

Henry at Yale

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"Kissinger greeted me amicably, said he'd long wanted to meet me, and immediately launched into a critique of my NATO expansion op-ed from last week -- it seemed I'd got the Concert of Europe wrong." The date was May 4, 1998, the location the Kissinger apartment in New York, and the occasion a dinner for the deputy prime minister of Singapore. It was also my first meeting with Dr. Kissinger, who immediately made it seem right to call him "Henry." While at the same time inviting, as they say in diplomacy, a full and frank exchange of views.

I'd written a lot about him by then, most recently an essay in which I'd suggested that some future Kissinger, in his capacity as a historian, might come to see the past Kissinger, in his role as a statesman, "as having been, like Metternich and Bismarck, in just the right place at the right time, thereby fulfilling in history, as well as in life, the man's incorrigible determination to be at the center of it all."¹ It's one of the few things I've said about Henry that he's never seen fit to question.

It's no coincidence, therefore, that dinners, at the Kissingers, became seminars. Guests arrived, cocktails were served, the meal was announced, and when all were seated Henry welcomed a guest of honor who was expected to respond with significant insights on the great issues of the day. If that luminary fumbled or mumbled, others had to be prepared to step in. "John will tell us whether he thinks the Nixon administration could have handled Vietnam in any way other than it did," Henry informed the table, without prior warning, the first time this happened to me. Or, on another occasion, "John will assess current conditions in Iraq." I eventually arranged for Dr. Kissinger's office to leak me pre-dinner guest lists, just to be ready, but even that didn't help on one memorable evening: "John will now explain the crisis at Harvard."²

It's no secret that Henry's relations with the university he attended and in which he'd once taught had long been strained. His Yale connections, however, had been limited to a few faculty friends, among them Donald Kagan, Jonathan Spence, Paul Kennedy, and his former aide and close confidant Charlie Hill. But now, with my arrival in 1997, we needed help.

Sensing a shortage of geopolitical acuity in Washington, Kennedy, Hill, and I had decided to co-teach a course on grand strategy. We would proceed, we agreed, not from contemporary commentary or theoretical models, but from the study of classical texts, together with the history that ensured their continuing relevance. Our goal would be to train the future leaders now sitting in our classrooms, while we still had their attention. And our first consultant, we hoped -- how could it have been otherwise? -- would be Dr. Kissinger.

¹John Lewis Gaddis, "Rescuing Choice from Circumstance: The Statecraft of Henry Kissinger," in Gordon A. Craig and Francis L. Loewenheim, eds., *The Diplomats, 1939-1979* (Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 588.

²This was during the vexed incumbency of Larry Summers.

Henry took an interest in our plans from the start, for his historical writings had long shared similar purposes. His 3,900 pages of memoirs, I'd written in a review of the third and final one, were the literary equivalents of battleships, "intimidating in appearance, heavy with armor and bristling with armaments, equipped to [launch] preemptive strikes against histories as yet unwritten."³

But could we invite the only living and able subject of our studies⁴ to the Yale campus without the distraction of demonstrations? Christopher Hitchens's *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* - the literary equivalent of a torpedo -- had just come out, and none of us were sure what the effects might be if Dr. Kissinger too visibly paid us a visit. "Don't worry," Charlie assured him on several occasions. "Our students' memories don't go back that far." "It's not the students that concern me," Henry would reply. "It's the faculty."

So we devised a strategy of sending our students to see him, the first of whom was Schuyler Schouten. "Sky," as he was known to us then, had learned Chinese while at Yale, but had never been to China. So we deployed him there on our budget in the summer of 2002, with instructions to see as much of the country as he could, to speak only Chinese, and to stay out of jail. Schuyler came back exhausted, exhilarated -- and determined to write a senior essay on "The Ethics of Henry Kissinger."

I thought it advisable to supervise that one myself, and so asked Henry to grant Schuyler an interview. Whether it was their shared interest in China, or political philosophy, or even in soccer, something clicked, for to my surprise and I'm sure to Schuyler's, Henry hired him on the spot to fact-check Hitchens with, as it turned out, devastating results. Schuyler has worked with Henry, off and on, ever since.⁵

Our next step was to have Henry meet the other grand strategy students. And so, on a fall Friday in 2003, some thirty Yalies got up unusually early, donned appropriate attire, and rode Metro North to the Yale Club of New York for a meeting with Dr. Kissinger. Here's the photo taken on that occasion, with Professor Kennedy posed conspicuously with Henry. I'm halfway back on the right, Schuyler, in red tie, is on the left, and Professor Hill, as usual, has concealed himself behind the woodwork, knowing from diplomatic experience the risks of photography in dubious company.

³John Lewis Gaddis, "The Old World Order," *New York Times Book Review*, March 21, 1999.

⁴Kennan was still living at the time, but at the age of 98, not able.

⁵As acknowledged in *On China*, *World Order*, and *The Age of AI*. Other former Yale students who have worked with Henry include Ben Daus, Jordan Hirsch, Meredith Potter, Eleanor Runde, and Vance Serchuk.



