

Book Review

NIXON AND KISSINGER: PARTNERS IN POWER¹

MAJOR SHANE REEVES²

*[F]ate is character.*³

*To advance themselves and their policies, they had few qualms making bargains with the devil—Nixon deceiving himself, the Congress, the courts, the press, and the public; Kissinger endorsing or acquiescing in many presidential acts of deception and engaging in many of his own.*⁴

I. Introduction

In 1972 Richard Nixon was re-elected as the President of the United States by the third largest margin in history,⁵ winning forty-nine of fifty states.⁶ This overwhelming margin of victory demonstrated that the American people emphatically believed that Nixon, in partnership with his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, had “earned another four years.”⁷ It is difficult to argue with the election results. During the first four years of their partnership, Nixon and Kissinger achieved an astonishing list of foreign policy accomplishments.⁸ Specifically, the unpopular Vietnam War was all but over, détente with the Soviet Union had begun, and diplomatic channels with China were opened.⁹ The election victory, coupled with the foreign policy successes, had placed the Nixon-Kissinger collaboration at the pinnacle of power with four more years of opportunity. The potential of those four years would go unfulfilled, however, as within twenty-one months of the 1972 election, Richard Nixon would resign as President of the United States and history would forever link the Nixon-Kissinger partnership to corruption and abuse of power in government.¹⁰

Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power by Robert Dallek is a detailed account of the partnership between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger and the dominant impact their relationship played in the Nixon Administration. Dallek, a prominent presidential historian,¹¹ does not simply restate well known historical facts concerning the Nixon Administration. Instead, he explores the personal ambitions that consumed both men, their joint willingness to break all ethical boundaries in furtherance of their goals, and the detrimental consequences of their decisions.¹² Focusing on the extraordinarily complex relationship between Nixon and Kissinger, the book offers a new understanding of the Nixon Administration’s strategy in Vietnam, its approach to international relations, and its use of executive power. With Iraq and Vietnam comparisons

¹ ROBERT DALLEK, *NIXON AND KISSINGER: PARTNERS IN POWER* (2007).

² U.S. Army. Student, 56th Judge Advocate Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School, Charlottesville, Va.

³ DALLEK, *supra* note 1, at 609 (referring to an ancient Greek saying).

⁴ *Id.* at 615.

⁵ *Id.* at 433.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.* at 612.

¹¹ Robert Dallek has been called “the eminent American presidential historian.” Emily Ghods-Esfahani, *Dallek Lectures on Nixon, Kissinger*, 25 DARTMOUTH REV., May 18, 2007, available at http://dartreview.com/archives/2007/05/18/dallek_lectures_on_nixon_kissinger.php. He has written and co-authored numerous books concerning U.S. Presidents including: *Let Every Nation Know: John F. Kennedy In His Own Words* (2006), *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (2005), *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (2003), *Flawed Giant: Lyndon B. Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (1999), *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (1999), *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1908–1960* (1994), *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (1979), *Roosevelt Diplomacy and World War II* (1970).

¹² DALLEK, *supra* note 1, at 614–15.

dominating the news, continuing discussions concerning the U.S. approach to international relations, and present day debates over the limits of executive branch power, *Nixon and Kissinger* provides valuable lessons and has contemporary relevance.¹³

II. Nixon and Kissinger

From the outset of *Nixon and Kissinger*, Dallek concedes that the historical record concerning the Nixon Administration is well documented.¹⁴ Rather than simply re-hashing these well known historical facts, Dallek takes a unique approach and attempts to explain why and how Richard Nixon, in partnership with Henry Kissinger, exercised power.¹⁵ Relying on Richard Nixon's presidential papers and tapes, recently released archival material of Henry Kissinger,¹⁶ personal diaries, national security files, White House special files, and a variety of secondary material, the author adeptly answers these questions.¹⁷ Combining his exhaustive research with narrative ability, Dallek provides fascinating insights into the dynamics of the Nixon-Kissinger partnership, its decision making process, and its often shocking ethical shortfalls.

