Kissinger looks back

by Conrad Black


It is my privilege to have been a friend of Henry Kissinger’s for more than forty years. We have had some ups and downs, but my respect for him as a historian and architect of foreign policy
has never wavered, and it is a particular pleasure of the last ten years that our relations have possibly become more cordial than ever. I would have declined to write this review if I could not conscientiously have praised the book. No such problem remotely arose: having, I believe, read all of Kissinger’s books and been impressed by all of them, I think Leadership is one of the best. This is a particularly remarkable and inspiring feat because the author wrote it when he was ninety-seven and ninety-eight years old.

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It is an unusually organized book assessing leadership techniques on the evidence of six prominent world statesmen of the twentieth century whom the author knew and worked with in several cases. The subjects are presented in order of their principal periods in office: Konrad Adenauer (the West German chancellor, 1949–63), Charles de Gaulle (the president of France, 1959–69), Richard Nixon (the U.S. president, 1969–74), Anwar Sadat (the Egyptian president, 1970–81), Lee Kuan Yew (the prime minister, senior minister, and minister mentor of Singapore, 1959–2011) who spanned all of the others, and Margaret Thatcher (the British prime minister, 1979–90). Adenauer is presented as exemplifying the strategy of humility, de Gaulle the strategy of will, Nixon the strategy of equilibrium, Sadat the strategy of transcendence, Lee the strategy of excellence, and Thatcher the strategy of conviction. These categorizations are somewhat arbitrary, as the qualities of will, equilibrium, excellence, and conviction could all be attributed in some measure to each of these leaders, though the qualities of the leaders with whom these leadership methods were identified certainly justified their designations.

It fell to Lee Kuan Yew to turn a small and new country, of minimal resources and polyglot population, practically expelled from the new Confederation of Malaysia, into a successful state, and he did so with spectacular and prolonged success. Foreign investment grew twenty-three-fold in Lee’s first ten years, per capita income rose from $517 in 1965 to $60,000 in 2020, and Singaporean life expectancy rose from sixty to eighty-five in the same period (seven years longer than Americans). And for most of his career of more than fifty years as Singapore’s principal leader, Lee Kuan Yew, because of his astonishing success and sage, detached opinions and articulation, enjoyed an esteem and an influence that vastly surpassed the objective importance of his country.

President Sadat entirely reversed the pan-Arabist, pro-Soviet policies of his charismatic predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and dedicated his presidency and his life to the pursuit of a peaceful solution to the differences between the Arab powers and Israel. He was prophetic and left a work in progress with much still to be accomplished when he was assassinated in 1981. Sadat’s efforts to encourage investment in Egypt and generate strong economic growth were not especially successful, and Egypt remained a developing, economically precarious country. That takes nothing from the just claim that Sadat was a leader of great courage and prescience, however, or from his success in raising Egypt’s stature after the disastrous Six Days’ War of 1967.
The other four subjects were leaders of the four principal Western powers, for different reasons called upon to lead their countries out of substantial and in some cases immense problems to a stronger and more secure condition. Konrad Adenauer, whom Kissinger met on about ten occasions for lengthy and comprehensive exchanges of views, assumed the chancellorship of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) at age seventy-three in 1949. He had the implacable task of leading the nearly 80 percent of Germans who were not under the hob-nailed jackboots of Stalin’s Red Army in East Germany out of the trauma, shame, and moral degradation of a war that German aggression had precipitated and in which unimaginable horrors and atrocities were committed by the German government and its collaborators elsewhere in Europe—including the systematic liquidation of whole categories of otherwise unoffending people totaling twelve million in the Nazi death camps, half of them Jews. And at the end of this German war of aggression, every square inch of Germany was occupied by the armies of its enemies. (The zones of occupation were not established at the Potsdam Conference, as is suggested here, but by the European Advisory Commission concluded in August 1944. This is why Truman and Eisenhower ignored Churchill’s call to seize Berlin, as they judged it unwise to tear up the zonal agreement and didn’t see why Allied soldiers’ lives should be expended to take territory to be handed over to the Russians. The issue was complicated because the Big Three had secretly agreed at Tehran in December 1943 to move Poland’s eastern and western borders two hundred miles to the west—but this has nothing to do with Adenauer.)

