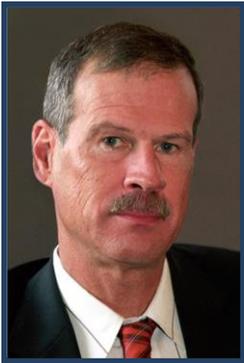




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KISSINGER'S WORLD ORDER

By Walter A. McDougall



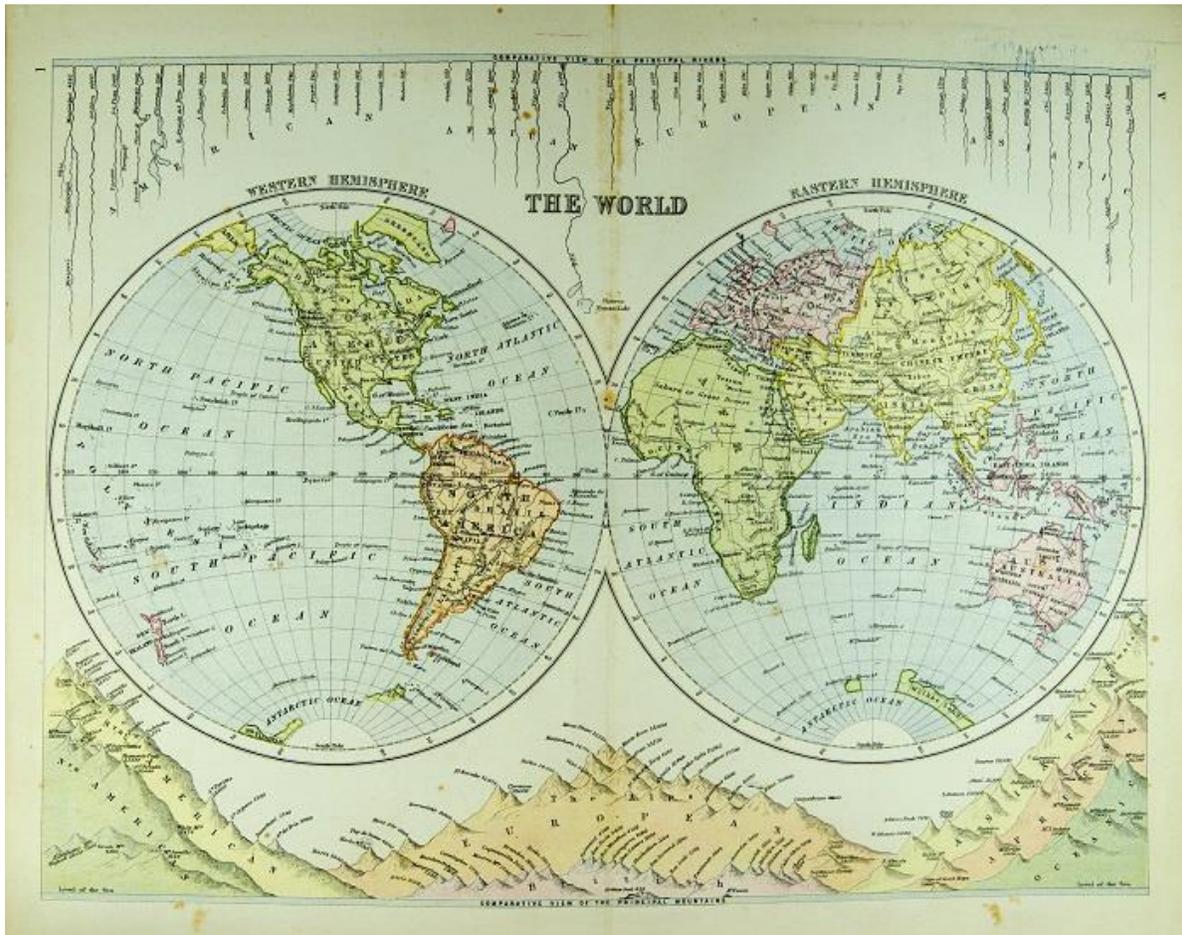
*Walter A. McDougall is Chair of the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Board of Advisors, Chair of FPRI's Center for the Study of America and the West, and Co-Chair of FPRI's Madeleine and W.W. Keen Butcher History Institute. He is the Alloy-Ansin Professor of International Relations at the University of Pennsylvania. His honors include a Pulitzer Prize, election to the Society of American Historians, and appointment to the Library of Congress Council of Scholars. His latest book, *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era 1829-1877 (2008)* was chosen by the *Athenæum of Philadelphia* as best book of the year by a local author.*

(Editor's Note: The following remarks were delivered by Walter McDougall at an FPRI Board of Trustees meeting on Monday, October 13, 2014.)

