

By Choire Sicha

From [New York Magazine](#) | Original Article

Go to [original article](#) to see many photos of interest.

His long final act — after Harvard and D.C. and Cambodia — was spent at New York’s more rarefied tables.

Henry Kissinger’s long and lucrative third act of dining out in New York City began in January 1977, when he was 53, long after he’d left academia (his first act) and then government (the second), exhausted by years of global jet-setting and his endless aggressive manipulations. He was in debt, he said, upon leaving government, and his evening clothes were in tatters. He promptly signed a book contract with Little, Brown and Company with a \$2 million advance just for the hardcover rights, keeping all the other rights for himself. He would have taught at Columbia with an endowed professorship, but the students promptly canceled him; he took a contract at Georgetown instead and spent the weekends in Westchester with the Rockefellers and began to write.

Even by the time he came here, in all the world there were fewer names more hated than his. This did not slow anyone down. For years, he was the darling of the dinner party, beloved by the now mostly dead army of regal wealthy socialites. “Manhattan social life is more generous than Washington political life,” Kissinger noted. “It’s not a blood sport.”

The avatar and architect of the United States’s desire to control the world left a softer legacy of an entire generation raised to view the politics of the world as a clash between America, China, and Russia with all those other pesky countries and entire continents as opportunities for our strategic wins and losses. His harder legacy is dead children and the mass displacement of humans from Bangladesh to Chile. “Every man in a certain sense creates his picture of the world,” he wrote in 1950. Violence, chaos, and burning palm trees are what the world sees as the long international legacy of the U.S. imperialist mission in the abstract and of Henry Kissinger in the quite specific.

To a Rockefeller vault in Tarrytown is where, in the mid-1970s, he took his 15,000 White House telephone-call transcripts after leaving government — he would have a secretary transcribe every call — claiming them as personal property. When this was challenged, the Supreme Court agreed that since he now physically had them, they couldn't be federal property; he set restrictions so they couldn't be seen until 2008. Soon enough, he and his second wife, Nancy, settled more permanently in New York City. Also, he lost 20 pounds.

At this time he was consulting for Goldman Sachs — that meant having lunch with its best clients or best clients-to-be — and putting on seminars for Chase Manhattan, where he was vice-chairman of the international advisory committee. He signed a talent contract with NBC on which he irregularly appeared. He helped Heinz when it wanted to make baby food in China. He bought an apartment in River House, at 435 East 52nd Street, for a bit over \$100,000. (The Sutton Place-adjacent co-op had, the legend goes, at one time rejected Richard Nixon as a resident.) As the brains and muscle behind Kissinger Associates, founded in 1982, he turned his legendary status as an international marvel and media manipulator into cash.

He then commanded a lecture fee of \$15,000 (enormous for its time, though he also said he did two free for each one paid). He took phone calls and wrote in a small home office with a pillow emblazoned with "Power Is the Ultimate Aphrodisiac." With his towering second wife, Nancy Maginnes — who grew up in White Plains near Punch Sulzberger — back at home happily smoking with their blond Lab, Tyler, he spent his evenings of these years with the society ladies: Mollie Parnis, Brooke Astor, Shirley Clurman, first Françoise de la Renta and then Annette de la Renta, and Happy Rockefeller, just then retired as Second Lady of the United States. At Brooke Astor's 100th birthday party, Kissinger made a speech: "When I moved to New York 26 years ago, Brooke introduced me to life here, bringing together interesting people that she knows and prevented me from taking myself too seriously, which is a formidable task."

His empire as financial engine, in this period, is more expansive even than his adventures in U.S. global intrusions. He goes on the board of Twentieth Century Fox. He goes on the board of CBS. When Disney is worried about China, Michael Eisner hires him. He goes on the board of American Express. At 58, the Yankees fan has the first of his heart surgeries and then celebrates his 60th birthday at the Pierre with Lady Bird Johnson and Alan Greenspan and Felix Rohatyn and Stavros Niarchos and people outside who scream "Murderer!" A number of people that he'd wiretapped over the years were present without grudge, though likely not Morton H. Halperin, who pursued Kissinger in court for nearly 20 years for having his home telephone tapped for nearly two years; he finally received an apology in late 1991. This is the rarest thing from Kissinger: an admission or confession. Notoriously, Kissinger Associates,

eventually over at 55 East 52nd Street, is so secretive about its client list that, when the second President Bush appointed him chairman of the 9/11 Commission in 2002, he chose to withdraw rather than reveal his clients to Congress.

Constantly and regularly, this long, lucrative stretch is interrupted by manifestations of his previous life. “How does it feel to be a war criminal, Henry?” Peter Jennings once asked him at a dinner party thrown by Barbara Walters. “Nancy reacted very strongly and hurt,” said Walters; Henry said nothing at all.

A vicious book by Seymour Hersh is published (“He lies like most people breathe,” said Hersh.) Mostly silence welcomes it. “New Yorkers have been at a loss about how to proceed. But only for a moment,” wrote Charlotte Curtis in the *New York Times* in 1983. “Then they invite the Kissingers to another party where nobody mentions the book.”

