

until too late, and few ever know where their money is until the Savings and Loan system collapses.”

But he promptly lapses into sterile cynicism again, funny but wrong-headed: “Those interested in the arts would be strongly discouraged from pursuing any of the arts. This will save many people from lifelong disappointment while limiting production, in the most Darwinian way, to the born artist who cannot be discouraged.” There is a kind of callous near-truth to this. But the greater truth is that, though arts cannot be taught, art appreciation can, and without a public informed about art and able to discriminate between the genuine and

the phony, we end up in the muck we are sloshing about in today.

Perhaps if education—including art education—were better, the melancholy proposition that drives these lectures, “Today, where literature was, movies are,” might be at least partly reversed. Then Vidal would not have to lament that he is no longer “a famous novelist”: “I am still alive but my category is not.” Then he wouldn’t have to worry about competition from television and movies. Unless, of course, the books he writes are poor stuff, only good for giving him fifteen minutes of fame apiece. In which case he may profit more from the status quo. □

Such assumptions have been fashionable for years, and Isaacson gives every indication of sharing most of them. But they are not the best qualification for writing biographies of the principal figures of the Cold War.

Isaacson, needless to say, subscribes to the conventional view that America’s cause in Vietnam was hopeless and that the only reasonable policy the Nixon Administration could have pursued was unilateral withdrawal. (He even puts forward the notion shared by Senator John Kerry that had this been done all of the American POWs would have been released, just like that.)

What Isaacson will not entertain is the argument that Nixon and Kissinger tried to act honorably toward an ally while also securing the United States’s own interests. Their policy combined escalation against—and concessions to—North Vietnam with promises of arms control treaties and trade agreements to the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the opening to China would ensure that the two Communist giants would each try to outbid the other for U.S. favors.

The policy came to be known as “linkage.” The problem was not that it was too complicated but that it was never really tried. There was never any serious danger of the United States walking out of the SALT negotiations because the Soviets were being insufficiently cooperative on Vietnam. Nor was there any serious danger of the United States halting troop withdrawals because Hanoi was showing signs of increasing belligerence. Kissinger has written with some justice of the pressures the Nixon Administration was under to go that extra mile to improve relations with the Soviet Union. Within the administration itself there was resistance to “linkage.” The State Department, Kissinger noted, “was most eager for liberalizing East-West trade unilaterally . . . and above all for beginning SALT as soon as possible. Any White House directive to the contrary was interpreted with the widest possible latitude if it was not ignored altogether.” As for the troop withdrawals, their popularity ensured their continuation, regardless of the military consequences.

A riskier alternative would have been for the administration to lead, rather than follow, public opinion. The bombing moratorium originating from the last

KISSINGER: A BIOGRAPHY

Walter Isaacson

Simon & Schuster/893 pages/\$30

reviewed by GEORGE SZAMUELY

When Walter Isaacson set out to write this biography, he had no trouble getting Henry Kissinger’s full cooperation. Richard Nixon even granted the author no less than three interviews. Given the reception of *The Wise Men* (1986)—the story of six of the leading architects of the United States’s Cold War foreign policy, which Isaacson co-authored with Evan Thomas—such assistance is not surprising: that book was almost universally praised for its scrupulous objectivity, its monumental scope, and its lively, lucid style.

Yet surprise should have been in order. For *The Wise Men*, though entertaining, was strikingly ambivalent on the most salient issues of the Cold War. The authors, for instance, found that their subjects “made anti-Communism dangerously rigid and U.S. commitments overly sweeping,” that “they bore part of

the responsibility for creating a world divided between East and West, over-armed and perpetually hovering at the brink.” And the authors arrived at this conclusion: “All in all, it can be argued that by failing to anticipate the consequences of their words and actions, [the *Wise Men*] sowed the seeds of both the Vietnam tragedy and, ultimately, their own undoing.”

Isaacson is an assistant managing editor of *Time* and it may be that these last sentences are the sort of bland equivocations to be expected from anyone who has put in time at that magazine. In fact, they express the standard post-Vietnam liberal position: Anti-Communism and the U.S. Cold War effort may have been justifiable while Stalin sat in the Kremlin, but they ceased to be so the moment he disappeared from the scene. The rift with China meant that the Marxist-Leninist world was so divided that we no longer had to worry about Communists running around in Rome or Saigon or Managua or Santiago.

days of LBJ could have been lifted and the so-called "honeymoon period" used for the launch of a massive offensive against North Vietnam. The war might have been won in 1969. Certainly Nixon would have had problems with Congress and the media, but he was to get that anyway. And putting forward the image of a strong President would only have improved his standing in the polls.