Photograph courtesy of Marc Sorel.

Schuyler's notes for that day reflected his past year: "I'll never forget this apprenticeship with HK, first through his books, now through work; and believe it or not, I don't just respect him -- I like him too. Yes, he's aloof and has his faults, which have been endlessly analyzed. But . . . in his long view, his insistence on national honor, his *tours d'horizon*, his self-deprecating humor, his unexpected rakish exploits, his appreciation of China and of great foreign cultures in general, his pragmatism and wariness of ideological foreign policy -- in all these respects he serves as a model for me at a formative period in my life."⁶

Our next seminar with Henry took place a year later, in October, 2004, again in New York -- we still weren't ready to risk bringing him to Yale. I began the discussion by asking what the grand strategy of the next administration, whether that of Bush or Kerry, should be. Henry improvised a three-part 35 minute lecture, "so clear and well organized," my own notes recorded, "that the students assumed I'd set it up with him ahead of time, but this was not true."⁷ As we finished and Henry was putting on his topcoat, he pulled out his Blackberry, presumably to call his office. Molly Worthen, who was present, recalled the students' astonishment: "colossal decisions," it seemed, "could be made by someone who waves his phone up and down in search of a clear cellular signal, just like the rest of us."⁸

Henry's first New Haven seminar came, on short notice, on inauguration day, January 20, 2005: could he meet with a few students, he asked, after another appointment? So we told our newest grand strategy class only that we'd be hosting a "surprise mystery guest" at our off-campus conference center, and that refreshments would be provided. It wasn't much of a mystery by then, though, and we had a lively discussion of Bush's speech, which Henry had strongly disliked -- although he did wolf down the cookies.⁹ I found him afterwards waiting for

⁶Schouten notes, October 24, 2003, JLG papers, privately held.

⁷JLG diary, October 15, 2004.

⁸Molly Worthen, *The Man On Whom Nothing Was Lost* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005), pp. 306-9.

⁹I'd been at a White House speechwriting session a couple of weeks earlier, at which I'd suggested a call for "ending tyranny," but not necessarily by trying to spread democracy. As delivered, however, this became "ending tyranny by spreading democracy," so I didn't much like the speech either.

his car, still encircled by students, they beaming at him and he at them, saying nothing but relishing each others' presence. Henry then whispered to me: did this hastily organized session preclude a more formal meeting later in the year? Of course not, I assured him -- this one was a bonus. We'd always be happy to have him.¹⁰

Our seminars with Henry so far had chiefly involved undergraduates, but we also had forthcoming and recent PhDs who were eager to meet him. So my wife Toni Dorfman and I invited the Kissingers to dinner at our house in New Haven on an evening in June, 2005, and we included, among our guests, several promising young historians. Following Henry's example, I turned the dinner into a seminar, asking Jeremi Suri to discuss his recently published book on the origins of detente, Michael Morgan his dissertation on the 1975 Helsinki conference, and Molly Worthen her forthcoming biography of Charlie Hill, a project that had originated as a Yale senior essay.¹¹ Toni and I were pleased, afterwards, to see the three of them sitting on our living room floor surrounding Henry -- comfortably ensconced in an armchair -- debating what documents were in the archives and which should be. When Molly presented Henry, as he was leaving, with the page-proofs of her book, he asked: "Would you autograph them?" And so as she later put it, descending from the ceiling, she did: "To Henry."¹²

The question hovering over all of us that evening had to do with Henry's own biography: who would write the authorized version? He'd approached me on several occasions, but with my own Kennan biography as yet uncompleted, I'd had to say "Sorry, I'm taken." Jeremi wrote his second book on Kissinger, but found him to be too "enlightening and frustrating" to continue.¹³ And so, in the end -- facilitated by all of us sharing the same agent, Andrew Wylie -- the task fell to Niall Ferguson, whose well-received first volume appeared in 2015.¹⁴ It then fell to me, shortly thereafter, to introduce Henry and Niall to hundreds of excited Yale students -- and faculty -- in the Law School auditorium: "Dr. Kissinger," I had the fun of saying, "is the one seated on the left."¹⁵

We were long past concerns, by then, about Henry's presence on campus: he had solved that problem himself, four years earlier, by donating his papers to Yale. At 343 boxes -- some 8,000 digitized files -- this is our largest individual archive, a major resource for anyone studying international history and strategy over the past eight decades. Most of it is now open for research, and Yale now runs an annual conference encouraging such scholarship, with Henry in attendance.¹⁶

¹⁰ JLG Diary, January 20, 2005.

¹¹ Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolutions and the Rise of Detente* (Harvard University Press, 2003); Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 2018); and Molly Worthen, *The Man on Whom Nothing Was Lost: The Grand Strategy of Charles Hill* (Mariner Books, 2007).

¹² JLG diary, June 11, 2005.

¹³ Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 345.

¹⁴ Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger, 1923-1968: The Idealist* (Penguin Press, 2015).

