

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.*].

Roundtable Editor: David A. Welch

Reviewers: Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Jeffrey Kimball, Lorenz Lüthi, Yafeng Xia

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Introduction by David A. Welch, University of Toronto

What Makes for Good Political Biography?

When asked to edit this roundtable for H-DIPLO, I balked. To begin with, I do not claim to be a professional historian. I do not even claim to be a professional political ‘scientist,’ though that is what my business card says I am (like Nathan Pusey, I have doubts about how scientific we can be). I am merely a student of international politics who has a particular fascination with human error—or, as I prefer to put it, ‘why smart people screw up.’ History provides a lot of the grist for my mill, but I can claim no particular insight into Nixon, Kissinger, or Mao. Besides, Margaret MacMillan is a good friend and was until recently my colleague at the University of Toronto. Robert Dallek very kindly blurbed my first book. I am a huge admirer of both. How could I possibly be objective even if I were qualified?

David Welch is Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto and Director of the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. He is author of Painful Choices: A Theory of Foreign Policy Change (2005), inaugural winner of the International Studies Association ISSS book prize, and co-author of The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History (2007).

I persuaded myself, however, that it was not my job to review the books, merely to recruit the reviewers, and I found the subject matter irresistible. As a connoisseur of human foibles, how could I pass up the opportunity to participate in a roundtable devoted to some of the most intriguingly problematic characters in history? Richard Nixon, the only president of the United States ever to resign, undone by an utterly unnecessary act of burglary; Henry Kissinger, the sycophantic professor-turned-courtier ersatz Metternich; and Mao Zedong, the man probably responsible for more deaths than anyone else on the planet. There is more to each than this, of course, but they are characters with dark sides that would slake even the most prurient thirst. They are also men who managed to pull off one of the greatest diplomatic coups of modern times. For all of their faults, they were in their own ways men of genuine talent and ability. What they did with that talent and ability, on both the plus and minus sides of the score sheet, makes for absolutely fascinating reading.

Robert Dallek and Margaret MacMillan, talented storytellers both, have at them, and at a host of lesser figures to boot, some no less important in certain respects than these three—Zhou Enlai, for instance, a rare example of a pragmatic conservative revolutionary and one of the greatest survivors of all time. To evaluate the stories they tell, we have four enormously well-qualified reviewers. Jussi Hanhimäki and Yafeng Xia share their reactions to both books; Jeffrey Kimball reports on Dallek; and Lorenz Lüthi reports on MacMillan. I confess that I am as much a fan of the work of these four gentlemen as I am of Dallek’s and MacMillan’s.

23 September 2007

The reviews speak for themselves. Most of them are mixed. Taken as a whole, they strike me as on balance rather more critical than favorable. As a biased and unqualified reader, I confess this made me sad, but I also confess that I was not entirely surprised -- for my initial reaction when I saw the titles was to wonder what more there could possibly be to say. Nixon, Kissinger, and Mao are, I suspect, probably as well understood as they can possibly be. They have been the focus of an enormous amount of attention precisely because they are such fascinating figures.¹ It would be astonishing if anyone could tell us something important about any of them that we didn't already know.

Reflecting on this, I realized that I was assuming that the measure of a good political biography is whether it tells us something new and important. A short journey aboard that particular train of thought led me to wonder whether this is so. What is it, exactly, that makes a book of this kind good? I have no definitive answer to that question, but I am now officially open-minded about it.

Reflecting on my own prior reading of political biography, I quickly realized that there are several books I have enjoyed and appreciated that did not necessarily say much of anything new. Jean Edward Smith's *Grant*,² for example, broke no major new ground as far as I can tell, but was a story well told, and, while a tad hagiographic, useful as a corrective to much of the early ill treatment Grant received at the hands of Southern conservative historians. I admired Martin Gilbert's *Churchill: A Life*³ for its sheer dogged comprehensiveness alone, though I found its endless string of quotations monotonous and grating. I consider Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*⁴ a masterful work, but less for being path breaking than for its compelling portrait of a man who is at best asymptotically fathomable. I appreciate any work that changes my understanding or makes me look at something in a new light, as long as the light is remotely plausible even if downright peculiar (my favorites here are Alexander and Juliette George's *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*⁵ and Fritz Redlich's *Hitler: Diagnosis of a Destructive Prophet*⁶). I also admire effective popularizers, as long as they meet certain standards of scholarship. Anything that makes the public more interested in history is a good thing, to my mind, so long as it does not bring historians into ill repute.

¹ A quick search of my university library turned up 75 books on Nixon, 25 on Kissinger, and more than 600 on Mao.

² Jean Edward Smith, *Grant* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

³ Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1991).

⁴ Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (London: Odhams Press, 1952).

⁵ Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (New York: John Day, 1956).

⁶ Fredrick C. Redlich, *Hitler: Diagnosis of a Destructive Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

23 September 2007

I doubt there would be much disagreement on what makes for bad political biography. Almost anything I have read that was written about the Kennedy brothers falls into this category. For some reason, it is hard for people to write about Camelot without an agenda, and I am as put off by myth making as I am by character assassination. Something that gets basic facts wrong, fails to engage the existing literature, or (this should go without saying) misappropriates it, clearly deserves our scorn as well.⁷

So what makes for good political biography? And do these two books count? The reviews in this roundtable do not explicitly address the former question, but in every case the operative criteria are not difficult to divine. I expect differences of opinion on this explain much of the variation we see in the reviews. Not being a professional historian, I cannot say whether it would be possible to articulate a broadly accepted hierarchy of criteria. But I am, as always, keen to learn.

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⁷ My greatest disappointment in this regard is probably William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978). When I read it I thought it fresh, insightful, and beautifully written; but shortly thereafter I read Forrest Pogue, 'The Military in a Democracy: A Review,' *International Security*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1979), pp. 58-80.