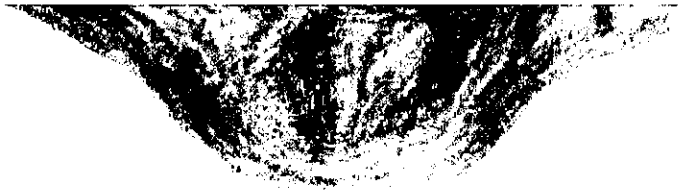




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As we celebrate our 30th anniversary, *TNI* Editor Jacob Heilbrunn sits down with the former Secretary of State.

by Henry Kissinger

The *National Interest's* editor, Jacob Heilbrunn, spoke with Henry Kissinger in early July in New York.

**Jacob Heilbrunn:** Why is realism today an embattled approach to foreign affairs, or perhaps not as significant as it was when you had figures such as Hans Morgenthau, George F. Kennan, Dean Acheson, then yourself in the 1970s—what has changed?

**Henry Kissinger:** I don't think that I have changed my view on this subject very much since the seventies. I have always had an expansive view of national interest, and much of the debate about realism as against idealism is artificial. The way the debate is conventionally presented pits a group that believes in power as the determining element of international politics against idealists who believe that the values of society are decisive. Kennan, Acheson or any of the people you mentioned did not have such a simplistic view. The view of the various realists is that, in an analysis of foreign policy, you have to start with an assessment of the elements that are relevant to the situation. And obviously, values are included as an important element. The real debate is over relative priority and balance.

**Heilbrunn:** One of the things that struck me in the new biography of you by Niall Ferguson is his quotation from your personal diary from 1964. You suggested rather

prophetically that “the Goldwater victory is a new phenomenon in American politics—the triumph of the ideological party in the European sense. No one can predict how it will end because there is no precedent for it.”

**Kissinger:** At the convention, it seemed to be true to somebody like me, who was most familiar with the politics of the Eastern Establishment. Later in life, I got to know Goldwater and respected him as a man of great moral conviction and integrity.

**Heilbrunn:** Right, but I was more interested in your interpretation of the ideological force that emerged in '64.

**Kissinger:** It was a new ideological force in the Republican Party. Until then, the Eastern Establishment view based on historic models of European history was the dominant view of foreign policy. This new foreign-policy view was more missionary; it emphasized that America had a mission to bring about democracy—if necessary, by the use of force. And it had a kind of intolerance toward opposition. It then became characteristic of both the extreme Right and the extreme Left, and they changed sides occasionally.

**Heilbrunn:** And they both vehemently attacked the Nixon administration.

**Kissinger:** Yes.

**Heilbrunn:** I remember that in your memoirs, you indicate that you were perhaps most astonished to be attacked from the right—

**Kissinger:** Totally unprepared.

**Heilbrunn:** —for allegedly appeasing the Soviet Union.

**Kissinger:** Well, and some, like Norman Podhoretz—who's a good friend today—attacked me from both the left and the right sequentially.

**Heilbrunn:** I'd forgotten that he'd managed that feat. In the end, though, détente played a critical role in bringing down the Soviet Union, didn't it?

**Kissinger:** That is my view. We viewed détente as a strategy for conducting the conflict with the Soviet Union.

**Heilbrunn:** I'm amazed that this doesn't get more attention—in Europe, this is the common view, that détente was essential toward softening up Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and getting over the memory of World War II, whereas in the United States we have a triumphalist view.

**Kissinger:** Well, you have the view that Reagan started the process with his Evil Empire speech, which, in my opinion, occurred at the point when the Soviet Union was already well on the way to defeat. We were engaged in a long-term struggle, generating many competing analyses. I was on the hard-line side of the analysis. But I stressed also the diplomatic and psychological dimensions. We needed to wage the Cold War from a posture in which we would not be isolated, and in which we would have the best possible basis for conducting unavoidable conflicts. Finally, we had a special obligation to find a way to avoid nuclear conflict, since that risked civilization. We sought a position to be ready to use force when necessary but always in the context of making it clearly demonstrable as a last resort. The neoconservatives took a more absolutist view. Reagan used the span of time that was available to him with considerable tactical skill, although I'm not sure that all of it was preconceived. But its effect was extremely impressive. I think the détente period was an indispensable prelude.

**Heilbrunn:** The other monumental accomplishment was obviously the opening to China. Do you feel today that—

**Kissinger:** —Reducing the Soviet role in the Middle East. That was not minor.

**Heilbrunn:** That's correct, and saving Israel in the '73 war with the arms supply.

**Kissinger:** The two were related.

**Heilbrunn:** Is China the new Wilhelmine Germany today? Richard Nixon, shortly before he died, told William Safire that it was necessary to create the opening to

China, but we may have created a Frankenstein.