¹⁵ The topic that day was "world order," the subject of Henry's most recent book by that title, published the previous year.

¹⁶ Nicholas F. Brady, '52, and Charles B. Johnson, '54, have generously supported these conferences, as well as the processing of the Kissinger papers and the Yale Grand Strategy Program.

The first of these, on the 20th century history of Sino-American relations, took place on March 30-31, 2012. I chaired the final panel, the purpose of which was to review opportunities for research in recently released Chinese documents. Henry was in the second row, and for the first few minutes appeared to be dozing, as were several others in the audience: we had, after all, just had lunch. This didn't last long, though.

The first speaker was a long-time friend of mine, Professor Chen Jian, then at Cornell University. After introducing some of the general problems involved in working with Chinese sources, he cited as a specific example a Mao Zedong dispatch of October 2, 1950, regarding intervention in the Korean War. "Which one?" Henry unexpectedly growled. "The second," Chen Jian replied. "What about the first one?" Henry demanded. There then ensued forty minutes of rapid exchanges on documents over sixty years old, showing that Henry had thoroughly mastered Chen Jian's book on this subject.

By this time, the audience as well as the other panelists were mesmerized: my notes record what happened next.

They then shifted the focus to Kissinger's own China trips. . . What still puzzled him, Henry said, was the one in November, 1973, when he had been negotiating, apparently smoothly, with Zhou Enlai, only to have Zhou drop from sight, never to be seen by the Americans again. . . . Kissinger asked whether Zhou's falling out of favor had anything to do with what the Americans had proposed to him.

Chen Jian said that it had, that the cause of the trouble had been an American suggestion that a "hot line" be set up between Washington and Beijing. Kissinger professed surprise at this, explaining that the proposal had been only a "bauble," meant to assure the Chinese that they were getting equal treatment with the Soviets, but of no particular strategic significance. After all, the Chinese didn't have at that time had the capacity to launch missiles at the United States, as the Soviets had long had.

But Chen Jian said sadly that Mao had misunderstood the proposal as one for a secret communications link between Zhou and Kissinger, and of this he was so suspicious that he in effect purged Zhou. I could see Henry's shoulders sag under the weight of this – the idea that his harmless "bauble" had in fact inflicted great harm on his great friend Zhou.

Chen Jian, sensing this also, hastened to say: "It was not your fault, Dr. Kissinger," the implication being that Mao by this time was sufficiently paranoid that anything could have set him off. Kissinger was still reeling, though: "We knew so little of what was going on," he lamented. And so it went, back and forth between them: the maker of history and the chronicler of history, operating as equals, both with precise details in their heads, neither, though, having the authority that the other did.¹⁷

For Henry could affect events, but with only imperfect knowledge of the context surrounding them, and certainly a limited ability to see what the consequences might be. Chen Jian could reconstruct context and consequences, but without the slightest ability to alter them. None of us had ever quite seen this paradox demonstrated in so clear and, if truth be told, so poignant a way.

I can't end this essay without mentioning one other characteristic of Henry that we at Yale came to appreciate: he didn't hold grudges, but he did seek opportunities. For many years, I'd

¹⁷JLG Diary, March 31, 2012. For Henry's account of this meeting, see *On China*, pp. 297-303.

taught a large lecture class on Cold War history -- also right after lunch -- to Yale undergraduates. To keep them awake, I polished punch lines. One of my favorites contrasted Henry Kissinger with Ronald Reagan: how was it, I asked, that Kissinger, with his gloomy studies of Hegel, Spengler, and Toynbee, had failed to foresee the end of the Cold War, but that Reagan, with his cheerful observations of John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, and June Allyson, had got it right?

That worked well until, in one of our sessions with Henry, a grand strategy student raised his hand: "Dr. Kissinger, Professor Gaddis in his lecture on the end of the Cold War says" While I was trying unsuccessfully to become invisible, Henry, unruffled, improvised another of his instant lectures, this time on how different the beginning of the 1970s had been from the end of the 1980s. I parted with him, on that day, as if nothing had happened.

A few months later, though, my publisher called asking whether Henry might blurb my forthcoming book, *The Cold War: A New History*, which was based on my Yale lectures. "I doubt it," I replied, "he's not going to like it." They persisted, though, and got the following endorsement: "A comprehensive and wise survey of the Cold War. Even those who do not agree with all its judgments will benefit from its sweep and scholarship." Then, on the next day, Henry told them to change it. The blurb would now read: Even those, *like me*, who do not agree" Then, on the next day after that, Henry called me, explaining what he had done: "I think, John, that this will sell you more books."

Years later, I turned this story into a toast to Henry, the guest of honor at a banquet given by Yale donors, administrators, and an admiring faculty. I'd long had the highest respect, I said, for Dr. Kissinger's role as a scholar, as a statesman, and now with our students, as a great teacher. Everyone stood, glasses were raised, cheers resounded -- but then Henry asked for one last word: "Yes," he said, slowly, deeply, and deliberately, "but the praise has not been unalloyed."