Henry Kissinger has been accused of many bad things. And when he dies, his critics will get a chance to rehearse the charges. Christopher Hitchens, who made the case that the former secretary of state should be tried as a war criminal, is himself gone. But there’s a long witness-for-the-prosecution list—reporters, historians, and lawyers eager to provide background on any of Kissinger’s actions in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, East Timor, Bangladesh, against the Kurds, in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Cyprus, among other places.

There have been scores of books published on the man over the years, but it is still Seymour Hersh’s 1983 *The Price of Power* that future biographers will have to top. Hersh gave us the defining portrait of Kissinger as a preening paranoid, tacking between ruthlessness and sycophancy to advance his career, cursing his fate and letting fly the B-52s. Small in his vanities and shabby in his motives, Kissinger, in Hersh’s hands, is nonetheless Shakespearean because the pettiness gets played out on a world stage with epic consequences.

Denunciations will be balanced by more favorable views. Kissinger has many devotees. And once his detractors and admirers are dispensed with, the obituary will move on to those who urge balance. Transgressions, they’ll say, need to be weighed against accomplishments: détente with the Soviet Union, opening up Communist China, negotiating arms treaties with Moscow, and his shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East. It’s at this moment that the consequences of many of Kissinger’s policies will be redefined as “controversies” and consigned to matters of opinion, or perspective, rather than fact. On the heels of George W. Bush’s reckless hubris and Barack Obama’s reactive pragmatism, Kissinger’s sober statesmanship is, as a number of commentators have recently claimed, needed more than ever.

There’ll be color commentary, colleagues and acquaintances who will reminisce that he had a wry sense of humor and a fondness for intrigue, good food, and high-cheeked women. We’ll be reminded that he dated Jill St. John and Marlo Thomas, was friends with Shirley Maclaine, and was affectionately known as Super K, Henry of Arabia, and the Playboy of the West Wing. Kissinger was brilliant and had a temper. He was vulnerable, which made him vicious, and his relationship with Richard Nixon was, as one reporter put it, “deeply weird.” They were the original frenemies, with Kissinger flattering Nixon to his face and bitching about him behind his back. “The meatball mind,” he called his boss as soon as the phone was back on the hook, a “drunk.” ¹ Nixon, Isaiah Berlin called the duo.

Born in Fürth, Germany, in 1923, Kissinger came to America when he was fifteen, and summaries of his life will stress his foreignness. “Jewboy,” Nixon called him. Kissinger’s view of the world,
conventionally described as valuing stability and the advance of national interests above abstract ideals like democracy and human rights, is often said to clash with America’s sense of itself as innately good, as an exceptional and indispensable nation. “Intellectually,” his biographer, Walter Isaacson, writes, his “mind would retain its European cast.” Kissinger, notes another writer, had a worldview that a “born American could not have.” And his Bavarian accent did grow deeper as he grew older.

But reading Kissinger as alien, as out of tune with the chords of American exceptionalism, misses the point of the man. He was in fact the quintessential American, his cast of mind perfectly molded to his place and time.

* * *

As a young man, Kissinger embraced the most American of conceits: self-creation, the notion that one’s fate is not determined by one’s condition, that the weight of history might impose limits to freedom, but within those limits there is considerable room to maneuver. Kissinger didn’t express these ideas in an American vernacular, the way, say New World poets and writers like Walt Whitman and Herman Melville did. “The Past is dead, and has no resurrection,” Melville wrote, “but the Future is endowed with such a life, that it lives to us even in anticipation…. Those who are solely governed by the Past stand, like Lot’s wife, crystallized in the act of looking backward…. It is for America to make precedents, and not to obey them.” Rather, Kissinger tended to express his philosophy in the heavy prose of German metaphysics. But the ideas were largely the same: “Necessity,” he wrote in 1950, “describes the past but freedom rules the future.”

That line is from a thesis that Kissinger submitted as a Harvard senior, a nearly four-hundred-page journey through the writings of a number of European philosophers. “The Meaning of History,” as Kissinger titled the work, is dense, melancholy, and often overwrought, easy to dismiss as the product of youth. But Kissinger has repeated many of its premises and arguments, in different forms, to this day. Besides, by the time of his arrival at Harvard, the author had extensive real-world, wartime experience thinking about the questions his thesis raised, including the relationship between information and wisdom, being and nothingness, and the way the past presses on the present.