**Kissinger:** A country that has had three thousand years of dominating its region can be said to have an inherent reality. The alternative would have been to keep China permanently subdued in collusion with the Soviet Union, and therefore making the Soviet Union—already an advanced nuclear country—the dominant country of Eurasia with American connivance. But China inherently presents a fundamental challenge to American strategy.

**Heilbrunn:** And do you think they're pushing for a more Sinocentric world, or can they be integrated into some sort of Westphalian framework, as you outlined in your most recent book, *World Order*?

**Kissinger:** That's the challenge. That's the open question. It's our task. We're not good at it, because we don't understand their history and culture. I think that their basic thinking is Sinocentric. But it may produce consequences that are global in impact. Therefore, the challenge of China is a much subtler problem than that of the Soviet Union. The Soviet problem was largely strategic. This is a cultural issue: Can two civilizations that do not, at least as yet, think alike come to a coexistence formula that produces world order?

**Heilbrunn:** How greatly do you rate the chances of a real Sino-Russian rapprochement?

**Kissinger:** It's not in either of their natures, I think—

**Heilbrunn:** Because the Russians clearly would like to create a much closer relationship.

**Kissinger:** But partly because we've given them no choice.

**Heilbrunn:** How do you think the United States can extricate itself from the Ukraine impasse—the United States and Europe, obviously?

**Kissinger:** The issue is not to extricate the United States from the Ukrainian impasse but to solve it in a way conducive to international order. A number of things need to be recognized. One, the relationship between Ukraine and Russia will always have a special character in the Russian mind. It can never be limited to a relationship of two traditional sovereign states, not from the Russian point of view, maybe not even from Ukraine's. So, what happens in Ukraine cannot be put into a simple formula of applying principles that worked in Western Europe, not that close to Stalingrad and Moscow. In that context, one has to analyze how the Ukraine crisis occurred. It is not conceivable that Putin spends sixty billion euros on turning a summer resort into a winter Olympic village in order to start a military crisis the week after a concluding ceremony that depicted Russia as a part of Western civilization.

So then, one has to ask: How did that happen? I saw Putin at the end of November 2013. He raised a lot of issues; Ukraine he listed at the end as an economic problem that Russia would handle via tariffs and oil prices. The first mistake was the inadvertent conduct of the European Union. They did not understand the implications of some of their own conditions. Ukrainian domestic politics made it look impossible for Yanukovich to accept the EU terms and be reelected or for Russia to view them as purely economic. So the Ukrainian president rejected the EU terms. The Europeans panicked, and Putin became overconfident. He perceived the deadlock as a great opportunity to implement immediately what had heretofore been his long-range goal. He offered fifteen billion dollars to draw Ukraine into his Eurasian Union. In all of this, America was passive. There was no significant political discussion with Russia or the EU of what was in the making. Each side acted sort of rationally based on its misconception of the other, while Ukraine slid into the Maidan uprising right in the middle of what Putin had spent ten years building as a recognition of Russia's status. No doubt in Moscow this looked as if the West was exploiting what had been conceived as a Russian festival to move Ukraine out of the Russian orbit. Then Putin started acting like a Russian czar—like Nicholas I over a century ago. I am not excusing the tactics, only setting them in context.

**Heilbrunn:** Another country that's obviously taken a lead role in Europe is Germany —on Ukraine, on Greece—

**Kissinger:** They don't really seek that role. The paradox is that seventy years after having defeated German claims to dominating Europe, the victors are now pleading, largely for economic reasons, with Germany to lead Europe. Germany can and should play an important role in the construction of European and international order. But it is not the ideal principal negotiating partner about the security of Europe on a border that is two hundred miles from Stalingrad. The United States has put forward no concept of its own except that Russia will one day join the world community by some automatic act of conversion. Germany's role is significant, but an American contribution to Ukrainian diplomacy is essential to put the issue into a global context.

**Heilbrunn:** Is that absence a mistake, then?

**Kissinger:** If we treat Russia seriously as a great power, we need at an early stage to determine whether their concerns can be reconciled with our necessities. We should explore the possibilities of a status of nonmilitary grouping on the territory between Russia and the existing frontiers of NATO.

The West hesitates to take on the economic recovery of Greece; it's surely not going to take on Ukraine as a unilateral project. So one should at least examine the possibility of some cooperation between the West and Russia in a militarily nonaligned Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis is turning into a tragedy because it is confusing the long-range interests of global order with the immediate need of restoring Ukrainian identity. I favor an independent Ukraine in its existing borders. I have advocated it from the start of the post-Soviet period. When you read now that Muslim units are fighting on behalf of Ukraine, then the sense of proportion has been lost.