Instead of victory, however, we got the 1973 Paris Accords. Even they would have been unattainable, according to both Nixon and Kissinger, had the administration not escalated U.S. military activity. The bombing of the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia in 1969, the dispatch of ground forces there in 1970, and the bombing of Hanoi and the mining of Haiphong (resulting in the destruction of Soviet ships) in 1972 all served to give South Vietnam a fighting chance.

In giving short shrift to this reasoning, Isaacson presents arguments of his own that are laughably confused. He accepts that by signing the 1973 Paris Agreement, the North Vietnamese had accepted the existence of a non-Communist regime in Saigon for the first time. But he has to prove that this had nothing to do with the defeat of Hanoi's 1972 offensive and its fear of a re-elected Nixon's launch of a major bombing campaign. No, it was the Russians who helped out. Again and again, Isaacson repeats that "Hanoi was being isolated internationally," that "trade benefits . . . had been the quid pro quo for Moscow's tacit help in the 1972 Vietnam negotiations."

But if that was so, why would the Russians risk jeopardizing the May 1972 Moscow summit—out of which would come SALT and lucrative trade agreements—by sanctioning Hanoi's 1972 invasion? Isaacson offers his own answer: "Linkage was becoming a looking-glass phenomenon: the American side was the one that seemed more eager for a summit, and Moscow even had the audacity to send a note warning Washington that restraint in the face of Hanoi's invasion would improve its prospects at the May summit." Exactly. What made the Paris Agreement possible was not the goodwill of Moscow but the efficacious use of force in Indochina.

Once Congress outlawed the use of force in Indochina, the fall of South

Vietnam became inevitable, an outcome Isaacson dismisses with predictable smugness: "When the U.S. government finally abandoned its policy of force in Indochina," he muses, "it was slowly able to rehabilitate its reputation at home and abroad, which was probably the best way to increase its global influence." This argument seems debatable, to say the least. The post-Vietnam era was not the most successful one for the spread of American "global influence." As he watched South Vietnam collapse and millions of its people fall under the sway of the most brutal kind of Communist dictatorship, Kissinger distinguished himself from many in Washington by passing up the opportunity to indulge in such frivolous and sententious reflections.

Kissinger has had many critics among both liberals and conservatives. But only liberals have repeatedly and unfairly called into question his sense of honor and seriousness of purpose. Isaacson's biography is far more balanced than Seymour Hersh's exercise in sustained viciousness, *The*

Price of Power. He nonetheless is consistently supercilious and moralistic, and follows Hersh in portraying Kissinger as a devious, obsequious fellow always eager to play both sides of the street. Isaacson accounts for everything he dislikes about Kissinger's foreign policy in terms of his personality, and accounts for Kissinger's personality in terms of his childhood experiences. Anything Kissinger says or does—whether as an adolescent or as a young man or as a university professor—is treated as a signpost for what was to come in the Nixon White House. The problem is that Isaacson presents so many mutually incompatible characterizations that one gets the impression that even after completing a massive biography he still does not have a clue as to what his subject is really about.

The roots of Kissinger's conduct, Isaacson suggests, lie in the misguided attitudes he acquired arriving in the United States at the age of 15 as a German-Jewish refugee:

A desire to be accepted, a tendency to be distrustful and insecure: these were

"The greatest living Irishman on the greatest Irishman who ever lived."

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Review of Books

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understandable reactions to a childhood upended by one of the most gruesome chapters in human history. Kissinger's desire for social and political acceptance—and his yearning to be liked—was unusually ardent, so much so that it led him to compromise his beliefs at times.

Then there was his outrageous reluctance to think of himself as a victim. An indignant Isaacson announces that Kissinger “minimized the traumas he faced as a child.” “[His] childhood friends,” he continues, “regard [this] as an act of denial and self-delusion. Some of them see his escape from memory as a key to his legendary insecurities. The child who had to pretend to be someone else so that he could get into soccer games . . . became an adult who was prone to deceit and self-deception in the pursuit of acceptance.”

