

The Odd Couple

Reviewed by Martin Walker

THE COVER OF THIS MAMMOTH BOOK DEPICTS the odd couple in what seems a characteristic pose. Two middle-aged men in suits and proper leather shoes are walking up a path toward the White House. Their backs are to the camera. Richard Nixon is on the right, in trousers a little too short for him. He strides stiffly, his head lowered and his hands clenched behind a back that appears rigid with tension. On the left, both deferential and tutorial, Henry Kissinger seems relaxed as he bends slightly toward his president, making some long-forgotten point. They could almost be friends, but there is a distance between them, a palpable lack of intimacy.

In Dallek's view, Nixon and Kissinger were "rivals who could not satisfy their aspirations without each other."

When apart and in private, they could be cruel about each other. My "Jew boy," Nixon called his gifted national security adviser. According to

presidential historian Robert Dallek, Nixon "accurately suspected that Kissinger saw himself as a superior intellect manipulating a malleable president." Kissinger in turn called Nixon "that maniac" or "our drunken friend" or "the meatball mind." Of his trials during his first year in the Nixon White House, Kissinger confided to British ambassador John Freeman, with whom he was far more candid about American foreign policy than he ever was with the State Department (at least until he became secretary of state), "I have never met such a gang of self-seeking bastards in my life. . . . I used to find the Kennedy people unattractively narcissistic, but they were idealists. These people are real heels."

Yet nobody was closer to Nixon, the self-made son of California Quakers, than Kissinger, the child of German-Jewish refugees. In the first 100 days after Nixon took office, the White House log recorded that Kissinger had 198

meetings with the president; the nominal secretary of state, William Rogers, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird had just 30. But Kissinger clearly saw the president as a loner.

"Isolation had become almost a spiritual necessity to this withdrawn, . . . tormented man who insisted so on his loneliness and created so much of his own torment," Kissinger wrote in his memoirs. "It was hard to avoid the impression that Nixon, who thrived on crisis, also craved disasters."

Kissinger, for his part, craved dramas. He was a prima donna, furious at any slight, even the military aircraft assigned to him for his 1971 secret trip to Beijing, though a more prestigious presidential plane would have attracted unwanted attention. He threw legendary tantrums, and could be cruel to his overworked staff. When future secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger was driven to a state of nervous collapse and fell to the floor, Kissinger literally stepped over his prone form, until he finally realized the seriousness of the situation. Dallek describes Kissinger as a match for Nixon in ambition and deviousness, playing up to both Democrats and Republicans, and to Nelson Rockefeller as well as Nixon, as he maneuvered for political power in the 1960s. In Dallek's view, the two men were psychological twins, "a union of two outsiders who distrusted establishment liberals. . . . Their cynicism would also make them rivals who could not satisfy their aspirations without each other."

Dallek briskly covers the lives of his two subjects before they came together in the White House, with so little initial understanding between them that Kissinger was not even sure he'd been hired. But *Nixon and Kissinger* is not a double biography; rather, it's a study in mutual seduction, mutual dependence, and shared power. Strikingly little that is truly new

**NIXON AND
KISSINGER:**
Partners in Power.

By Robert Dallek.
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President Richard Nixon (left) was a loner, and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, was a prima donna. Together, they toppled governments, waged war in Vietnam, opened China—and unwittingly launched the nation into a decade of crippling inflation.

emerges from the 20,000 pages of Kissinger's telephone transcripts, hundreds of newly released Nixon tapes, and the diaries of White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman upon which Dallek relies. He has, however, gleaned some useful nuggets, such as Kissinger's grumble to Nixon, "In the Eisenhower period, we would be heroes," regarding their role in overthrowing Salvador Allende's elected Marxist government in Chile. They swiftly congratulated themselves for keeping their part in the coup at least semisecret.

Most of Dallek's new details are of this unsavory and personal nature, and suggest that the current fashion for "realism" in U.S. foreign policy in the Nixon-Kissinger style, rather than the naive or flawed idealism of liberals and neo-conservatives, carries its own costs in ruthlessness and denial of democratic principles. Mainly, however, this material reinforces Dallek's contention that in crises such as the secret bombing of Cambodia, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, or

the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Kissinger acted as a kind of co-president.

In broad terms, we knew this already. Even putting aside the fresh material, Nixon's is and may well remain the best-documented presidency in history because of the Watergate tapes. Dallek, who has already written solid accounts of the Franklin Roosevelt, Kennedy, Johnson, and Reagan presidencies, tries honorably to present Nixon's first term in office without the tarnish of Watergate, but the task is impossible. Whatever the interim triumph, be it the opening to China or the launch of détente with the Soviet Union or the signing of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the dark clouds gather ominously ahead.

So much of Nixon's ruthless and anguished character came out in Watergate and the eponymous tapes that any attempt to assess his personality, hopes, and ambitions depends on the hindsight made possible by the scandal that ruined him. This is true of all the memoirs written by figures who

knew Nixon at the time, all the interviews dutiful historians have assembled, and all the histories. And yet it was a fresh, confident morning when Nixon came into office in January 1969, promising to bring the nation together again after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy the previous year, after the campus riots and the burning of American cities. There was even hope that he would, as promised, end the Vietnam War on plausibly honorable terms.