**Heilbrunn:** That's a disaster, obviously.

**Kissinger:** To me, yes. It means that breaking Russia has become an objective; the long-range purpose should be to integrate it.



**Heilbrunn:** But we have witnessed a return, at least in Washington, DC, of neoconservatives and liberal hawks who are determined to break the back of the Russian government.

**Kissinger:** Until they face the consequences. The trouble with America's wars since the end of the Second World War has been the failure to relate strategy to what is possible domestically. The five wars we've fought since the end of World War II were all started with great enthusiasm. But the hawks did not prevail at the end. At the end, they were in a minority. We should not engage in international conflicts if, at the beginning, we cannot describe an end, and if we're not willing to sustain the effort needed to achieve that end.

**Heilbrunn:** But we seem to recapitulate this over and over again.

**Kissinger:** Because we refuse to learn from experience. Because it's essentially done by an ahistorical people. In schools now, they don't teach history anymore as a sequence of events. They deal with it in terms of themes without context.

**Heilbrunn:** So they've stripped it of all context.

**Kissinger:** Of what used to be context—they put it in an entirely new context.

**Heilbrunn:** The kind of book you wrote—your first book, for example—would never pass muster in political science today because it's not filled with abstract theories. It actually tells a narrative lesson.

**Kissinger:** That's why I get attacked from the left and the right—because I don't fit either of their categories.

**Heilbrunn:** Speaking of history, what is your assessment of Germany's role in Europe right now? Are we back to a new German problem, where southern Europe views them as an occupying power, and in Germany itself there are hints of nationalism—I wouldn't say that it's an efflorescence.

**Kissinger:** Well, there are hints. Some groups in Germany, in the group below fifty, sometimes act as if the country that once sought to shape Europe by force now claims the right to reshape it by absolute moral judgment. It's unfair to tempt Germany into such a role. It's easy domestic politics for the countries of southern Europe to blame the Germans rather than themselves. What is the German sin in Greece? The Germans are saying that what is put forward as a bailout perpetuates irresponsibility. They are seeking to define a responsible process of recovery. Considering that their history has made inflation such a nightmare to Germans, I have sympathy for their position. Germany has never in its national history starting in 1871 had to run an international system. From 1871 to 1890, Bismarck conducted a spectacular tour de force that was not sustainable. You can't have a great policy if it requires a genius in every generation. But from 1890 to the end of the Second World War—nearly a century—Germany was embattled in its perception of the world around it. Britain and France have much more experience in multilateral diplomacy. So I have sympathy for the German dilemma. They can help, they may be decisive in helping, but they need a bigger, more global framework, which we need to contribute.

**Heilbrunn:** The Atlanticist generation in Germany and the approach it embodied have largely disappeared.

**Kissinger:** That's a pity.

**Heilbrunn:** The younger CDU [Christian Democratic Union] politicians that I've met are not that interested in the United States, which is a dramatic shift, since the whole Adenauer policy was based on *Westbindung*.

**Kissinger:** It's partly their fault and partly our fault.

**Heilbrunn:** I saw Robert McFarlane recently, who worked for you, and in the Reagan administration. He said to me, "The last strategic thinker as an American president was Richard Nixon." Is that true?

**Kissinger:** I think that's right. He had substantial strategic vision. At the end of the first volume of my memoirs, *White House Years*, I wrote that the question is: What would have happened if the establishment that Nixon both admired and feared had shown him some love? Would he have retreated further into the wilderness of his resentments, or would such an act have liberated him? I leave it open.

**Heilbrunn:** Do you trace many of the problems in American foreign policy back to Vietnam, to that shattering of foreign-policy consensus?

**Kissinger:** I think Vietnam was the pretext. It made the protest legitimate. Because after all, you had student demonstrations in the Netherlands, which had no Vietnam, and in France.

**Heilbrunn:** Nixon was clearly somebody who had a tremendous amount of foreign-policy experience before he became president in 1969.

**Kissinger:** And he was thoughtful, and his psychological attitude made him unwilling to deal with too many people, so he had to think and read—he couldn't push a button and get a Google answer—and travel. He was not threatened personally when he traveled abroad, so he was at ease in many conversations with foreign leaders. For all of these reasons, he thought deeply about foreign affairs.

**Heilbrunn:** He must have learned a lot from Eisenhower, too, I assume.

**Kissinger:** Well, like everything with Nixon, it was always a good combination of resentment and admiration, so nothing was ever unambiguous.

**Heilbrunn:** Do you think that Barack Obama is a realist—he's reluctant to get involved in Ukraine, for example—or do you think that's overdone?

**Kissinger:** Well, on the prudential level he's a realist. But his vision is more ideological than strategic.

**Heilbrunn:** Thank you for the interview.

*Image: Rebecca M. Miller*

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