

Review – Leadership

Written by Matthew C. Kolasa

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MATTHEW C. KOLASA, JAN 9 2024

Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy

By Henry Kissinger

Penguin Random House, 2022

Globally celebrated and despised with perhaps equal intensity, one cannot ignore the late Henry A. Kissinger's influence on the study and practice of foreign policy and international relations. The German-born historian-turned-American Secretary of State and National Security Advisor's final single-authored monograph, *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy* complements the author's oeuvre built over seven decades.

The subject of leadership has seen much ink spilt from various perspectives of late, from Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Leadership in Turbulent Times* to neo-stoic former naval officer Jocko Willink's self-help manuals. Kissinger combines history and biography with foreign policy analysis and international relations theory to develop a work that theorizes leadership and investigates case studies on different leadership styles.

Even today, Kissinger's influence is vast in scholarship and policy. In policy, he implemented balance of power in US foreign relations. In the academy, he developed classical realism and, arguably, neoclassical realist theory by addressing domestic politics within a competitive state system. Criticism of Dr. Kissinger's foreign policy, particularly bombing Cambodia and Laos and support of despots in furtherance of US foreign policy objectives, has been covered exhaustively elsewhere. While briefly acknowledging controversy surrounding bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail on the sovereign territory of weak, neutral countries, the author goes into more detail in 4,000 pages of memoirs.

This work analyzes six national leaders, Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, Richard Nixon, Anwar Sadat, Lee Kuan Yew, and Margaret Thatcher, focusing on transformative foreign policy decisions. The book explores case studies on four continents, focusing on leaders active in the second half of the 20th century in times of crisis. Kissinger knew all six personally, giving the portraits a more intimate tone. Some events depicted recur from the perspectives of different leaders, highlighting the national goals each leader pursued. While some ideas may be familiar to readers of 1994's *Diplomacy* or 2014's *World Order*, the book develops further concepts from previous work and shows how they are relevant to decision-making processes. *Leadership* develops a theory of transformative leadership. A mere manager, the book argues, can maintain the status quo in an era of stability. In time of crisis, however, more decisive leadership is needed. Two types of transformative leaders equal to the task emerge: the statesman, who works at the edge of the possible to mediate between a nation's past and possible future, and the prophet, who molds reality to a different vision for a country's future. This paradigm, described earlier in *Diplomacy*, sees application and elaboration in the book's six case studies.

Kissinger prefers the statesman's approach, acknowledging leaders could have qualities of both approaches and even switch between statesman and prophet over the course of a career. Germany's Adenauer, the quintessential statesman, brought West Germany out of the ashes of war and returned it to the state system by rebuilding credibility and joining transatlantic and European institutions with a strategy of humility. Charles de Gaulle was a prophet, assuming leadership of the Free French by sheer force of will and insisting on a French role in the postwar world, often to the exasperation of allies who accused de Gaulle of harboring a Joan of Arc complex.

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Margaret Thatcher was a statesman who, through charisma, boldness, and vision, managed to influence late Cold War politics in a way disproportionate to Britain's size and hard power capacities. Where she reached beyond Britain's grasp was in seeking retention of some Soviet troops in Germany and treating German reunification with suspicion of German revanchism as even France accepted a united Germany. Going against what 10 Downing Street could realistically influence only diminished UK power as the Iron Curtain fell. Such an assessment leaves the reader asking what the book's lesson is as the prime minister's profile renders emulation difficult. The line between visionary mission and aspirational wishful thinking depends on context and the specific case in which the statesman operates. The tome is a guide rather than a manual, the author explains: "While Thatcher's leadership was governed by principles, she never allowed her decisions to be overwhelmed by abstractions.... Part of her genius as a leader inhered in her ability to adapt to the dictates of reality without relinquishing her larger vision" (p.338). The lesson is: one must start with a vision and apply it to the reality one is given.