Kissinger escaped the Holocaust. But at least twelve family members didn’t. Drafted into the army in 1943, he spent the last year of the war back in Germany, working his way up the ranks of military intelligence. As administrator of the occupied Rhine River town of Krefeld, with a population of 200,000, Kissinger purged Nazis from municipal posts. He also distinguished himself as an intelligence agent, identifying, arresting, and interrogating Gestapo officers and securing confidential informants. He won a Bronze Star for his effectiveness and bravery. In other words, the tension between fact and truth, a central preoccupation of his thesis—which, as one observer points out, reads like a “personal statement”—was not an abstract question for Kissinger. It was the stuff of life and death, and Kissinger’s subsequent diplomacy was, writes one of Kissinger’s Harvard classmates, a “virtual transplant from the world of thought into the world of power.”

Kissinger’s metaphysics, as they evolved from his thesis to his most recent book, published at the age of ninety-one, comprised equal parts gloom and glee. The gloom was reflected in his acceptance that experience, life itself, is ultimately meaningless and that history is tragic. “Life is suffering, birth involves death,” he wrote in 1950, “transitoriness is the fate of existence…. Experience is always unique and solitary.” As to “history,” he said he believed in its “tragic element.” “The generation of Buchenwald and the Siberian labor camps,” he wrote, “cannot talk with the same optimism as its fathers.” The glee came from embracing that meaninglessness, from the realization that one’s actions were neither
predetermined by historical inevitability nor governed by a higher moral authority. There were “limits” to what an individual could do, “necessities,” as Kissinger put it, imposed by the fact that we live in a world filled with other beings. But individuals possess will, instinct, and intuition—qualities that can be used to expand their arena of freedom.7

It’s difficult to work one’s way through Kissinger’s brooding thesis. But it is worth the effort, for it reveals him as a far more interesting thinker than he is conventionally described as being. Kissinger is inevitably called a “realist,” which is true if realism is defined as holding a pessimistic view of human nature and a belief that power is needed to impose order on anarchic social relations. But if realism is taken as a view of the world that holds that reality is transparent, that the “truth” of facts can be arrived at from simply observing those facts, then Kissinger was decidedly not a realist. Rather, Kissinger in his thesis was declaring himself in favor of what today the Right denounces as radical relativism: there is no such thing as absolute truth, he argued, no truth at all other than what could be deduced from one’s own solitary perspective. “Meaning represents the emanation of a metaphysical context,” he wrote. “Every man in a certain sense creates his picture of the world.” Truth, Kissinger said, isn’t found in facts but in the questions we ask of those facts. History’s meaning is “inherent in the nature of our query.”8

This kind of subjectivism was in the postwar air, and Kissinger in his thesis sounds not unlike Jean-Paul Sartre, whose influential lecture on existentialism was published in English in 1947 and is cited in Kissinger’s bibliography. Sartre, like Kissinger, would soon use the phrase “dialectical unity of freedom and necessity.” And when Kissinger insists that individuals have the “choice” to act with “responsibility” toward others, he seems absolutely Sartrean: since morality isn’t something that is imposed from without but comes from within, each individual “is responsible for the world.” Kissinger, though, would take a very different path than Sartre and other dissenting intellectuals, and this is what made his existentialism exceptional: he used it not to protest war but to justify waging it.

Kissinger wasn’t alone among postwar policy intellectuals in invoking the “tragedy” of human existence and the belief that life is suffering, that the best one can hope for is to establish a world of order and rules. George Kennan, a conservative, and Arthur Schlesinger, a liberal, both thought human nature’s “dark and tangled aspects,” as Schlesinger put it, justified a strong military.9 The world needed policing. But both men (and many others who shared their tragic sensibility, like Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau) eventually became critical, some extremely so, of American power. By 1957, Kennan was arguing for “disengagement” from the Cold War and by 1982 he was describing the Reagan administration as “ignorant, unintelligent, complacent and arrogant.”10 Vietnam provoked Schlesinger to advocate stronger legislative power to rein in what he came to call the “imperial presidency.”

Not Kissinger. At every single one of America’s postwar turning points, moments of crisis when men of good will began to express doubts about American power, Kissinger broke in the opposite direction. He made his peace with Nixon, whom he first thought was unhinged; then with Ronald Reagan, whom he initially considered hollow; and then with George W. Bush’s neocons, despite the fact that they all rose to power attacking Kissinger. Fortified by his uncommon mix of gloom and glee, Kissinger never wavered. The gloom led him, as a conservative, to privilege order over justice. The glee led him to think he might, by the force of his will and intellect, forestall the tragic and claim, if only for a fleeting moment, freedom. “Those statesmen who have achieved final greatness did not do so through resignation, however well founded,” Kissinger wrote in his 1954 doctoral dissertation. “It was given to them not only to maintain the perfection of order but to have the strength to contemplate chaos, there to find material for fresh creation.”11

Kissinger’s existentialism laid the foundation for how he would defend his later policies. If history is
already tragedy, birth death, and life suffering, then absolution comes with a world-weary shrug. There isn’t much any one individual can do to make things worse than they already are.