Few leaders can have assumed the headship of their peoples in more daunting circumstances. Adenauer voted against emergency powers for Hitler when the latter became chancellor, refused to meet him, was sacked as lord mayor of Cologne in 1933, and landed in prison for a time in both 1934 and 1944—his anti-Nazi credentials were impeccable. Adenauer devised a policy not just of humility as is stated here, but indeed of repentance coupled with the representation, at first tacit, but gradually more explicit, that while the conduct of Germany’s former government had been morally execrable and utterly inexcusable, the entire German population was not implicated, had been motivated primarily by patriotism rather than hatred, and would accept wholeheartedly the necessity of reparations to oppressed minorities and particularly to the state of Israel, whose founding Adenauer supported. Adenauer deftly and confidently anticipated the emergence of Stalin’s Soviet Union as a mortal threat to the West, and he understood the need for the security of Western Europe to be strengthened by the presence and willing collaboration of West Germany, whose stake in resisting the further penetration of Western Europe by the Russians hardly needed elaboration.

Even in this endeavor, Adenauer had to work around the sluggishness of France and even of Churchill’s Great Britain in embracing West Germany as a full nato ally. He managed it all with exquisite diplomacy and with the very effective assistance of President Eisenhower, who alone among the principal Western leaders had no fear of a rearmed and reunited Germany. As
Kissinger writes, Adenauer sought for Germany to become a “normal country,” albeit with an “abnormal memory.” The might of America fully engaged in the Western alliance made the terribly complicated relationship between the Germans and the British and the French much simpler, and Adenauer skillfully allied himself with the immense prestige Eisenhower had earned as the supreme commander of the victorious Allied armies in the West, the principal military governor of Germany, and the founding supreme commander of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Adenauer repented the evils of a regime from which he had constantly dissented and, particularly in an affecting visit to Israel, promoted a reconciliation between the German and Jewish peoples. With enormous skill and patience, Adenauer repented the evils of a regime from which he had constantly dissented and, particularly in an affecting visit to Israel, promoted a reconciliation between the German and Jewish peoples. Although it is not explained in exactly these terms in this book, Adenauer was subtly presenting the proposition that the infamies of the Nazis were not evidence of the unique susceptibility of the Germans to commit unspeakable atrocities, but rather of the potential of all peoples, even the sophisticated culture of Goethe and Beethoven, to sink to infamies if demented leaders could gain control of their governments. The outrages of the Soviets, Chinese, and Japanese contemporary with those of Nazi Germany furnished supportive evidence. I have long believed, and the excellent Adenauer section of this book does not dispute, that perhaps the greatest single act of statesmanship in the post-war world has been Adenauer’s rejection of Stalin’s offer of reunification in exchange for German neutrality and disarmament. Adenauer carried a majority of Germans with him on a policy of remaining in close alliance with Germany’s principal enemies in the first half of the twentieth century—the British, French, and Americans—and pursuing reunification by strength and patience with its allies. It was the highest pinnacle of leadership that he was able to carry such an emotional issue with a durable majority of his countrymen in the truncated German nation, and he was entirely vindicated in the twenty-five years that followed his death.