Richard Nixon, a complicated figure whose insecurities and failings prevented him from realizing a transformation in US foreign policy, is the leader Kissinger worked with most directly. Kissinger argues, "A Nixonian flexibility, at once realistic and creative, is needed for American foreign policy" (pp.201-202). The assessment of Nixon may be Kissinger's most biased because of his role in the administration, one that has evolved over time. "Peace with honor" in Vietnam failed in part because of a divided America and in part because of overextension and mission creep over four White House administrations. The author's most contestable claim was for American forces being near victory at the time of American withdrawal, as civilian and military lives, millions of dollars, and American credibility were sacrificed over years as victory seemed always just over the next hill. The most interesting part of the Nixon case study is analysis of the president's strengths and weaknesses and the administration he built, from deploying shuttle diplomacy to developing a National Security Council (NSC) structure that remains intact today. Nixon's approach to group decision-making included proposing a general goal while allowing different advisors to provide context and options to afford the president well-informed decisions and openness to different possible courses of action. Nixon's foibles would cut short his presidency and preclude full implementation of his vision, particularly in the Middle East.

Anwar Sadat is the most surprising and least known of the six profiles in leadership. The Egyptian president's legacy lies in the shadow of his immediate predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser. A greater challenge than achieving independence from British indirect rule was finding a lasting peace on Egypt's eastern border. After initiating a surprise attack on Israeli positions and negotiating a temporary truce, "Sadat's journey to Jerusalem was that rare occasion in which the mere fact of an event constitutes an interruption of history and therefore transforms the range of the possible. It was his ultimate revolution," argues Kissinger (p.262). Moving from the Yom Kippur War in 1973 to a visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and peace treaty with Israel in 1979 marked a bold divergence from Nasserian foreign policy and what amounted to a revolutionary compromise. Leading Egypt to the controversial position of recognizing Israel ultimately led to his assassination by radicals in the military in 1983.

Singaporean prime minister Lee Kuan Yeu, educated in Singapore and England, in one stroke lost his Malaysian identity and was forced to build a city-state. Building an economic miracle, Lee forwent democratic structures he thought would lead to sectarianism in a multicultural society, freely admitting to civil rights violations to build an educated, wealthy state able to attract foreign investment. Lee's failure, the author suggests, was to seek a democratic transition after Singapore's economic transition was complete.

The most novel part of the book is its meditation on leadership today, especially the value of liberal education. American higher education, the author argues, trains activists and technicians but not citizens. Ostensibly meritocratic success has trained elite professionals but does not prepare leaders. The problem is not barriers to entry but rather a lack of standards upon entry into the professional and leadership class that brings mutual contempt to elites and citizenry.

Another argument for deeper understanding is one of thorough reading. Deep literacy is less common but essential to Weberian 'proportion' and analogical analysis as well as intergenerational conversations with the past. Facts do not speak for themselves. Integration and synthesis are essential for wisdom. Even fiction is important, as literature in its nuance and complexity is closest to depicting how the world really works. The visual culture of social media, by contrast, foments biases toward immediacy, intensity, polarity, and conformity as social media users are divided into

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followers and influencers. There are no leaders.

Newer developments provide a coda. The author attributes Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine to failed strategic dialogue—a failure of leadership. He predicts a triangular relationship among America, China, and Russia will resume, though this assessment underestimates the potential for Europe to act as a powerful unit when united. The US has options other than playing resurgent China and diminished Russia against each other, in particular as China takes the old role of the USSR as America's strategic rival. The tripolar world implied by the argument neglects rising powers of the future and European democracies awakened to threats to a formerly complacent continent. The desires of the Ukrainian people are noticeably absent. The rights and roles of smaller states merit further discussion.

Leaders do not ignore reality but challenge it: "Great statesmen operate at the outer limits of what is commonly thought possible; rather than parroting whatever orthodoxy defines the times, they probe its boundaries" (p.379). The book is a history, a guide for leaders, and a comparative foreign policy analysis opening the black box of foreign policy decision-making. Kissinger looks at some of the same events focusing on the perspectives of different leaders. *Leadership* can interest a wide audience beyond those interested in international relations as a lesson in how to lead and prod the possible with a sense of civic duty and learned thoughtfulness. The leaders analyzed are notable in the diversity of strategies they deployed, styles they brought with them, and political realities that confronted them. The lesson is to dare greatly, but not too much. This may sound unsatisfying, but that is the point. Leadership is difficult. The world's wicked problems are complex. While there are no easy answers, a deeper, considered approach to what was and can be will bring us to the edge of the possible and realize a nation's potential. That is Henry Kissinger's valedictory message.

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