

Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Powers
Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World
Roundtable Review



Reviewed Works:

Robert Dallek. *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power.* New York: Harper Collins, 2007. 740 pp. \$32.50. ISBN-13: 978-0060722302 (hardcover).

Margaret MacMillan. *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World.* New York: Random House, 2007. 404 pp. \$27.95. ISBN-13: 978-1-4000-6127-3 (hardcover). [Previously published in Canada as *Nixon in China: The Week that Changed the World* and in the UK as *Seize the Hour: When Nixon Met Mao.*].

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Nixon, Kissinger, and the Years that Shook the World

“History,” Henry Kissinger told Richard Nixon on the eve of the president’s resignation in August 1974, “will treat you more kindly than your contemporaries have.”

He has been proven correct. When Nixon died in 1994, his achievements, particularly in the field of foreign policy, dominated the historical assessments of the only president in the nation’s history to have resigned.

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The opposite seems to have been the case with Kissinger. Journalists fawned on him when he was in office. In 1973—as Nixon was squirming in the purgatory of Watergate—Kissinger had even been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating the imperfect end to the Vietnam War. But over time ‘Super-K’ became a favorite, perhaps fashionable, target for a number of historians and journalists. Relentlessly attacked in the writings of Christopher Hitchens and others, ‘Kissinger the war criminal’ came to replace, by the late 1990s, the image of a globetrotting super diplomat.

Since both men have been subjected to intense scrutiny by journalists and historians, their stories are so familiar as to beg a simple question: what new could there possibly be to say about Nixon and Kissinger or the policies they pushed? Both have written massive memoirs (Kissinger’s amounting to over 3,500 pages in three volumes).¹ Over the years Stephen Ambrose, Herbert Parmet, Anthony Summers, Marvin and Bernard Kalb, Jussi Hanhimäki, Robert Schulzinger, Seymour Hersh, and Walter Isaacson, among others, have written lengthy biographies of the two². And while no one has previously written a 600+ page book focusing on the

¹ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979); *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982); *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

² Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). Herbert S. Parmet, *Richard Nixon and his America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990). Anthony Summers, *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon* (New York: Viking, 2000). Marvin Kalb and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974). Jussi Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Robert D. Schulzinger, *Henry Kissinger: Doctor of Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983). Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

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relationship between the two men, in-depth and insightful analysis of their complex bond can be found in any and all of these works.

Thus, it may seem pointless for Robert Dallek, the best-selling author of a sympathetic biography of John F. Kennedy and other major studies of twentieth century presidents, to retell the story of the Opening to China, the end of the Vietnam War, the unfolding of Soviet-American détente, and the Middle East peace process of the 1970s. Nor does it seem likely that there is much new to be learned about the Nixon administration's role in the Chilean coup that ousted Salvador Allende in 1973. What could we possibly gain from a replay of the machinations inside the Byzantine Nixon White House or, even, its self-destruction in the process that we call Watergate?

Nor does it seem that we are likely to learn new exciting revelations—save some peculiar anecdotal vignettes—from the recounting of Nixon's (and Kissinger's) 1972 trip to China. Yet, another best-selling author—Margaret MacMillan of *Paris 1919* fame—devotes over three hundred pages to this episode in the Nixon Administration's foreign policy.

Indeed, anyone already familiar with the main outline of this often sordid history should not expect to find smoking guns on the pages of *Nixon and Kissinger* or *Nixon and Mao*. Dallek, for example, writes at the outset: “We know almost all of what they did during their five and a half years in the White House; their major initiatives were and remain landmarks in the history of American foreign policy.” What he is truly interested in, Dallek argues, are the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions; he wants to know more about the motivations and modus operandi of Nixon and Kissinger's foreign policy initiatives. Or, as he puts it, the bulk of the book is an effort to “cast fresh light on who they [Nixon and Kissinger] were and how they collaborated in their use and abuse of power.” (x)

MacMillan, in contrast, has a far more contemporary rationale. To her, studying the opening to China is important because the Sino-American relationship promises to be (to a large extent already is) one of the key global relationships of the 21st century. She wishes to bring past events to life in order to improve our understanding of the present and improve our handling of future challenges. For, as MacMillan ominously writes, “there will be no peace for Asia and the world unless... the United States and China find ways to work with each other. To understand their relationship we need to go back to 1972, to the moment when it started anew.” (xxii)

What flows from these premises are, in essence, two well written and competently researched narratives. Both books are a joy to read and easy to follow. They deliver what they promise, offering an endless litany of interesting citations and anecdotes. In a sense, they also offer antidotes to each other. Reading Dallek's book makes one

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inevitably recoil with the pettiness that the 'good and the great' of the Nixon White House embarked upon. MacMillan's Kissinger and Nixon are, in contrast, much closer to the popular imagination of great statesmen. She appears quite convinced that only Nixon, as Nixon would like us believe, could have gone to China.

Except on the margins they do not, however, offer anything approaching a new interpretation on the Nixon-Kissinger relationship or the American president's trip to China in February 1972.

Dallek, for example, projects fresh light into the odd couple's relationship through the use of masses of newly released documents and recordings. In addition to the millions of pages of National Security Council files, *Nixon and Kissinger* makes good use of the White House Tapes, the recordings of Nixon's conversations while president that, in 1974, did produce the smoking gun that drove him to resign. Then there are the Kissinger transcripts, the accounts of Kissinger's telephone conversations.

Dallek's use of these records makes this book a worthwhile and entertaining read. What emerges is a disturbing portrait of how pettiness—in the form of personal ambition or a sheer desire for public praise—was as, if not more, important in driving policy than grand geopolitical stratagems or sophisticated analyses of international relations. One is reminded, repeatedly, that Nixon and Kissinger—despite the façade they tried to build—were but two men vying for personal glory, a desire that often made them not only partners but competitors.

The trouble is: we knew this already. For anyone even somewhat familiar with the Nixon-Kissinger saga, there is not much new or surprising in what Dallek tells us. He provides examples of backbiting, sniping, courting, and lying. Dallek then concludes that "Nixon's imperial rule created a degree of distrust about executive authority that has made it more difficult for his successors to govern effectively," while Kissinger "was as much the partisan supporter of a highly imperfect administration as he was its foreign policy expert." If that is not bland enough, Dallek then sagely adds that "no one has a monopoly on wisdom." (622) I think most students of history had a vague notion that this might indeed be the case.

Margaret MacMillan's engaging narrative is equally short on new interpretation. Although she ably surveys the background to the famous February 1972 trip and provides perhaps the fullest account of the day-to-day unfolding of the high-level visit. But the conclusions that she draws are no more breathtaking than those found in Dallek's book. There were losses and gains to both sides, she confidently asserts, listing the usual litany from triangular diplomacy to lack of impact on Vietnam, and from Beijing's agreement to wait on Taiwan (not that there is much evidence that Mao was about to order a bold offensive against the island) to the end of its long isolation. "Individuals," she further judges, "ultimately made this happen" and

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points to the particularly pivotal role of Mao, Zhou Enlai, Nixon and Kissinger.(p. 338) True, or at least supportable by evidence. But hardly new.

Thus, it is difficult not to be slightly cynical and wonder whether other considerations than the desire to make a path-breaking contribution to the emerging scholarship on the Nixon-Kissinger era foreign policy lie behind the publication of these two books. For with the depth of their knowledge on the history American politics and diplomacy (in case of Dallek) and the history of international relations (MacMillan), both books ultimately promise much more than they can deliver. While they will undoubtedly prove commercial successes, they do not, however, mark a significant shift in the arguments regarding their subject matter. That remains the work of others.

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