

# Henry Kissinger and the Limits of *Realpolitik*

*Alexander J. Groth*

*Alexander J. Groth* is Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Davis. Among his books are *Lincoln: Authoritarian Savior* (1996); *Democracies Against Hitler: Myth, Reality and Prologue* (1999); *Holocaust Voices* (2005); and the forthcoming *Accomplices: Churchill, Roosevelt and the Holocaust* (2011). As a child, Prof. Groth survived the Holocaust in German-occupied Poland, including some two years in the Warsaw Ghetto, 1940–42.

If a single, short quotation could destroy a man's claim to the respect of mankind, this was it. Henry Kissinger telling Richard Nixon "...if they put Jews into gas chambers in the Soviet Union, it is not an American concern. Maybe a humanitarian concern" was a self-inflicted wound from which the former US Secretary of State can never hope to recover. This was *realpolitik* at the cost of one's soul. The remarks are recorded on one of the White House tapes from 1973. Whether Kissinger said those words because he thought Nixon would like to hear them, or because he really believed them — or perhaps some of each — he embraced an all but unbelievable abomination. "Maybe" what Hitler, Eichmann, and their compatriots did to some six million of Kissinger's fellow Jews was a humanitarian concern? Maybe?! Gassing Soviet Jews in the millions would not be an American concern?!

Kissinger forgot that America was not just a Place, or a Nation; it was also an Idea. His remarks were certainly not in the spirit of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776.

In this brief utterance, Henry Kissinger underscored an important defect in a career seemingly dedicated to a tough, hard-headed, "whatever works" advancement of something called the national interest. Alternatively, his career could be characterized by "politics based on practical and material factors rather than on theoretical or ethical objectives," or alternatively still, perhaps politics of personal self-interest.

Kissinger's recent defense of his 1973 remarks is based on a familiar device. His words need to be understood in their context. Arguably, the context made them worse rather than better. He could have said this anywhere, to anyone, and at any time. But these words were uttered to the president of the United States. He was not quoting someone else. He was not drunk. And he was not engaged in telling

wildly inappropriate jokes. He crossed a line that no good man can ever possibly cross. In fact, he was speaking in character. He was a Jew who saw no harm in President Ronald Reagan's visit honoring SS dead at the Bitburg cemetery. He was a man who opposed the construction of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC as an apparent "provocation" to antisemitic sentiment in the United States. As secretary of state, he had been a most reluctant visitor to Yad Vashem. Even if none of these things were true, even if all his diplomatic-political behavior could be, somehow, explained away, the content of the 1973 White House tape could not be denied.

If ever there was a virtually perfect disconnect between knowledge and moral sense, the Kissinger case was a perfect illustration. Here was a man born of Jewish parents in Germany in 1923. He came to America in 1938, the year of the Evian Conference and *Kristallnacht*. As a precocious teenager, he had personal memories of the persecution of the Jews under Hitler's rule. He served in the American Army in World War II. He saw for himself some of the evidence of what the Germans and their accomplices had done to the Jews of Europe. His family lost more than a dozen relatives in the Holocaust. He witnessed the all-but-monumental wartime indifference of the Allies toward the crime when it was in progress. He also witnessed the disclosures made in the war crimes trials of the late 1940s and in subsequent years.

Possessed of a brilliant intellect, here was a man who graduated summa cum laude from Harvard University in 1950 from whence he also collected a PhD in 1954. A distinguished academician, he was the author of many widely acclaimed books, beginning with *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* in 1957 and *The World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace 1812–22*. Many other volumes were to follow. He had served as an assistant to the president of the United States for national security affairs from 1969 to 1973, and served in the most coveted cabinet post of all, as secretary of state, from 1973 to 1977. In 1973, he was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize, the pinnacle of a veritable mountain of honors the man had collected.

If knowledge and intellectual attainment led to moral virtue—as so many have always hoped and believed—Kissinger would have been one of the world's finest embodiments of moral sensitivity. The memory of the Holocaust would have found in him a commemorative shrine. The significance of Hitler's crime and the resolve never to permit its repetition would have been foremost in this brilliant and highly cultivated mind. This, however, was not the case. If, pursuant to his personal interest, it was, or seemed, desirable to him to tolerate the repetition of history's most infamous mass murder upon his fellow Jews, Kissinger had no problem verbalizing his consent—in advance!

The Kissinger case illustrates, in microcosm, one of the blind spots in the Western liberal tradition, a tradition that has always “oversold” the importance of “information,” “education,” and “communication” as gateways to “virtue” and “harmony” among human beings. The perceptive warnings of the great Scottish philosopher of the eighteenth century, David Hume, have been characteristically shunted off in the Western world to a corner of profound obscurity. If Kissinger represents the “microcosm,” Germany itself between the years 1933 and 1945 represented the “macrocosm” of this great disjunction. How could the crime of the ages, rationalized by a school dropout, Adolf Hitler, in *Mein Kampf*—a work intellectually executed at virtually comic book level—be carried out with meticulous efficiency in a country whose culture, education, literacy, and communication and information networks were the envy of the world? That question has never been satisfactorily addressed in the literature on the subject. It has always been a bridge too far, many laudable attempts notwithstanding.

The latest revelations about Kissinger take us back nearly thirty-seven years. He made his remarks to President Richard Nixon on March 1, 1973, after Israel’s Prime Minister Golda Meir had asked for Washington’s help in allowing Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel. This episode is an important reminder. Without prejudice to information, education, and the cognitive function more generally, we need to be reminded of still another category of human consciousness.

Political scientists call it “affect.” Affect is, metaphorically speaking, a matter of the heart. It is the sum of profound feelings, some perhaps learned, but many seemingly instinctive and virtually reflexive; it involves something radically different from a “rational utility-maximizing actor.” No formula for creating this has yet been devised. It is from this category of consciousness that great heroes are drawn, whether in ancient times or in our day. Consequently, the pantheon of great men and women in history will probably never have room for the likes of Henry Kissinger.