Yet before it was an instrument of self-justification, Kissinger’s relativism was a tool of self-creation and hence self-advancement. Kissinger, who admittedly believed in nothing, was skilled at being all things to all people, particularly people of a higher station: “I won’t tell you what I am,” he said in his famous interview with Oriana Fallaci, “I’ll never tell anyone.” The myth about him is that he disliked the messiness of modern interest-group politics, that his talents would have been better realized had they been unencumbered by the oversight of mass democracy. Really, though, it was only because of mass democracy, with its near endless opportunities for reinvention, that Kissinger was able to climb the heights.

A product of a new postwar meritocracy, Kissinger quickly learned how to use the media, manipulate journalists, cultivate elites, and leverage public opinion to his advantage. And within a remarkably short period of time and at a stunningly young age (he was forty-five when Nixon named him his national security adviser in 1968) he had seized the national security apparatus from the establishment “Eastern men.” The gentile Wasps with their inner-directed egos, like Nixon’s first secretary of state, William Rogers, whom Kissinger eventually pushed out, had no idea what they were up against. “What amazed” his colleagues, David Halberstam once wrote, was “not the dishonesty or ruthlessness, but the fact that what was at issue was frequently stunningly inconsequential.”

This book, though, focuses not on Kissinger’s outsized personality but rather on the outsized role he had in creating the world we live in today, which accepts endless war as a matter of course. Since the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, there have been many versions of the national security state, a quasi-covert warfare establishment that the political theorist Michael Glennon has recently described as a “double government.” But a transformative moment in the evolution of that state occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Henry Kissinger’s policies, especially his four-year war in Cambodia, hastened its disintegration, undermining the traditional foundations—elite planning, bipartisan consensus, and public support—on which it stood. Yet even as the breakup of the old national security state was proceeding apace, Kissinger was helping with its reconstruction in a new form, a restored imperial presidency (based on ever more spectacular displays of violence, more intense secrecy, and an increasing use of war and militarism to leverage domestic dissent and polarization for political advantage) capable of moving forward into a post-Vietnam world.

America’s failed war in Southeast Asia destroyed the public’s ability to ignore the consequences of Washington’s actions in the world. The curtain was being drawn back, and everywhere, it seemed, the relationship of cause and effect was coming into view—in the reporting by Hersh and other investigative journalists on US war crimes, in the scholarship of a new questioning generation of historians, in the work of documentary filmmakers like Emile de Antonio’s In the Year of the Pig and Peter Davis’s Hearts and Minds, among apostate former true believers, like Daniel Ellsberg, and in the forensic logic of dissent intellectuals like Noam Chomsky. Worse, the sense that the United States was the source of as much bad as good in the world began to seep out into popular culture, into novels, movies, and even comic books, taking the shape of a generalized, even if not always political, skepticism and antimilitarism—a “critical disposition,” as one writer put it, that “has become a cultural belief, entirely taken for granted and now part of conventional wisdom.”

There are many ways Kissinger helped the national security state adapt to what the first generation of
neoconservatives began, by 1970, to identify as an entrenched, permanent “adversary culture.” But key was the restoration of a denial mechanism, a way to neutralize the torrent of information becoming available to the public regarding US actions in the world, and the often unhappy results of those actions. What we could call Kissinger’s imperial existentialism helped pull the curtain closed once more, blinding many to the monster outside. Reporters and academics might have been obsessively digging up facts that proved the United States overthrew this democratic government or funded that repressive regime, but he persevered in insisting that the past shouldn’t limit the country’s range for options in the future.

In doing so, Kissinger provided a new generation of politicians a template for how to justify tomorrow’s action while ignoring yesterday’s catastrophe. The present can learn from the past, he said, but not through an obsessive reconstruction of “cause and effect.” Kissinger dismissed “causal” reasoning as a false, or lower-order and deterministic, form of comprehension. Rather, history teaches “by analogy.” And each generation has the “freedom” to “decide what, if anything, is analogous.” In other words, if you don’t like the lesson Richard Nixon and Vietnam teaches, don’t worry about it. There’s always Neville Chamberlain and Munich.