Such a characterization might sound plausible if one did not know anything at all about Kissinger. But how can a man with his thick Central European accent or his intellectual interest in Metternich and Spengler or his heavy Germanic prose be described as “ardent in the pursuit of acceptance”? Isaacson undercuts his own argument by showing how close Kissinger continued to be to his parents throughout his career, even having the impertinence to criticize him for his “sentimental streak” in this regard.

But Isaacson has to build his case. He traces the familiar path of Kissinger's career through Harvard, where along the way he picks up the usual malicious academic backbiting. Typically, he has nothing to say about how Kissinger's intellectual development shaped his actions in power. He writes of Kissinger's bestselling *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* without ever troubling himself to discuss Kissinger's arguments. He gleefully reports that a number of Rand Corporation luminaries hated the book, but never explains why. Since it was this book that launched Kissinger's career as a policy-maker, Isaacson's omission is all the more reprehensible. It is of a piece

with his almost exclusive interest in gossip and office politics.

As for Kissinger's years in power, Isaacson's psychologizing foreshadows the inevitable litany of charges that he will level. What is different is the slipperiness of his method. He recounts the familiar allegation that in the 1968 presidential election Kissinger offered his services to both Nixon and Humphrey. After giving the impression that this did indeed happen, Isaacson admits that no evidence has come to light to support his charge. When it comes to the issue of the so-called “secret” bombing of North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia in 1969, Isaacson is at his most deviodia. First, he follows William Shawcross in charging that it was the



bombing that led the “Communist camps to disperse over a larger area.” A little later, though, he admits that the critical event took place not in 1969, but in April 1970 when Marshal Lon Nol, the new Cambodian chief, “ordered the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to leave Cambodia immediately. Instead, the Vietnamese Communists launched an assault on the Cambodian government.” They left their sanctuaries, invaded the Cambodian interior, and besieged Phnom Penh. But a few pages later, Isaacson is contradicting himself again. In May 1970,

when U.S. forces went into Cambodia to save it from being taken over by the North Vietnamese, “the nation's descent into hell had begun. Every dire prediction of those opposed to the invasion came true. . . . The war widened. . . . Cambodia inextricably became ensnared in the Vietnam conflict it had avoided for so long.” In other words, it was not the North Vietnamese attempt to take over Cambodia that “ensnared” that nation in “the Vietnam conflict.” No, it was the United States's faltering attempts to preserve Cambodia's sovereignty that did the trick.

Soon this argument becomes too ludicrous even for Isaacson, and he changes tack to suggest that it would have been better to have let Hanoi take over in 1970 than have the Khmer Rouge come to power in 1975. It is true that the North Vietnamese were a less gruesome crowd than the Cambodian Communists. But since the Khmer Rouge were clients of the North Vietnamese, it is difficult to see how anyone in 1970 could have sat around and made these nice distinctions. It would certainly have been odd to try to save South Vietnam from North Vietnamese Communists but not Cambodia.

American foreign policy during the Kissinger years has always left liberals in a quandary. On the one hand, they liked the goals. Détente, arms control, the opening to China, the liquidation of America's involvement in Vietnam were all things liberals had been pining for. The suggestion that national interest should prevail over ideology had also become liberal orthodoxy, as the bloody mess in Indochina appeared to be bringing the Cold War “containment” policy into disrepute. In claiming to be seeking nothing more than a balance of power, the Nixon Administration was contenting itself with a modest aspiration.

Yet liberals have serious problems with Nixon and Kissinger. And this has nothing to do with their alleged devious style, which was certainly no greater than that of their predecessors. Nor does it have anything to do with their lack of

internationalist goals like human rights. (The most scathing pages of *Kissinger* are devoted to Senator Henry Jackson who; in linking U.S.-Soviet trade agreements with the exit of Soviet Jews, was precisely trying to add a moral dimension to American foreign policy.)