It is certainly fair to credit Charles de Gaulle with a strong will, and Kissinger is careful to emphasize that de Gaulle’s legendary determination complemented an extraordinarily high intelligence and a remarkable culture, especially great eloquence both in spoken and written French—he was that rarest of individuals, the soldier-intellectual with great practical skill also. The author’s acquaintance with the French leader essentially consisted of accompanying President Nixon to Paris in March 1969 and speaking at moderate length with de Gaulle when he led the foreign mourners at General Eisenhower’s funeral in Washington the following month. (De Gaulle had done likewise at the mighty state funerals of John F. Kennedy in 1963, Churchill in 1965, and Adenauer in 1967. This was one of his methods of emphasizing his ultimate solidarity with his allies even as he disputed with them.) De Gaulle’s ability to impose himself on the fissiparous landscape of French politics was as much strategic and political genius and tactical skill as it was self-assertion.
The brigadier general who left a crumbling France as it succumbed to the Nazi war machine in June 1940, who, as Churchill said, “carried with him, in his small aeroplane, the honor of France” as he flew to London, was undoubtedly a man of strong will. He proved this in defending French interests and challenging his Anglo-American benefactors throughout the war despite his limited resources. And great though Churchill’s and Roosevelt’s skepticism about him had been at times, as the Liberation approached, they realized that he was, as Eisenhower told them, the only ally they had whom the French people respected and who could therefore help the Allies. Kissinger refers to de Gaulle’s achievement as head of the Free French, to the skill with which he outwitted the Communists after the Liberation, and to his extraordinary foresight and patience in resigning from government in 1946 and returning to his village predicting that the Fourth Republic would not succeed. It did not, and its baffled leaders begged for his return with practically unlimited powers to save the country from the threat of military revolt, civil war, and endless combat in Algeria.

The constitution of the Fifth Republic, which de Gaulle provided and the people ratified, effectively resolved the 165 years of conflict between the monarchists, who had had three empires and two kingdoms in that period, and the republicans now trying again for the fifth time. De Gaulle created a monarchy and called it a republic: a presidency with extensive powers and a seven-year renewable term. The de Gaulle section of this book captures the general’s unreasonableness at times, as in his absurd answer to Kissinger’s question of how he proposed that France might resist the ultimate preeminence of Germany: “by war.” He must have said it if Kissinger repeats it, but he was probably referring to French nuclear deterrence. Kissinger also suggests that de Gaulle was particularly terse because he did not really trust advisors or like speaking with the advisors of other leaders.

This book naturally doesn’t get into this, but a careful examination of de Gaulle’s exchanges with Churchill and Roosevelt and his thoughtful addresses to the French people during World War II, and even his visit to Stalin in 1944, demonstrated that he wished Britain to rejoin France as coequal allies preeminent in Western Europe. More, he wanted a Western Europe led by them to maintain the American alliance, though not in the state of subordinancy that existed when de Gaulle returned to power in 1958, and to make, under Franco-British leadership, its own arrangements with the USSR. His grievance against Britain was that it found the United States a more attractive ally than France, and his grievance against the United States was that it preferred Britain as an ally over France. Given the circumstances of World War II, these facts were hardly surprising. But Kissinger recognizes that, like Adenauer’s restoration of Germany as an important power in Europe, de Gaulle’s restoration of France as an important power in the world and the reconciliation he and Adenauer wrought between France and Germany were decisive steps in the strengthening of the West against the Soviet challenge.
There is also here a sense of de Gaulle’s grandeur in human relations when they were disentangled from the competing interests of states. Of Churchill’s defeat in the 1945 election, he wrote: “His countenance, etched by the fires and frosts of great events; his personality, identified with a magnificent enterprise, were no longer adequate to the era of mediocrity.” At about the same time, on meeting again the last president of the Third Republic, Albert Lebrun, he remarked: “As chief of state he lacked two things: he was not a chief and there was no state.” Kissinger captures the personality and the genius of Charles de Gaulle as few other people have, including that element of French cynicism that caused him to resign his office and end his distinguished career over a referendum on local government and university organization, in his words, “because of their triviality.”

And so to Richard Nixon, and an incomparably authoritative summary from that president’s closest and most talented collaborator. Many readers will remember that when Nixon was inaugurated on January 20, 1969, the United States had 550,000 draftees in Vietnam, two to four hundred of them coming home in body bags every week, with no exit strategy. When President Johnson agreed with President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam at Manila in 1966 on an offer to evacuate all non-South Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam and was peremptorily rejected by Ho Chi Minh, it was clear that the North Vietnamese objective had graduated from the reunification of Vietnam (which had never been unified) to the decisive defeat of the United States itself. This presumably would be the coronation of Ho Chi Minh’s supreme ambition. He had petitioned President Woodrow Wilson at Paris in 1919 without success; fifty years and nine U.S. presidents later, he would provide the decisive turning point in the triumph of Communism by inflicting an overwhelming defeat not just on America’s vulnerable ally in Saigon but even—something that had never occurred in history—upon the armed forces of the United States, massed in strength and in a prolonged war. Back home, for the last two years there had been riots every week or two, race riots and anti-war riots, all around the country, and there were no substantive discussions underway either with the Soviet Union or in the Middle East. Nixon was the first American president since Zachary Taylor to take office with both houses of Congress in the hands of his opponents.

