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The elite love him but for some reason won't say why.

On Monday evening at the New York Public Library's 42nd Street entrance, several men were on their knees meticulously installing a red carpet over the stone steps as a half-dozen security guards in suits looked out from behind the velvet rope.

I was there to crash the 100th-birthday party of [Henry Kissinger](#), the former secretary of State to Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford who historians and journalists say is responsible for countless atrocities. He prolonged and expanded the Vietnam War with the bombing of Cambodia and Laos, killing hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of innocent people. He helped empower genocidal militaries in Pakistan and Indonesia. He enabled juntas that overthrew democracies in Chile and Argentina. He's [often called a war criminal](#), and the [long-running social-media joke](#) is that he's still alive while so many better humans are dead.

And he's been having a lot of birthday parties.

When I heard that there was one happening in Manhattan with a secret guest list and that he would be attending in person, I decided to go as well. I would stake out the scene and document the guests for history's sake — or at least for what's left of Twitter.

I knew about it only from a cryptic line on [Secretary of State Antony Blinken](#)'s schedule: "7:30 p.m. Secretary Blinken attends a celebration in honor of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in New York City, New York. (CLOSED PRESS COVERAGE)." You can't really close press coverage when the event is taking place in Bryant Park, though, and I wanted to ask Blinken what he was doing there. It seemed peculiar that Kissinger was such a cherished statesman to a certain smart set yet no one wanted to talk about celebrating him.

A library spokesperson reiterated that it was a private party and handed me over to the office of event planner David Monn, who had also thrown Kissinger's 90th-birthday celebration. "We are unable to share details," a business manager told me.

When I showed up at the library, another Monn underling spotted me immediately. "We know who you are," she said, "and you were told not to come."

Around the corner, I met a gentleman in a tuxedo with a cane and a sensible pair of black Samuel Hubbard slip-ons. It was former ambassador Dick Viets, who represented the U.S. in Jordan and Tanzania. He told me he had known and admired Kissinger since he was a young man in the foreign service. Kissinger's New York friends would be here, he said, "a lot of whom want to give him a toast." He also told me Wall Street titan Henry Kravis, co-founder of the investment giant KKR, was the host. (Monn's staff denies this, and KKR declined to comment.)

Viets walked toward the red carpet and began chatting with Graham Allison, a Harvard scholar of international relations and a [serial corporate board member](#) who studied under Kissinger at Harvard in the '60s. "I was introduced at an event recently as his oldest — and slowest — continuously learning student," he told me. "Which statesman of the 20th century will people remember 100 years from now?"

I write about foreign policy, and this was my first time covering a red carpet. But here I was, not asking, "Who are you wearing?" but instead inquiring as to what about Kissinger merits celebrating. Luckily, years of reporting on foreign affairs had trained me well in recognizing senior citizens in black tie. I introduced myself to David Petraeus (who rushed by, even though we sometimes email — *General, please get back to me!*) and [Larry Summers](#) (who had no interest in chatting).

Then arrived Jane Harman, who once served as the senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee. What's Kissinger's legacy? "Everything, everywhere, all at once," she said. She posed for me to snap a photo and then got checked in by a guard.

William J. Burns, the CIA director, crossed the sidewalk with a tough-looking entourage. Then came more guests in black Escalades and Audis and a couple of green Bentleys. The security guards kept reminding me to stay away, an instruction I politely ignored, and a crowd of Israeli tourists asked me what was going on. The former New York schools chancellor Joel Klein walked in, and [Diane von Furstenberg](#) seemed to have snuck by me.

And then there was Bill, a friendly 20-something in a polo. Bill was testing my patience, angling for selfies with the A-listers as I tried to ask Mike Bloomberg about his new appointment to President Biden's Defense Innovation Board. But then Bill, who declined to share his full name or any other personal details, spotted George H.W. Bush's secretary of State James Baker, himself a spritely 93-year-old, and secured a selfie. Now he was my ally. "Archbishop Dolan, will you take a picture with me?" he said, greeting New York's Catholic luminary. I would never have recognized either man.

Some people didn't show up. Kissinger had served on the board of the now disgraced and thoroughly fraudulent Theranos, and its founder, Elizabeth Holmes, is in prison, somewhere a lot of people would apparently like to see Kissinger. Hillary Clinton, who had with her husband, Bill, attended [Kissinger's 90th](#), also didn't appear.

Kissinger is having an extended birthday month. Two weeks earlier, I had successfully invited myself to another birthday party hosted by the [Economic Club in New York](#). They made me sit up on the mezzanine of the Yale Club ballroom, admiring the food from afar, but at least they let me in. There was also Kissinger's

[lengthy interview](#)

with

The Economist

and "centennial celebrations" in London and his hometown of Fürth, Germany,

[according](#)

to his son. It has also been a month of outstanding watchdog reporting — from

[new revelations](#)

about previously untold mass killings Kissinger was responsible for in Cambodia, to the

[grilling](#)

of Ted Koppel for giving his old friend Kissinger the softball treatment on CBS.