Henry Kissinger's latest book is a major event, if only for the obvious reason that it might be the swan song of the 91 year old scholar-statesman. No American in the post-World War II, excepting perhaps George Kennan, Robert Strausz-Hupé, and John Lukacs, has lived such a long, reflective, prolific life of the mind with regard to foreign policy, and no one else whatsoever has also been such a constant participant in world affairs at the highest levels. At this stage of life Kissinger has earned the honor and attention of old enemies as well as admirers. He has outlived the Cold War and indeed his own century.

Most of you, I expect, have read some reviews of [World Order](#), so I will just mention them briefly. Hillary Clinton's self-serving [column](#) in the *Washington Post* is so light-weight I had to wonder whether she had bothered to read the book. Clinton claims that Kissinger's analysis "largely fits with the broad strategy" of the Obama administration, assures us that Kissinger is a friend "who checked in with me regularly" during her time as Secretary of State, and applauds the book for endorsing indispensable American leadership. This was a presidential campaign release, pure and simple.

James Traub's reflective [review](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* credits Kissinger for his lifelong "campaign to undermine the romantic pieties of left and right that have shaped so much of American foreign policy." He suggests Henry may "outlast many of the people who hate him and make others forget why they hated him in the first place." But Traub hints at a duality in the book that I also detected. On the one hand Kissinger affirms the Westphalian international system – based on state sovereignty, non-intervention, and balance of power – that emerged from Europe's wars of religion as "the most morally, intellectually, and even aesthetically pleasing" order. It lasted from 1648 to 1914 – a pretty good record – and allowed statesmen pursuing limited ends to adjust and improvise because they understood the needs of the system and not just their own states. The diplomacy that inspired, in Traub's elegant phrase, was "a combination of fluid dynamics and jazz." But Kissinger also recognizes that since Woodrow Wilson U.S. presidents have been ideological universalists who treat foreign policy as a teleological struggle for justice rather than a prudent pursuit of contingent aims. Hence, "the tragedy of Wilsonianism is that it bequeathed to the twentieth century's decisive power an elevated foreign policy doctrine unmoored from a sense of history or geopolitics." Perhaps Henry has given up hoping that Americans can ever learn, which may explain why he makes no criticism of the Obama administration's foreign policy and even has kind words for George W. Bush, despite the fact that he specifically warned in the 2001 book [Does America Need a Foreign Policy?](#) against democratic nation-building crusades.



In the *New York Times* reviewer John Micklethwaite [chides](#) Henry for this “needless craving not to upset the Lilliputian leaders he still seeks to influence.” He also complains, unfairly in my judgment, that much of Kissinger’s latest work repeats material from earlier books such as [A World Restored](#), [Diplomacy](#), and [On China](#). But he also names this a “book that every member of Congress should be locked in a room with” because its purpose is no less than to suggest the preconditions for the first true world order. Today we live in a world in which “the international community” is constantly invoked, but no agreed upon goals, methods, or limits bind the players, many of whom are not states at all. “Chaos threatens side by side with unprecedented interdependence. Hence the need to build an order.” But could American diplomats ever prove capable of playing the roles of balancer, integrator, and mediator that a world order requires? If so, says Kissinger, America must overcome two deep character flaws: a conceit that foreign policy is “an optional activity” and a heritage of idealism that might have built a great nation at home but is lousy at guiding diplomacy abroad.

The most perceptive reviewer, in my opinion, is Walter Isaacson, Kissinger’s biographer back in 1992. He [explains](#) his subject’s *Weltanschauung*, World View, in terms of his status as a refugee from Nazi Germany, but even more as a Central European who knew the danger of “foreign policy that is overly guided by moral impulses and crusading ideals.” As a student at Harvard the precocious Kissinger concluded from studying the era of the French Revolution that the limitation of self-righteousness was just as critical as resistance to evil. During the Nixon and Ford administrations, says Isaacson, Kissinger was “able to manipulate the levers of this system with a mastery that would have mesmerized Metternich,” but brought down on himself the contempt of moral idealists, neoconservatives, and old right anti-communists. Kissinger now realizes that Americans, yes, are incurable idealists, but also knows cannot be effective unless their aspirations are “paired with an unsentimental analysis of underlying factors.” According to Isaacson that “yes, but” approach pervades the whole book, and expresses the wisdom and humility so becoming in elderly sages.