Nixon and Kissinger seamlessly illustrates the evolution of the Nixon-Kissinger partnership from its inception until its demise due to the Watergate scandal. Dallek begins the book by describing each man's personal background, early career highlights, and independent paths toward politics.¹⁸ Immediately, the reader is bowled over by the overwhelming ambition demonstrated by both Nixon and Kissinger to achieve individual greatness. Describing Nixon's ambition as "a little engine that knew no rest"¹⁹ and Kissinger's as a "ceaseless force,"²⁰ it is clear that above all else, each man's personal desire for individual gain was the force that brought them together.²¹

Markedly absent from the relationship is any type of friendship or mutual affection. Instead their partnership is a poisonous combination of deception, competitiveness, and resentment.²² Nixon's and Kissinger's veiled hostility towards each other²³ and their continual battle for supremacy²⁴ is vividly described throughout the book. The viability of such a shallow relationship seems always in question, yet individual ambitions force each man to concede that he needs the other.²⁵

¹³ See, e.g., CNN.com/, *Bush Invokes "Tragedy of Vietnam" Against Iraq Pullout*, Aug. 22, 2007, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/08/22/bush.iraq.speech/index.html?iref=newssearch>; Mark Mazzetti, *Bin Laden Releases Video as C.I.A. Issues Warning*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 8, 2007, at A6 (noting that Osama bin Laden in a recent video tape compares Iraq to Vietnam); IVAN ELAND, *THE EMPIRE HAS NO CLOTHES: U.S. FOREIGN POLICY EXPOSED* (2004) (discussing current U.S. foreign policy); Dan Eggen & Amy Goldstein, *Broader Privilege Claimed in Firings; White House Says Hill Can't Pursue Contempt Cases*, WASH. POST, July 20, 2007, at A1 (detailing dispute between the executive branch and Congress over contempt charges filed against White House aids).

¹⁴ DALLEK, *supra* note 1, at ix.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Dallek notes that "[t]he most important collateral collections are Henry Kissinger's office memos, memoranda of conversations, and transcripts of telephone conversations made by aides listening in on a 'dead key or undetectable extension.' The transcripts were opened to researchers in May 2004." *Id.* at 629.

¹⁷ See generally *id.* at 629–96 (Source Notes).

¹⁸ See generally *id.* at 3–59.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 4 (quoting Nixon's law partner William Herndon).

²⁰ *Id.* at 503.

²¹ See *id.* at 81 (stating that other less important factors also played a part in the genesis of the collaboration including: circumstances, "shared interest in great foreign policy issues," distrust of establishment liberals, and life experience).

²² *Id.* at 615.

²³ See, e.g., *id.* at 93 (quoting Nixon as calling Kissinger "Jew boy" as a form of humiliation and Kissinger privately referring to Nixon as "our drunken friend" or "the meatball mind").

²⁴ See, e.g., *id.* at 330–31 (describing the envy and competition between Nixon and Kissinger when vying for public recognition for positive developments in Sino-American relations).

²⁵ *Id.* at 615.

Dallek concisely describes this seemingly impossible arrangement when he states that Nixon and Kissinger were “rivals who could not satisfy their aspirations without each other.”²⁶

As Dallek describes the complexities of the Nixon-Kissinger partnership, he illustrates how their mutual obsession with personal recognition, coupled with their individual desire for control, resulted in a streamlined decision making process in the White House.²⁷ Despite their personal competitiveness, the men became increasingly dependent on each other²⁸ and viewed the media, much of the public, and the rest of the government as hostile.²⁹ Marginalizing all other members of the administration, and paranoid of disseminating any power, Nixon and Kissinger held all major foreign policy decisions between the two of them.³⁰ Dallek, in engrossing fashion, lays bare the often vulgar, blunt, and pragmatic³¹ manner in which Nixon and Kissinger made those foreign policy decisions and the effect those decisions had on world affairs.³²

However, the author’s detailed description of the men’s decision making and joint approach to foreign policy is also where the book is most lacking. Dallek begrudgingly recognizes the accomplishments of the Nixon-Kissinger collaboration and its approach to international relations.³³ He gives limited credit for the partnership’s historic accomplishments, and at times, seems unable to overcome his disdain for Nixon’s and Kissinger’s personalities or their method of governing when discussing their foreign policy successes.³⁴

Though *Nixon and Kissinger* may not give extensive credit to the Nixon Administration for foreign policy accomplishments, the author is not unfair in his criticism of the Nixon-Kissinger partnership. Some accuse Dallek as being anti-Republican and having a liberal bias.³⁵ Dallek’s impressive research and reliance on taped conversations, memos, and direct correspondence easily rebuts any accusations that *Nixon and Kissinger* is promoting an agenda other than adding to the historical record.³⁶ Dallek’s extensive use of primary resources not only deflates any accusations of bias, but is also damning to any who argue that Nixon and Kissinger acted ethically during their collaboration.³⁷ Dallek presents overwhelming evidence that Nixon established a White House atmosphere devoid of all ethical boundaries. A White House where Nixon’s self-interests were the primary concern,³⁸ and where aides could “assume[] that behind-the-scenes maneuvering, including

²⁶ *Id.* at 81.