Despite all of these obstacles, four years later Nixon was reelected by what remains the greatest plurality in American history despite the near doubling of the size of the electorate: eighteen million votes, forty-nine states. The United States had departed from Vietnam while retaining a non-Communist government in Saigon, triangulated Great Power relations with the reopening of direct diplomacy with China, and begun the de-escalation of the Cold War with the greatest arms-
control agreement in history, which also included the restoration of American nuclear superiority
that Kennedy and Johnson had abandoned. Segregation had finally been eliminated in the schools
of America, and the nation had been spared the nightmare of bussing tens of millions of
schoolchildren all around metropolitan areas in search of racial balance. The draft was about to be
abolished, and Nixon had founded the Environmental Protection Agency, which began
auspiciously. Egypt had expelled twenty thousand Soviet advisors, and a peace process in the
Middle East was about to begin. There were no more riots or skyjackings or prominent
assassinations. Nixon had had one of the most successful single terms in the history of the U.S.
presidency.

Kissinger details how Nixon had over many years come to a range of thoughtful conclusions about
the need for the United States to maintain its position in the world. The president favored retaining a balance in
the correlation of forces rather than the periodic and direct imposition of
overwhelming American strength, which was
no longer practical, nor always possible. He recruited Kissinger from the camp of the Rockefellers,
and the pair saw the virtue and in fact the necessity of Britain and France retaining their
independent nuclear capacity, altering the irritating policy of the previous administrations who
had lectured those countries on the expediency of all Nato forces being gathered together under
American command. Nixon had had excellent relations with de Gaulle when he was the vice
president, and these relations were clearly reviving when Nixon and Kissinger visited the French
president early in their administration.

In Vietnam, because the South Vietnamese had defeated the North Vietnamese and Vietcong in the
great offensive that the Communists launched in the spring of 1972 (between Nixon’s visit to China
and his visit to the Soviet Union), and because the South Vietnamese accomplished this with no
American ground support though heavy air support, Nixon and Kissinger believed that when the
terms of the Vietnam peace were violated by Hanoi—as the two were sure they would be—the
same formula could be repeated and the United States would provide a massive aerial support
campaign to help repulse the North Vietnamese invasion. As all the world knows, the Watergate
debacle intruded and U.S. Democrats—having plunged America into the Vietnam War in the first
place, lost heart, turned on their own president, and watched indifferently as Nixon rescued their
war for them—insisted on terminating the war and delivering South Vietnam to the Communists.
There was nothing amid the paralysis of Watergate that Nixon and Kissinger and subsequently
Gerald Ford could do about it.

Because of the extreme controversy surrounding Nixon’s departure from office, there was for
many years a tendency to attribute all of the credit for the success that Nixon and Kissinger
together achieved in every important foreign policy area to Kissinger alone, and it is a credit to Kissinger’s integrity and rigor that he fairly and meticulously shares the responsibility for those many successes, which are steadily more evident and appreciated as the cant and emotionalism of the immediate post-Nixon era has subsided. The account in this book of their work together must stand as the most authoritative summary of these extremely important events that has been or could be written. The subjects and personalities are treated with a diplomacy as exquisite as the diplomacy being described. It recalls for this reviewer the eloquent eulogy delivered by Kissinger for Richard Nixon:

He stood on pinnacles that dissolved into precipice. He achieved greatly and he suffered deeply. But he never gave up. . . . He was devoted to his family. He loved his country. And he considered service his honor.

