On the night of September 26, 2008, during an otherwise predictable presidential debate, Henry Kissinger—his thoughts, his words and, more importantly, their true meaning—suddenly became a heated topic of discussion between the two candidates. Barack Obama and John McCain were discussing the possibility of the United States engaging in high-level talks, “without conditions,” with some of America’s most loathed enemies, including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Iran. Drawing a historical parallel, McCain claimed that the opening to China in 1972, one of the most renowned examples of U.S. engagement with a hitherto absolute enemy, had been carefully planned. Richard Nixon’s visit, McCain claimed, “was preceded by Henry Kissinger, many times before he went.” (Both claims were inaccurate: there was an element of improvisation during the entire process, and Kissinger had visited China only twice prior to Nixon’s trip to Beijing.) Obama did not miss the opportunity: “I’m glad that Senator McCain brought up the history, the bipartisan history of us engaging in direct diplomacy,” the soon-to-be-elected president argued. “Senator McCain
mentioned Henry Kissinger, who’s one of his advisers, who, along with five recent Secretaries of State, just said that we should meet with Iran—guess what—without precondition.” “When we talk about preconditions—and Henry Kissinger did say we should have contacts without preconditions,” Obama continued, “the idea is that we do not expect to solve every problem before we initiate talks.” “My friend, Dr. Kissinger, who’s been my friend for 35 years,” McCain retorted “would be interested to hear this conversation and Senator Obama’s depiction of his...positions on the issue. I've known him for 35 years.”

It mattered little to the two contenders that during those thirty-five years, Kissinger’s view of world affairs had rarely been presented as an enlightened model for U.S. statesmen and that many, on the Right and the Left, had often lambasted Nixon’s former national security czar for promoting and justifying a foreign policy devoid of moral scruples and humanitarian concerns. In many ways it also mattered little what Kissinger had actually said or suggested. (Despite Kissinger’s successive semantic acrobatics to help McCain by claiming he supported negotiations with Iraq that were “geared to reality,” Obama was largely right.) The contest was not so much over the merit of the issue or the strength of Kissinger’s argument, but its symbolic value. What both Obama and McCain sought was the mantle of Kissinger-the-symbol rather than the endorsement of Kissinger-the-expert. By invoking Kissinger’s authority and claiming his support, whether willing or unwilling, the presidential candidates looked to justify their positions and emphasize who was the greater realist.

During the first term of the George W. Bush presidency (2001–5), some neoconservative intellectuals and senior advisors to the president scorned and derided the so-called reality-based community: those naïve people “who believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” “We’re an empire now,” one aid to the president confessed to the author and journalist Ron Suskind: “when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”

That was said, however, during a period of almost unprecedented imperial hubris in the United States. Fears and ideology stimulated this hubris and the ensuing dream of transforming the world, beginning with
the Middle East. Facts, or rather “reality,” forced a rapid retreat and the abandonment of such dreams. After the Iraqi fiasco, the most extreme neo-conservative fantasies were confined once again to their proper place in intellectual circles, think tanks, in-house magazines, Fox TV, and the Internet. People capable of studying “discernible reality,” members of the “reality-based community,” were back in demand.

Whatever Bush’s advisors may have argued during the post-9/11 ideological hangover, in the end politicians, statesmen, and common people alike are always required (and always believe) to be “realistic” in their choices and being re-
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pered by deeply realist considerations makes both sides uncomfortable. For democracy promotion, however, it is the only real choice.”

