left office in 1977.

As the director of the Archive, Tom Blanton, piquantly [remarked](#), “Kissinger’s aides later commented that he needed to keep track of which lie he told to whom.” But the telcons are also illustrative, less of Kissinger the realist who furnished his employer with fearless advice than that of a truckler, obedient to his paymaster. When Nixon made the decision to commence the secret bombing of Cambodia to target Hanoi’s supply routes in March 1969, Kissinger [conveyed the order](#) to Secretary of Defence Melvin Laird without demur. He also states firmly that “there is to be no public comment at all from anyone at any level either complaining or threatening”. When public comment did make its way to the *New York Times* in May that year, Kissinger [badgered](#) the FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to place a number of selected government officials and journalists under surveillance.

While one’s death is rarely a planned thing – the Grim Reaper makes calls at all unexpected hours – there was a sense in Kissinger’s case that he had cheated it just long enough. He made it to a century without his collar being fingered. He avoided, in the early 2000s,

attempted legal suits for human rights violations in the UK and France. Despite failing health, he was surrounded by the Establishment sycophants of which he had been one, worshipping power over principle while proffering snake oil. And there were a goodly number of them for the sendoff.

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