Finally, Kissinger’s [self-review](#) appeared in the form of an op-ed summarizing the operational conclusions he reached in his book. The search for world order has long been defined in western, even European, concepts of the sovereign nation-state, non-interference in the internal affairs of others, and inherently competitive relations among states subject to the constraints imposed by the balance of power. Those concepts appeared to become universal

through what my own mentor William H. McNeill called “[The Rise of the West](#)”: the Age of Exploration, the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, and especially the Age of Imperialism followed by Decolonization, which extended the European nation-state system to the rest of the world. But at the same time an American conception of world order purported to transcend the balance of power through the spread of democracy, peace, and free enterprise – presumably the heart’s desire of all peoples.

When Communism amazingly collapsed those “[ideas that conquered the world](#),” in Michael Mandelbaum’s phrase, seemed the only ideological concepts left standing and therefore the ones sure to become universal. But according to Kissinger three contradictions have exposed that “end of history” scenario as illusory. First, the nation-state itself has come under severe pressure. In Europe states have been transcended by transnational “soft power” bureaucracies. In much of the Middle East and Africa states have simply failed or dissolved. In South and East Asia states are threatened the old-fashioned way – by the prospect of a hegemony – and therefore by arms races, crises, and quite possibly war. Second, the world’s disunited political structure is in severe conflict with its globalized economic structure that in turn generates severe and diverse political reactions on all continents. Third, no mechanism exists for the Great Powers to cooperate and to agree on rules and norms even if their governments wanted to. The UN, NATO, ASEAN, GATT, and G-8 don’t fulfill this function because they are too public, too political, and too episodic. What the world needs is a steering committee of responsible powers akin to the 19th century Concert of Europe.

But no longer is it even the 20th century, let alone the 19th, and not even America, let alone Europe, bestrides the whole world. Our moment in history is unique in that other, non-Western and especially Asian societies have assimilated western technology and economics and emerged as potential peer competitors. In particular, the United States now confronts, for the first time in its history, an authentic China: a coherent, confident, Confucian China that knows it is the Middle Kingdom and is bidding to become a regional hegemon to which all other states are tributary. Likewise, during the life span of the United States, no serious Islamic jihad had arisen before the 1970s. Whereas today Muslim terrorist movements and regimes aspiring to a universal caliphate have become pandemic, while Iran, of course, asserts its own Persian and Shi’ite concept of legitimate world order. India, Russia, and Japan also nurture historic notions of legitimacy and order that are unique to themselves. Kissinger only makes one brief reference in an end-note to Samuel Huntington, but the world he describes sounds an awful lot like a [Clash of Civilizations](#).

In other words, the Westphalian order remains as an excellent model – or at least the only model – of an international order in which five or more Great Powers limited conflict among themselves and cooperated for goals of mutual interest. Why can’t such an order be established today? Perhaps it can. But the only region with experience in that system is relatively impotent Europe, while the Great and Emerging Powers today are all bearers of non-Westphalian universalist ideologies. The classical Indian model of foreign policy, though muted today, is rigidly hierarchical. Its great classic, written by the prime minister Kautilya from the fourth century BCE, is the [Arthashastra](#) which Kissinger says is like [Machiavelli](#) and [Clausewitz](#) rolled into one. The Chinese model, associated with [Sun Tzu](#) and Taoism, takes for granted that the Chinese Imperial Dynasty is the sole source of legitimacy and peace under heaven. Hence it made no room for foreign policy at all, just relations with barbarian representatives to be administered by the Ministries of Rituals and Border Affairs. (But China, unlike Islamic and Christian civilizations, was not a missionary society.) The Islamic caliphate, in its most tolerable form, would probably look like the Ottoman Empire that terrorized Christendom for centuries.

Last but not least, the United States itself is no bridge, but rather a hurdle, on the road to a world order because of its code of human rights and humanitarian intervention. Kissinger’s implication is that there is just no way a world order can be created so long as Americans insist on principles they are no longer strong enough to impose but are unwilling to renounce. Kissinger understands that “America would not be true to itself if it abandoned this essential idealism.... But to be effective, these aspirational aspects of policy must be paired with an unsentimental analysis of underlying factors, including the cultural and geopolitical configurations of other regions and the dedication and resourcefulness of adversaries....” In other words, “the realities of the mentalities of the localities,” to quote FPRI’s own Yoda, [James Kurth](#).