²⁷ *See, e.g., id.* at 623 (noting their “shared affinity for exclusive control of foreign policy”).

²⁸ *See, e.g., id.* at 100 (“From the beginning of Nixon’s tenure, Henry became one of the few who could see him repeatedly almost every day, with numerous phone conversations filling the gaps between visits.”); *id.* at 201 (“During the first nine days of May, Nixon had sixteen telephone conversations and seventeen face-to-face meetings with Kissinger . . .”).

²⁹ *See, e.g., id.* at 270 (discussing Nixon’s paranoia concerning the Democrats); *id.* at 500 (discussing Nixon and Kissinger’s paranoid conversations concerning the media); *id.* at 92 (quoting Lawrence Eagleburger, Kissinger’s civilian deputy at the National Security Council, as saying: “Kissinger and Nixon both had degrees of paranoia. . . . It led them to worry about each other, but it also led them to make common cause on perceived mutual enemies.”).

³⁰ From the outset of the partnership and throughout the five and half years they worked together, Nixon and Kissinger asserted dominance over foreign policy and gave only cursory input to the State Department or other Administration personalities. *Id.* at 84–85, 100.

³¹ Nixon and Kissinger’s pragmatic approach to international relations is often called “real politik.” *See, e.g.,* Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Odd Couple*, N.Y. TIMES, May 13, 2007, sec. 7, at 29 (reviewing ROBERT DALLEK, NIXON AND KISSINGER: PARTNERS IN POWER (2007)). Lawrence refers to Nixon and Kissinger as “[c]hampions of realpolitik.” Realpolitik is defined as “political realism or practical politics, esp. policy based on power rather than on ideals.” Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Realpolitik> (last visited Dec. 14, 2007).

³² *See generally* DALLEK, *supra* note 1, at 617–23.

³³ *See, e.g., id.* at 440–46. To re-start the peace negotiations between North and South Vietnam Nixon orders renewed bombing of North Vietnam. *Id.* Dallek spends significant time discussing the negative ramifications of the decision, but only spends one sentence stating that the strategy was successful. *Id.* at 446 (“The devastation from the raids, however, forced the North Vietnamese to agree to return to the peace table in January.”).

³⁴ *See id.* at 346 (Dallek states “it is amazing how well Nixon and Kissinger did in making foreign policy in spite of unacknowledged impulses to make decisions partly based on their amour prop[er].”).

³⁵ One conservative critic has explicitly accused Dallek of bias and promoting a liberal agenda. *See* Clay Waters, *NYT: Iraq Isn’t Like Vietnam—Now That Bush Makes Comparison*, Aug. 22, 2007, <http://www.newsbusters.org/blogs/clay-waters/2007/08/22/nyt-suddenly-iraq-isnt-vietnam-least-not-when-bush-makes-comparison> (stating that “Dallek . . . has long been the [N.Y.] Times’s go-to guy for criticism of Bush as well as past Republican presidents.”).

³⁶ *See generally* DALLEK, *supra* note 1, at 631–96 (Source Notes).

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *See id.* at 409–11.

illegalities, were acceptable.”³⁹ It is also clear that Kissinger contributed to this atmosphere and was more than willing to use foreign policy to distract the public from Watergate.⁴⁰ *Nixon and Kissinger* is well researched and therefore, by extension, it is difficult to argue with Dallek’s objectivity as he describes the Nixon-Kissinger partnership, its decision making, and the ethical shortfalls that permeated throughout the relationship.

III. Contemporary Relevance

Nixon and Kissinger offers numerous valuable lessons on an array of contemporary issues. The most visible lesson that emerges from the book is the failure of “Vietnamization”⁴¹ to successfully end the Vietnam War on terms advantageous to the United States.⁴² The parallels between Vietnamization and the current U.S. strategy in Iraq⁴³ are striking.⁴⁴ The failure of Vietnamization and the eventual collapse of South Vietnam illustrate the difficulty in using a similar strategy in Iraq. *Nixon and Kissinger* offers readers insights into why Nixon’s strategy for Vietnam failed and an opportunity to critically compare and analyze the current strategy in Iraq with Vietnamization.