The last of the major power leaders to be covered is Margaret Thatcher. The revival of the British economy and national morale is well known, and the principal foreign-policy events of her time are also well known: the Falklands, Grenada, the deployment of the Euromissiles, the Gorbachev discussions leading to the end of the Cold War, Hong Kong, the first Iraq War, and Britain’s relations with Europe. As Kissinger records, Thatcher was instrumental in galvanizing President George H. W. Bush to make a determined response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Kissinger very knowledgeably describes the Thatcher technique of starting with an extremely firm position and only modifying it gradually as the correlation of forces, which she realistically evaluates, requires. He does not mention Thatcher’s belief that the American operation in Grenada—which was annoying to the British because that small country is a member of the Commonwealth, it has a British governor general, and Britain received no notice of the operation—was undertaken to cause the American public to forget the debacle of the 241 U.S. Marines murdered in the Beirut barracks bombing in 1983.

This section also closely examines the very productive relationship that Margaret Thatcher had with Ronald Reagan. I am reluctant to take issue with any of Kissinger’s opinions, but President Reagan gave me to understand that, contrary to the most frequent interpretations of what went on at the meeting between him and Gorbachev at Reykjavik in 1986, he was never prepared to abandon nuclear weapons altogether, only to reduce their numbers. The flamboyant suggestions of disposing of them completely, he intimated to me, were to strengthen the credibility of his proposed Strategic Defense Initiative, a space-based anti-missile defense system. Kissinger and Nixon were chess players and Reagan was a poker player—they were all very talented at what they did. De Gaulle and Thatcher, at the heads of less powerful countries, had to do the best they could alternating between those broadly formulated methods of foreign-policy implementation Kissinger describes. Adenauer, encumbered by the Nazi past and a divided country, was in a more confined position.

All of these Great Power statesmen rebuilt their countries very successfully. Adenauer presided over an economic miracle of reconstruction with generous American assistance and the integration of Germany, for the first time since Bismarck’s day, into the front rank of
responsible great European powers. De Gaulle ended revolving-door government and made France an influential force in the whole world with a hard currency, a nuclear strike force, and the most successful form of government it has ever had. Thatcher, as she promised, put the word “Great” back in the name of her country and was the first British political leader to win three consecutive full-term elections since before the first Reform Act in 1832. She was the greatest Conservative vote-getter in British history, pushed out of office by her own members of Parliament for advocating a position toward Europe more intimate and conciliatory than what the whole British nation has since voted to adopt.

The great progress that Richard Nixon made, which was recognized by his overwhelming reelection, was compromised by the nonsensical Watergate affair, which Nixon acknowledged that he bungled but in which there remains no convincing evidence that he was guilty of any crimes. Kissinger rightly does not deal with Watergate, as it is not germane to the points that he wants to make. America had to wait for the optimistic Californians—Reagan, George Shultz, Caspar Weinberger, and others—to finish Nixon and Kissinger’s work and bring the Cold War to a satisfactory end.

As Anwar Sadat was a prophet, it was inevitable that the confirmation of his courageous vision would require more time than was allowed to him. The creation of a successful, prosperous, and strong though small country out of whole cloth, almost by Lee Kuan Yew alone, is one of the most inspiring development stories in the history of the world. My only cavils with this book are the minor points that Canada should have been mentioned as participating in the Normandy invasion, as it had one of the five beaches, a paratroop brigade, and more than 10 percent of the first day’s forces, and that de Gaulle’s mad and outrageous attempt to incite the secession from Canada of Quebec in 1967 was similarly omitted.

This is a brilliantly insightful and interesting book, no matter how familiar anyone may be with the subjects of it. A number of the perceptions are new, and the organization of the principal aspects of these remarkable careers is masterly. It is more than fifty years since Dr. Henry Kissinger first became a household name worldwide, and this book demonstrates that even on the verge of his personal centenary, he retains a genius of perception and description of the strategic direction of and relations between states. They are great stories very well told, and the standard the author sets of insight, experience, lucidity, and useful longevity is uplifting.
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