What Kissinger has in mind is a building-blocks approach that treats the construction of world order as a work in progress. The initial need is to encourage what he calls regional or international orders on the basis of shared civilizational values and interests. That implicitly concedes to the Chinese, Indians, and moderate Muslims some recognized spheres of influence, and thus would require some serious readjustments by other powers. But Kissinger does not imagine them as amounting to unilateral U.S. withdrawal. On the contrary, he imagines the U.S.

playing offshore balancer in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific regions.

Once a rough division of the world into regional orders has been achieved, then the leaders of those orders will be able to work toward the first world order, a 21st century Westphalian system based on respect for each other's singular characteristics but adherence to the same set of privileges, responsibilities, and rules.

Nobody said it would be easy. Kissinger is doing no more than trying to imagine what a world order might look like and how the nations might get from here to there. He understands especially the cognitive barrier born of the cardinal distinction between Western and non-Western thought. The West is committed to the notion that reality is external to the observer and knowledge defined by measurement and classification. Non-Western civilizations are committed to the notion that reality is internal to the observer and defined by convictions whether psychological, philosophical, or religious. It remains to be seen whether Westerners are correct in their assumption that non-Westerners will alter their cultural perceptions on the strength of science, technology, and prosperity. But it is hard to imagine the emergence of world order without some kind of world convergence.

In private conversation I once mentioned to Kurth that Kissinger had crossed the Atlantic from Central Europe to America in 1938 – just as power was beginning to shift decisively to the New World – and then crossed the Pacific as Nixon's emissary to China in 1971 – just as power was beginning to shift to the Asia-Pacific. “*Exactly!*” Kurth cried, but he added his personal belief that the second transition had been far more of an education than the first. Kurth had been a student of Kissinger's at Harvard where everyone took for granted what they saw as a superiority complex. Certainly Kissinger did not act as if he'd ever needed a mentor. But then he went to China – and met Chou Enlai, I interjected? “*Exactly!*” cried Kurth again, and surmised that in Chou Kissinger encountered someone from whom he could learn a great deal. He might also have found a kindred spirit, because Central Europe and the Middle Kingdom are geopolitical cousins compared to which the United States is provincial and solipsistic.

My intuition tells me that the last task Henry Kissinger has set for himself is to persuade American elites to permit – yes, permit – the reconciliation of the American and Chinese world views through the mechanism of world order based on a European world view. Thus would his life come full circle and the world realize the ancient wisdom he quotes at the end of book: “the unity of things lies beneath the surface; it depends upon a balanced reaction between opposites.”

That sounds a lot like *Yin and Yang*.

I first met Dr. Kissinger in 1990 when Penn sponsored, as part of its 250th anniversary celebration, a televised panel on the world after the Cold War, emceed by Ted Koppel. As the new star on Penn's IR faculty I was asked to introduce the panel and I could not help but applaud the incredible events of 1989 and our escape from a dangerous conflict that had lasted my entire lifetime. Americans and Russians alike, I said, should be dancing in the streets. Dr. Kissinger listened and then issued a gentle rebuke to the effect that history always moves on, new challenges always await, and no victory is final.

Just this week I came across in my research an article Kissinger had [written](#) in *Foreign Affairs* that made the same point back in 1956. He quoted Metternich to the effect that “Policy is like a play in many acts which unfolds inevitably once the curtain is raised. To declare that the play will not go on is an absurdity. The play will go on either by means of the actors or by means of the spectators who mount the stage....” But Americans were incapable, he said, of understanding the contingency of all things. “Our feeling of guilt with respect to power has caused us to transform all wars into crusades, and then to apply our power in the most absolute terms.... Both major political parties maintain that they work for a lasting peace, even if they differ about the best means of attaining it. Both make statements which imply that on a certain magic day, perhaps after a four-power conference, ‘peace will break out.’ No idea could be more dangerous.”

At 91 Kissinger is still an apostle of order. But the owl of Minerva does not always wait until dusk, because Kissinger had already understood at age 33 that history never comes to an end. Today, he would probably be the first to admit – indeed, to insist – that even if a world order could be designed according to some amalgam of Western and Chinese wisdom, that order would not last very long. It was Kissinger, after all, who instructed us back in the 1970s that the most to which statesmen can aspire is to fashion a generation of peace.