What liberals did not like about the Nixon Administration was that for all the modish rhetoric of "charting a new course," its actual foreign policy continued to be stubborn old "containment," updated to take into account the American elite's willingness to finish runner-up in the Cold War. To Kissinger, the SALT and ABM treaties were a way to prevent the Soviets from continuing with their missile buildup during the years in which the United States had no new missile program in the works and was reluctant to go ahead with ABM development. To Kissinger, granting the Soviet Union due acknowledgment as a superpower with its sphere of interest went hand-in-hand with the United States acting without guilt within its own sphere of interest. That is why Kissinger, unlike many in Washington at the time, was so alarmed at the prospect of Communists coming to power in France, Italy, Portugal, or Chile. Liberals always hated this aspect of détente. Isaacson haughtily dismisses Kissinger's "tendency to see complex local struggles in an East-West context." Kissinger saw détente as a means of continuing the struggle with Communism. Détente's enthusiasts, however, saw it as a means of ending it.

Isaacson rummages around in Kissinger's intellectual past in a vain attempt to understand him. Metternich, Spengler, Bismarck, Kant are all trotted out to no particular purpose, other than to suggest that Kissinger was somehow "European" or "pessimistic" or uninterested in noble goals like human rights. Kissinger's mind is rich and complex. He never followed the fashions of the times to question the very premises of American Cold War foreign policy. But what is truly remarkable about him is his worldliness. There are many intellectuals. But few of them would have the audacity and perseverance to negotiate the most esoteric issues with the most obdurate prevaricators in the world. One need only compare Isaacson's biography with Kissinger's own memoirs to realize the extent to which Kissinger towers over his contemporaries. □

HITLER AND STALIN: PARALLEL LIVES

Alan Bullock

Alfred A. Knopf/1,081 pages/\$35

reviewed by JOSEPH SHATTAN

In thinking about Hitler and Stalin, perhaps the most important thing to bear in mind is that, under normal circumstances, neither man would have amounted to much. Stalin might have enjoyed a brief fling as a Caucasian bandit-chieftain; Hitler might have attained a certain notoriety in the political underworld of Central Europe. As the distinguished British historian Alan Bullock observes in his remarkable story of history's two pre-eminent geniuses of evil, "To anyone who came across either of them before the age of thirty, a suggestion that he would play a major role in twentieth century history would have appeared incredible."

Unfortunately, the times in which Stalin and Hitler came to maturity were not normal. Russia was ravaged by war and revolution, Germany by defeat and depression. And it was precisely because authority had crumbled and the future was up for grabs that misfits like Hitler and Stalin could scale the heights of power.

For Stalin, who was ten years older than Hitler, a career as a professional revolutionary seemed perfectly natural. Stalin had an intense hatred of authority, "not so much in principle," Bullock notes, "as in its exercise over him by others." Consumed by feelings of class hatred, convinced that he was destined for greatness, "Stalin emerged as a rough, coarse, difficult man whose original motivation as a revolutionary was colored far more by hatred and resentment than by idealism."

Just as he was a natural revolutionary, Stalin was a natural Bolshevik, and he came to regard the Bolshevik leader,

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Lenin, as a role model. As for Lenin's rivals in the Russian Social Democratic movement, the Mensheviks, Stalin's attitude is well illustrated in an address to Georgian workers that he delivered in 1905:

Lenin is outraged that God sent him such comrades as the Mensheviks! Who are these people anyway? Martov, Dan and Axelrod are circumcised Yids. And that old woman Zasulich! Try to work with them. You can't go into a fight with them, or have a feast with them. Cowards and peddlers!

Stalin's idolization of Lenin led him to see himself—and yearn to be seen by others—as Lenin's chief lieutenant and heir-apparent. But Stalin's failure to play a significant role in the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 inflicted a terrible, totally unacceptable blow to his self-esteem. Bullock argues that the "trauma" of being overshadowed by Trotsky and others at the decisive moment in the party's history is a "key to the understanding of Stalin's psychological development." It led him to embark on a long and tortuous campaign to eliminate his rivals, gain control of the party, launch a "Second Revolution" against the peasantry, and thus come to be seen, finally, as Lenin's equal—his rightful heir and legitimate successor.

Like Stalin, Hitler had an exalted sense of personal destiny. A pampered child of middle-class parents, he spent his formative years as a vagabond in Vienna, where he was forced to rub shoulders with all sorts of riffraff while pursuing an imaginary career as an artist. This career came to nothing, but the Vienna years were hardly wasted. For it