That politics, policy and, indeed, life often compel us to temper values with reality, ideals with possibilities, and goals with means, is a truism. It is nevertheless interesting to consider the parable of realism in U.S. public and political discourse since the great realist moment of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy, Nixon and Kissinger’s détente, and the much more restrained realist appendix of George H. W. Bush (1989–93). In the past three
decades, realism and realpolitik have at worst been outright rejected, particularly in the early Reagan years, and at best qualified and consequently adjectived, as if unable to stand on their own. This trend has been particularly true for the past few years, when this sort of qualified realism has made a comeback, in some cases to support and justify Bush’s choices—presenting them as not only just and bold, but also realistic—more frequently to denounce those same choices as hazardously unrealistic. Among the many illustrative examples are Charles Krauthammer’s “democratic realism,” Charles Kupchan and John Ikenberry’s “liberal realism,” Condoleezza Rice’s “American realism,” Francis Fukuyama’s “realistic Wilsonianism,” and Bill Richardson and John McCain’s calls for “a new realism” and “realistic idealism,” respectively. In recent years, particularly after 2003, everyone seemed increasingly compelled to present himself or herself as a realist. Everyone, however, also seemed obliged to qualify his or her realism. Even “balances of power,” the quintessential realist mantra, could not stand alone as a category of analysis and, more so, a political prescription. To be meaningful, such “balances” had to at least “favor freedom,” as reiterated several times in the U.S. National Security Strategy of September 2002. Qualifications notwithstanding, realism has thus made something of a comeback in U.S. political discourse. The connection of such a comeback with the stunning failures of George W. Bush and the difficulties the United States is currently facing is quite evident. In times of crisis, and of diffuse pessimism, it becomes convenient for policymakers and statesmen to present themselves not just as realistic (which they always must be) but also as “realists.” When it comes to foreign policy, being a realist means being cognizant of power realities, the unalterable structural features of the international system, the rules and practices of such a system (devoid of any meliorist utopia or missionary impulse), and placing the national interest above any other concern.

All of which leads us back to the Obama-McCain quarrel on Kissinger and his “real” position on negotiating with the enemy, with or without preconditions. Before 2008 it would have been hard to imagine two presidential candidates, or for that matter two U.S. political leaders, seeking legitimacy and political cover in what Kissinger did or did not say. This year, however, was different, a time of a perceived deep crisis, which in many ways evoked memories of 1929 and also the 1970s. It was a time that
seemed to demand not only pragmatism, concreteness, and sobriety, but also realism. After almost two decades of global interventionism, nation building, regime change, and democracy promotion (policies, strategies, and discourses, incidentally, that Kissinger the public pundit rarely condemned or contested), the time had come for a return to a “Kissingerian” foreign policy, or even a “Kissingerian” president.

Despite being surrounded by liberal interventionist experts and advocates such as Susan Rice, Samantha Power, and Anthony Lake, Obama was increasingly portrayed (and, it must be said, ably represented himself) as the true realist and balanced contrasted with McCain’s Bush-like “preference for illusions over facts.” “It was a reminder,” Rubin claimed, “of how badly this country needs a dose of realism.” “Look at where the grand pubahs of Republican realism,” Kissinger among them, “stand on pretty much all the foreign policy issues of our day,” progressive commentator Ilan Goldenberg argued, “and it becomes pretty obvious that McCain is no realist.” The canonization of Obama as the realist that the America of 2008 badly needed was completed when one of the most influential foreign policy pundits, Fareed Zakaria, declared the Illinois senator “the true realist in the race.”

This discussion says more about U.S. political culture than Obama’s or McCain’s worldview or future foreign policies, let alone their realist credentials. In periods of difficulty, critical introspection, and domestic division, realist and anti-utopian formulas and codes tend to become more popular and acceptable. In such periods, offering the public an ostentatiously realist discourse can be highly profitable and convenient for politicians and aspiring statesmen—the first argument I advance in this book on the rise and fall of Henry Kissinger’s fame and influence. During his tenure as national security advisor and secretary of state in the Nixon and...
Ford administrations, Kissinger succeeded in presenting himself as the no-nonsense hard-nosed realist who could finally teach naïve and immature America the timeless (and indeed European) rules and practices of international politics. Educating America and fast-forwarding it to responsible adulthood were presented by Kissinger as bold tasks that ran counter to a deeply entrenched political culture, which only the sophisticated and heretical German-born intellectual, turned improbable “American hero,” could achieve. The United States, Kissinger claimed in retrospect, “possessed neither the conceptual nor the historical framework” for “cold-blooded” policies. The time had come, however, because a majority of Americans were urging such a change—a fact that Kissinger and many commentators often failed to mention. Disillusioned with a policy of global containment of the Soviet Union and bewildered by the consequences of the modernizing crusades of liberal administrations in the 1960s, Americans were asking for a change of course, political as well as discursive. Far from being a bold and idiosyncratic response to the crisis—in part real, in part exaggerated—that the United States faced, Kissinger’s prescription was a mostly conventional one. The realist discourse of limits adopted by Nixon’s advisor was not just in tune with the mood of the country; it was a product of such a mood and an attempt to exploit it, to forge a new consensus around a foreign policy whose contents (détente, the opening to China, and the end of intervention in Vietnam) were obligated, but whose basic narrative was to undergo a drastic change. This inclination to feign eccentricity and idiosyncrasy, where conformism was dominant, was not new in Kissinger’s career. On the contrary it had already been a distinctive mark of a brilliant pre-governmental intellectual parable, where Kissinger had frequently offered analyses—on nuclear weapons, transatlantic relations, limited war, and the like—that pretended to be ahead (and outside) of time, and instead rephrased in rich and baroque prose conventional wisdom and orthodoxy.8