But none of these events seemed to carry as much star power as a black-tie event in midtown.

By now, I was posting a running tweet thread of the A-listers as they arrived, and it seemed as if the whole broken Twitterverse was contributing a riff. Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots, climbed down from an SUV in a pair of glittery Nikes and a tux. Menswear commentator Derek Guy [wrote](#), “kissinger may have bombed cambodia but you bombed this outfit.” Gripping a gift box with a Patriots logo, Kraft pointed out that Kissinger had fled the Nazis to come to the U.S. “He shows all the values of America,” he told me.

Then came Samantha Power, the USAID administrator and human-rights celebrity, with her husband, the lawyer Cass Sunstein. Two decades ago, she was working as a journalist and wrote the iconic book on genocide, *A Problem From Hell*, in which she described the U.S.’s long-standing complicity in mass murder. She detailed the backstory behind the more than 1 million Bengalis murdered by the Pakistani military while Nixon’s team “did not protest,” thereby enabling the killing. On the U.S. carpet-bombing of Southeast Asia, she wrote bluntly, “Kissinger had bloodied Cambodia and blackened his own reputation.”

If these people love Kissinger so much, why won’t they say so openly? The secrecy of the event implied a sense of shame, or at least sheer protectiveness, even though at this point, Kissinger’s own problems from hell are not really contested.

At the top of the stairs, I glimpsed Eric Schmidt, the billionaire former Google CEO who [co-authored a book on artificial intelligence](#) with Kissinger. I asked him what it was like to collaborate with Dr. K, but he turned back inside.

Now, it was just me and the guards, the NYPD, and the diplomatic details, all of whom were getting a little sick of me but were maybe also becoming my friends. Asked who his favorite celebrity sighting of the night was, one of the library guards replied, “I’m just here to get paid.” Peeking past him, I could make out a green monogram of “HK” at the ballroom’s entrance, and the staff brought out giant glass urns in which they lit candles as the sun set over Fifth Avenue.

Another guard cut me a break and told me Blinken had entered through the service entrance. I

decided to wait to see if I could catch him coming out.

Blinken had [interviewed](#) Kissinger for his senior thesis at Harvard in the '80s and favorably discussed the economic component of détente with the Soviets in his 1987 book *Ally Versus Ally* at a time when not a lot of young people were praising him.

Soon, Tom Sullivan, Blinken's deputy chief of staff, was speed walking down the red carpet toward an SUV. I know advance work when I see it, and I made out some grumblings into earpieces that they needed to prepare for a 9:15 p.m. exit. "We're set for departure," the NYPD honcho said into a microphone coming out of his shirt as police cars seemed to be performing a ballet of security theater.

"You're not going to be able to ask the secretary any questions," the diplomatic security said, adding that it would be a misdemeanor if I got any closer. By now, they knew my deal. "We're going to need you to go stand over there," he instructed me again, back behind the light post, actually beyond the garbage can. "A little further back, behind that pole, please."

So I needed a question, one I could yell from 20 feet away before Blinken's SUV flew down 42nd Street. I had interviewed Blinken before, and I've [written](#) about his consulting firm, for which he [advised](#) banks, military contractors, and big tech, [much like Kissinger](#) has lucratively done over the past four decades.

The sirens blared, a bunch more guys blocked the sidewalk, and at 9:25 p.m., Blinken appeared in a tux, a long black tie, and patent leather shoes as he rushed down the stairs.

"Mr. Secretary!" I called out. "What is there to celebrate about Henry Kissinger?"

He didn't answer.

But there was a second chance the next day. The Washington *Post*'s John Hudson put this question to the State Department spokesperson in the briefing room with just enough bite.

"What does Secretary Blinken

like

about Henry Kissinger?" Spokesperson Vedant Patel said there's an "important perspective to be gained through those conversations with predecessors" but declined to speak further. It was a private event, he emphasized. Blinken was by then in Saudi Arabia, where he would meet Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who, according to the CIA, had ordered the murder of *Post*

columnist Jamal Khashoggi. Blinken's visit might be called a Kissingerian move.

I called the event planners the morning after to ask if they would share photos or toasts, but I was told no. "You need to respect the privacy of all those participants," they said. "You were specifically given instructions that there would be no information, yet we see you've been firing up Twitter."

Later in the week, I caught up by phone with Summers to ask the same question of what there is to celebrate about Kissinger. "His insight and wisdom is unlike anything I've ever seen," he told me, and he emphasized how much Kissinger has accomplished between the ages of 90 and 100.

For someone so beloved by the New York elite, where were the fancy portraits and sentimental tributes? And what about the allegations that Kissinger is a war criminal? "I'm just not going to go there," Summers told me. "I'm gonna leave it at the one quote I just gave you."