Dallek also highlights the advantages and disadvantages of the Nixon-Kissinger theory to foreign policy and illustrates the limitations of relying on a single approach to practicing international relations. Nixon’s and Kissinger’s belief that their primary responsibility was “to foreign affairs and the defense of the nation’s security,”⁴⁵ combined with their willingness “to do whatever seemed necessary to defeat opponents of what they saw as good for the country,”⁴⁶ resulted in many historic foreign policy successes.⁴⁷ However, their unwillingness to entertain alternative ideas, their preoccupation with personal control, and their paranoia of other government actors⁴⁸ resulted in numerous foreign policy failures.⁴⁹ *Nixon and Kissinger* demonstrates that the complexities of foreign policy makes any one approach unlikely to be consistently successful, and makes a compelling case for relying on a diversity of theories and opinions when practicing international relations.

Finally, *Nixon and Kissinger* offers the stark reminder “that even a president, however effective his policy making skills, cannot escape the rule of law.”⁵⁰ Dallek describes the Nixon presidency as an “Imperial Presidency”⁵¹ and Kissinger as his

³⁹ *Id.* at 410.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., *id.* at 585 (discussing Kissinger’s involvement in illegal wiretaps on “leaks” in the administration); *id.* at 565 (noting that during the Watergate crisis, Kissinger described Nixon as indispensable to world peace); *id.* at 569 (discussing Kissinger’s attempt to boost Nixon by holding a press conference detailing new possible breakthroughs on arms control with the Soviets).

⁴¹ “Vietnamization” was the term the Nixon Administration used to describe the U.S. strategy in Vietnam. *Id.* at 125. Vietnamization relied on U.S. forces to provide security, training, and equipment to the South Vietnamese military and government. *Id.* at 125–27. The intent was to create an effective South Vietnamese fighting force simultaneously with an autonomous South Vietnam government thus allowing for the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces. See generally *id.* Vietnamization was to “replace the Americanization of the war.” *Id.* at 125.

⁴² See *id.* at 619 (discussing the many failures of Vietnamization; the most notable was the fall of Hanoi to the North Vietnamese in 1975).

⁴³ The current strategy in Iraq was outlined in a speech by President Bush. President George W. Bush, President’s Address to the Nation (Jan. 10, 2007) (transcript available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html>). A portion of the strategy for success in Iraq outlined by President Bush includes securing Iraq with U.S. forces, training and equipping the Iraqi Army, and supporting the young Iraqi government. *Id.* The long-term goal of this strategy is to eventually withdraw U.S. forces. *Id.*

⁴⁴ Though Iraq is only mentioned once in *Nixon and Kissinger*, Dallek has been interviewed to discuss the similarities between Iraq and Vietnam. See generally James Gerstanzang & Maura Reynolds, *Bush to Cite Vietnam in Defense of Iraq*, L.A. TIMES, Aug. 22, 2007, at A10 (quoting Dallek’s critical comments concerning Bush’s comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam).

⁴⁵ DALLEK, *supra* note 1, at 99.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ See *id.* at 617–19.

⁴⁸ See *id.* at 84–85, 124, 247.

⁴⁹ See *id.* at 618–22.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 622.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 84.

most important aide.⁵² Both Nixon and Kissinger wielded enormous power⁵³ and were willing to use their positions to punish their enemies, deceive the American public, and to further their own self-interests.⁵⁴ *Nixon and Kissinger* illustrates the inherent danger in allowing so few to possess such enormous power, while simultaneously warning those that are entrusted with positions of authority that abuse of power is intolerable in the U.S. system of government.

IV. Conclusion

Robert Dallek's *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* is an easy read, well organized, and impressively researched. Dallek does a masterful job detailing the partnership between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger and outlining the impact their relationship had on the national and international arenas. Though the author reluctantly gives Nixon and Kissinger credit for their foreign policy accomplishments, it is difficult to question Dallek's objectivity due to his extensive research and reliance on primary sources. The book clearly explains how and why the Nixon Administration created and implemented policy, and gives the reader a number of relevant lessons on current issues. *Nixon and Kissinger* is an exceptional book and should be read by anyone having an interest in history, leadership, or ethics.

⁵² *Id.* at 99.

⁵³ Dallek states that "the Nixon-Kissinger relationship was one of or possibly the most significant White House collaboration in U.S. history." *Id.* at 623.

⁵⁴ *See id.* at 622–23.