Nixon's failure to resolve the Vietnam conundrum poisoned his presidency from the beginning. He had no "secret plan" to end the war, as was reported at the time; his only scheme was to use back-channel contacts with South Vietnam president Nguyen Van Thieu to sabotage any prospect for success for the Johnson administration at the Paris peace talks. (In an aside that is new, at least to this reviewer, Dallek reveals that Lyndon Johnson knew of this from bugs on Spiro Agnew's campaign plane and elsewhere, but dared not publicize the information because of the illicit way it had been obtained.) Like Johnson, Nixon was reduced to bombing even harder and then to escalating the conflict into Cambodia, when the North Vietnamese made it clear that the war would end only on their own terms, with an American withdrawal and a united Vietnam under their control.

In the end, what Nixon and Kissinger both realized was that however dominant the Vietnam War seemed in American public life, it was essentially a second-order issue on the wider strategic map. The agony of Vietnam loomed so large because it was a matter of American self-esteem, made acute by anger and incredulity that the nation was committing half a million of its troops yet being defeated by a small and backward state. But once Nixon and Kissinger realized that no important dominoes were falling in Asia and that the United States remained a superpower despite its apparent humiliation, they turned to the grander matters of the Soviet Union and China. In effect, they compensated for the apparent strategic reverse America was suffering in Vietnam by playing the China card against the Soviets, a move that was

all the more alarming to the Soviets because their troops were skirmishing with Chinese soldiers along the Amur and Ussuri river borders between the two countries.

The result was a remarkable success, not only in Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972, but also in the way that event unlocked so many avenues of superpower diplomacy with Moscow. The era of détente, in regard to both Europe and arms control, and the eventual withdrawal of the Soviets from Egypt and their relegation to a secondary role in the Middle East, followed. But the price turned out to be much higher than expected—and it receives unusually scant attention in Dallek's history.

The real American weakness in the early 1970s had less to do with Vietnam (though the costs of the war made matters worse) than with the U.S. dollar and the apparent faltering of America's economic dominance, which eroded Washington's influence over its increasingly affluent European allies. Even the ever-loyal British began to distance themselves. Prime Minister Edward Heath limited the traditional openness of Anglo-American diplomatic and intelligence conversations on the grounds that as a new member of the European Economic Community, Britain should be able to share what it learned from Washington with its European partners.

In retrospect, the crucial non-Watergate date in Nixon's presidency was the weekend of August 14–15, 1971, when a meeting was held at Camp David that Kissinger did not attend. The discussion was led by Federal Reserve chairman Arthur Burns, and the issues on the table were the weakness of the dollar, the balance-of-payments gap, and the prospect of serious inflation. With his eyes firmly on his reelection campaign the following year, Nixon decreed the most draconian economic measures ever enacted by a president in peacetime. He froze prices and wages, imposed surcharges and other controls on imports, and severed the link between the dollar and gold that had endured since the New Deal. Kissinger's absence was understandable; at the time, he knew

little, and cared less, about economics. Once he understood the effect of the economic crisis, he asked the new British ambassador, Lord Cromer, a former chairman of the Bank of England, for some private tutorials on the topic.

If in the early 1970s Kissinger did not fully understand how economic weakness would affect the United States' strategic role, he and the rest of America soon learned better. The nation's abandonment of the gold standard devalued the dollar against other currencies, which meant that oil-exporting countries received less real money for their oil, traditionally priced in dollars. The OPEC countries immediately agreed to confer about steps they might take to restore their income, and their opportunity came in 1973 with the Yom Kippur War, when U.S. support for Israel triggered an oil embargo. The price of oil subsequently tripled, sharply exacerbating the inflation that had been gathering speed since Johnson's presidency. The Great Inflation of the 1970s, which has emerged as one of the gravest legacies of the Nixon years, roared into being. It was the weakness of the dollar, far more than the Vietnam War, that colored the presidencies of Nixon's successors, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Indeed, the United States was not to recover its economic self-confidence until the Reagan years.

It may soon be considered peculiar to write books like *Nixon and Kissinger* that give so little prominence to the economic forces that underpin

the diplomacy and strategy of political leaders. The United States was uniquely powerful in the decades after World War II because it was uniquely rich, and in the end it was the ability to pay for both guns and butter that allowed America to prevail in the Cold War against a much poorer antagonist. The heirs of Kissinger and Nixon, however skillful they may be in diplomacy, must engage a world in which Europe already operates from a base of similar financial strength, and eventually China and then India will as well. The emergence of these separate poles of economic might is already squeezing American freedom of maneuver as sole superpower.

In this new world that is upon us, the skills of a Kissinger, who made his name as a scholar with his study of Prince Metternich's diplomacy in the era of Europe's concert of great powers after 1815, could come into their own once more. But any future Kissinger had better know much more about global economics than the original. It is no accident that the only American figure in the last two decades other than a president to achieve international status as a sage and global guru equal to Kissinger's has been central banker Alan Greenspan. What we know about America's future challenges suggests that the abilities of both a Kissinger and a Greenspan will be required. But we can certainly do without another Nixon.

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Our Inner Abes

Reviewed by Florence King

LOOKING FOR THE REAL ABE LINCOLN IS like looking for Moby Dick, Rosebud, and the silver lining, all at the same time. Do not be fooled by the title of this book. Some stores will inevitably stock it under Travel, but its real purpose is to explore why America's most complex, contradictory president still exerts such a psycho-

logical hold over us.

While a boy growing up in Illinois, *Weekly Standard* senior editor Andrew Ferguson collected the usual artifacts and memorized the Gettysburg Address, but he

LAND OF LINCOLN:

Adventures in Abe's America.

By Andrew Ferguson.
Atlantic Monthly Press.
279 pp. \$24