America’s exceptional sense of itself depends on a similarly ambiguous relationship to the past. History is affirmed, since it is America’s unprecedented historical success that justifies the exceptionalism. Yet history is also denied, or at least what is denied is an understanding of the past as a series of causal relationships. That is, the blowback from any given action—arming anti-Soviet jihadists in Afghanistan, for example, or supplying Saddam Hussein with the sarin gas he used on Iran—is rinsed clean of its source and given a new origin story, blamed on generalized chaos that exists beyond our borders.

This evasion has been on full display of late, as the politicians who drove us into Iraq in 2003 tell us that decisions made at the time that facilitated the rise of Islamic State militants shouldn’t hinder America from taking bold action in the future to destroy Islamic State militants. “If we spend our time debating what happened eleven or twelve years ago,” former vice president Dick Cheney today says, “we’re going to miss the threat that is growing and that we do face.” The United States, Cheney insists, needs to do “what it takes, for as long as it takes.”

Kissinger perfected this type of dodge. He was a master of advancing the proposition that the policies of the United States and the world’s violence and disorder are entirely unrelated, especially when it came to accounting for the consequences of his own actions. Cambodia? “It was Hanoi,” Kissinger writes, pointing to the North Vietnamese to justify his four-year bombing campaign of that neutral nation. Chile? That country, he says in defense of his coup-plotting against Salvador Allende, “was ‘destabilized’ not by our actions but by Chile’s constitutional President.” The Kurds? “A tragedy,” says the man who served them up to Saddam Hussein, hoping to turn Iraq away from the Soviets. East Timor? “I think we’ve heard enough about Timor.”

* * *

Obituaries, already on file and waiting to run, will mention how conservative hostility toward Kissinger’s policies—détente with Russia, opening to China—helped propel Ronald Reagan’s first real bid for the presidency in 1976. And they will draw a distinction between his brand of supposed hardheaded power politics and the neoconservative idealism that led us into the fiascos of Afghanistan and Iraq. But they’ll likely miss the way Kissinger served not just as a foil but as an enabler for the New Right. Over the course of his career he advanced a set of premises that would be taken up and extended by neoconservative intellectuals and policy makers: that hunches, conjecture, will, and intuition are as
important as facts and hard intelligence in guiding policy, that too much knowledge can weaken resolve, that foreign policy has to be wrested out of the hands of experts and bureaucrats and given to men of action, and that the principle of self-defense (broadly defined to cover just about anything) overrules the ideal of sovereignty. In so doing, Kissinger played his part in keeping the great wheel of American militarism spinning ever forward.

Henry Kissinger is, of course, not singularly responsible for the evolution of the United States’ national security state into the perpetual motion machine that it has become today. That history, starting with the 1947 National Security Act and running through the Cold War and now the War on Terror, is comprised of many different episodes and is populated by many different individuals. But Kissinger’s career courses through the decades like a bright red line, shedding spectral light on the road that has brought us to where we now find ourselves, from the jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia to the sands of the Persian Gulf.

At the very least, we can learn from Kissinger’s long life that the two defining concepts of American foreign policy—realism and idealism—aren’t necessarily opposing values; rather, they reinforce each other. Idealism gets us into whatever the quagmire of the moment is, realism keeps us there while promising to get us out, and then idealism returns anew both to justify the realism and to overcome it in the next round. So it goes.

Back in 2004, the journalist Ron Suskind reported a conversation he had with a top aide to George W. Bush who many now believe was Karl Rove. Studying “discernible reality” was not the way the world worked any more, Rove said: “We’re an empire now, and 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.”

The quote circulated widely, interpreted as the blind ideology of the Bush administration taken to its conceited conclusion, the idea that reality itself could bend to neocon will.

But Kissinger said it four decades earlier. Inspired by John F. Kennedy’s facing down of the Soviets during the Cuban missile crisis, Kissinger, then still a Harvard professor, urged foreign policy experts to escape the restraints imposed by reality and embrace a similar élan: An “expert,” he wrote in 1963, “respects ‘facts’ and considers them something to be adjusted to, perhaps to be manipulated, but not to be transcended…. In the decades ahead, the West will have to lift its sights to encompass a more embracing concept of reality…. There are two kinds of realists: those who manipulate facts and those who create them. The West requires nothing so much as men able to create their own reality.”

Nothing so much as Henry Kissinger.