This concept leads to the second argument I make in the book: that Kissinger carefully considered, sometimes to the point of obsession, the
domestic repercussions of his words and deeds. Using previously inaccessible documents, recent books such as Robert Dallek’s *Nixon and Kissinger* have highlighted in great detail the attention paid by Nixon and his national security advisor to the internal political and electoral implications of their foreign policy choices. Such attention is normal, if not inevitable, in any democracy, particularly the United States. Yet, to date, the most popular argument put forward by Kissingerologists of all stripes has been a different one, namely, that Kissinger was insufficiently aware of the interaction between foreign policy and domestic politics, and showed little or no concern for U.S. democratic procedures as well as America’s cultural transformation.

This lack of respect, it is claimed, was one of the main factors behind his political defeat in the 1970s. Armed with this uncontested truth, I first approached this topic a few years ago during archival research on the United States’ reaction to the 1974 Portuguese revolution. Skimming through various archival records and memoranda of Kissinger’s conversations with his staff, I discovered, to my great surprise, that Kissinger spent an inordinate amount of time speaking to journalists and senators. In short, he paid paramount attention to how his declarations and actions were presented and received.

Again, this sort of diligence was almost inevitable in the U.S. political system, especially during the 1970s, when U.S. foreign policy was subject to unprecedented public scrutiny and a “new internationalist Congress” tried to reaffirm its constitutional prerogatives after almost thirty years of acquiescence to executive primacy in foreign affairs. Furthermore, Kissinger enjoyed the fame, popularity, and, in the end, influence he gained by successfully selling his and Nixon’s foreign policy to the American public. But Kissinger’s attention to the nexus, and interdependence, between foreign policy and domestic politics did not simply stem from the different political climate in the United States or his ambition and notoriously narcissistic ego. There was something more. From the second half of the 1960s onward, the crisis of Cold War internationalism, if not of the Cold War itself, had opened a heated discussion in the United States on the foreign policy the country should promote: on its goals, means, and practices. Nixon and Kissinger’s proposals and strategies must be considered within this discussion. Realism was the discursive medium they used to convey such proposals and strategies to the American public. The aim was to forge a new,
broad internal consensus around a proactive and internationalist, although formally less ideological, foreign policy. Only by achieving this goal, Nixon and Kissinger reasoned, would it be possible to contain the “limitationist” requests to reduce U.S. international commitments as well as the politically impracticable demand of relaunching the Cold War as it was before Vietnam and the crisis of containment.12

In 1972–73, Kissinger and Nixon thought they had achieved this objective. According to many polls, U.S. public opinion appreciated the realist turn in American foreign policy and the “Europeanization” of its modus operandi. Not so. Kissinger’s critics, on the Right and the Left, began to condemn the European, and consequently un-American, matrices of Kissinger’s political culture and strategic vision. Denunciations of Kissinger’s amoral approach and calls for a new moralization in American foreign policy became more and more frequent. Détente with the Soviet Union was presented as a new form of appeasement. The New Right and many liberal hawks, led by Senator Henry Jackson (D—Washington state), presented negotiations on arms control and the 1972 SALT agreements as a capitulation of the United States that would lead to its strategic inferiority vis-à-vis the USSR. Kissinger’s opponents considered nuclear interdependence and security based on the logic of deterrence and mutually assured destruction (MAD) as unacceptable, both strategically and morally. Finally, dialogue with a totalitarian and expansionist Soviet power, which violently crushed any form of political dissent within its borders, was presented as a violation of American principles, ideals, and values. “This country has not prevailed for two hundred years,” Henry Jackson proclaimed in 1975, “only to have its chief foreign policy spokesman side with the Soviet rulers against the American commitment to freedom.”13

Kissinger had attempted to de-exceptionalize the way in which U.S. foreign policy was conducted and, even more so, was narrated. His critics, particularly the future neoconservatives, instead proudly proclaimed America’s uniqueness and exceptionalism, rejecting his calls for the United States to be a country among others whose position in the international system was measured solely by the merits of power and diplomatic prowess.
Confounded by his own success and fame, Kissinger did not fully comprehend the political strength of his domestic adversaries. Nor did he understand the power and resilience of an exceptionalist and nationalist view of America’s role in the world—a notion he believed had been silenced for good by Vietnam and the crisis of Cold War liberalism. It was not the nature and functioning of U.S. democracy that Kissinger did not grasp: in fact, these he understood far too well and he had ably exploited them in his own political ascent. What he underestimated and failed to anticipate was the rapid reemergence of an exceptionalist, and soon hegemonic, political culture. By design policy should be attained through

The unrealistic nature of Kissinger’s realism, however, was not limited to his lack of understanding of international affairs and to his geopolitical vision, which is the third and final argument of the book. Both at the time and later, Kissinger presented his efforts as an attempt to deal with the objective multipolar evolution of the international system. Yet Kissinger’s diplomacy and actions often revealed that he paid little more than lip service to the notion of multipolar relations. As I show in chapter 3, from the opening to China to relations with European allies, the paramount consideration was repercussions on the competition and balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. Kissinger looked at the world through a bipolar, albeit nonideological, prism. What is more interesting is that for Kissinger, bipolarity as an analytical category—his way of defining power relations in a specific historical juncture—produced bipolarism as a policy prescription. The preservation of such bipolarity was the primary objective for détente and negotiations with the former absolute enemy, Nixon and Kissinger hoped to achieve a variety of goals: reduce the risk of a devastating nuclear conflict; preserve the U.S.-USSR duopoly of power; co-opt the Soviet Union to jointly discipline the system, particularly in Europe; facilitate an evolution of the USSR from a revolutionary power bent on destabilizing the system into a status quo actor devoted to its consolidation; and reduce the costs of U.S. primacy. “There can be no peaceful international order,” Kissinger proclaimed in a statement delivered to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1974, “without a constructive relationship between the
The Eccentric Realist

United States and the Soviet Union. There will be no international stability unless both the Soviet Union and the United States conduct themselves with restraint and unless they use their enormous power for the benefit of mankind.”

Détente was therefore an attempt to co-manage bipolarism in order to consolidate and uphold it. As such it was geopolitically conservative because it sought to preserve the status quo and keep in check the many forces that were instead eroding the bipolar discipline.

Such an approach, however, opened up a series of inescapable dilemmas that revealed how Kissinger’s realism lacked, ultimately, the necessary dose of realism prop up bipolarism; his was a bipolarism that Kissinger were fully on display ir was never threatened produced an pro-Western to for Kissinger revolution Soares (w his initial policy of on in Italian element of the two cases, rejections from his staff to adopt a man who had frequently invoked the need for greater “nuance” in the United States’ approach to world problems. It was also a consequence of the fundamental contradiction concerning how détente was defined and promoted: a strategy aimed at imposing bipolar discipline and stability, but one that was also eroding some of the elements on which such stability had been based.

This book offers an unconventional explanation of a crucial passage (and a crucial character) in U.S. history and solves some of the incongruities that still characterize historical interpretations of Henry Kissinger,
détente, and international relations during the 1970s. The book takes the form of an essay, and its mode of presentation is interpretative rather than narrative. The 1970s are now recognized by many scholars as a watershed in world history. During the decade, several factors and processes converged. As a result the nature of the international system was altered, powers relations were transformed, and the successive reaffirmation of America’s world primacy was facilitated. In the United States we witnessed the return of American exceptionalism, which embraced the notion that the United States was bound to lead the world. This revival of American exceptionalism challenged Kissinger’s realism and reaffirmed once again America’s sense of its role as the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.

Kissinger’s realist moment revealed itself as a parenthetical period in the history of the United States. In the 1980s and afterward, Kissinger vainly tried to render himself acceptable to the neoconservatives and the New Right, even embracing some of the critiques they had originally formulated of him and his détente. He had to wait for more than three decades, however, for an extreme radicalization of U.S. nationalism and a consequent major crisis of U.S. hegemony before becoming the quintessential symbol of a form of realism that an embattled America once again seemed to need.