They get a country estate in Kent, Connecticut — \$470,000 for nearly 50 acres. Niall Ferguson wrote a bit of Kissinger’s biography in the pool there. Another Lab, this one named Abigail. (There is also apparently a Lab named Amelia.) The legendary editor Harry Evans edited his *White House Years*; legendary pot-stirrer Tina Brown has him for dinner. He receives a handsome sum from AIG to help it with China. The NBC contract runs out and ABC signs him to a new one. The Kissingers are not just neighbors in Kent with Oscar and Annette de la Renta but also run with them each Christmas to the Dominican Republic.

New York City loves him, after a fashion, but there they are, always. At yet another book signing in Connecticut in 1999 — at this point, he has produced at least 3,800 pages of memoir — they are outside, holding signs that say “HENRY KISSOFDEATH.” “I’m used to them,” he said.

Most of what Kissinger is celebrated for and hated for took place 50 years ago, which is a long time to be pulling in \$250,000 consulting contracts. This long life packed in the most action in just a few very busy years, most notably 1969 to 1974: the destruction of Cambodia; the carpet-bombing of Vietnam; the abandonment of the Kurds; 1971’s iteration of the India-Pakistan war, in which Kissinger supported Pakistan as an enemy of the Soviet Union; disastrous meddling with the CIA in Cyprus.

As part of an anti-socialist mania, Kissinger, Richard Nixon, and the CIA joined forces and “intervened” in Chile in such a manner that it resulted in the rise of Pinochet, a regime with an enormous body count; even decades later, the Chilean government was paying out more than \$100 million a year to survivors and families of people murdered. Equally notorious and suspect were his moments of inaction: the invasion of East Timor by the Indonesian President Suharto, took place the very next day after he met with President Ford and Kissinger; there was also an all-clear in Argentina for a murderous junta.

He flew 265,000 miles with the Air Force in 1972 alone in his long march to “control, contain, and otherwise govern” the world, as Edward Said put it. (Speaking of Said, when Kissinger went to Beijing in 1971, paving the way for Nixon’s famous visit of 1972, he told Zhou Enlai, the premier, that China was a “land of mystery.” Kissinger wrote of the response: “There were 900 million Chinese, he observed, and it seemed perfectly normal to them.”) All the while he courted journalists, even as he frequently wiretapped people in government and in the media on the pretext that someone was leaking information to reporters.

“I experienced the symbiotic relationship in Washington between media and government,” Kissinger wrote in his memoirs. “Much as the journalist may resent it, he performs a partly governmental function”:

The journalist has comparably interested motives in his contacts with the official. He must woo and flatter the official because without his goodwill he will be deprived of information. But he cannot let himself be seduced — the secret dream of most officials — or he will lose his objectivity. A love-hate relationship is almost inevitable.

Journalists did love him on the earlier end of his terms as national security adviser from 1969 to 1975 and secretary of State from 1973 to 1977. He would allude to journalists that he was protecting the world from the evils that Nixon might do unattended. He would also ask their advice, a wonderful tactic. He told reporters that Nixon was weak, or unpredictable, or scheming, becoming the lens through which the media saw the president.

This method was used too in diplomacy, to insert himself between all parties. If people like Golda Meir and Anwar el-Sadat weren’t speaking, then each would hear only what Kissinger wanted them to hear.

Journalists bought everything he said in part because he was an excellent source — the real leaker — but soon enough they tired of the con. The notable break with the press came when Kissinger was livid that reporters reported that he was involved in wiretapping 17 people (he was).

In 1974, he threw a hissy fit in Austria and threatened to quit the State Department. This was not effective: “Ordinarily Mr. Kissinger is the most persuasive of men, both as a negotiator and as a publicist for the results of his negotiations,” wrote the *Times*. He was upset not just because of his enormous, egotistical entitlement but surely because he sought distance from Watergate, the then-endlessly unfolding end of Richard Nixon. (He remained distant, too: Kissinger, Nixon’s chief policy architect and avatar and highest ranking Cabinet member, barely even appears in the Wikipedia entry on the scandal.) He also inserted that enormous sense of self between America and the world at large. This custom showed its limits at moments such as when he was awarded a shared Nobel Peace Prize for 1973 for ostensibly bringing to an end the Vietnam War; his North Vietnamese counterpart in the negotiations declined the medal owing to what he saw reasonably as a lack of actual peace; two members of the Nobel committee resigned. Kissinger received the award solo.

In every American military affair since, there is a trail that leads back to Kissinger. In Obama’s expansive drone wars, there was Kissinger going before him; in the secrecy and financial dealings of Trump and Cheney, there is Kissinger; without Kissinger Associates, there could be no absurd racket like Giuliani Partners. Kissinger is the one great commonality between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

Heinz Alfred Kissinger was born May, 27, 1923, in Fürth, Germany, which adjoins Nuremberg; the family were observant Orthodox Jews. His father, Louis, was a teacher but by 1933 was unemployed. The family, at his mother Paula’s initiative and a cousin’s money, escaped Germany in August 1938, when Henry was 15. (His brother, Walter, born in 1924, came along and died in the spring of 2021.) Kristallnacht was about three months later; at least 13 family members died in the Holocaust, according to Thomas A. Schwartz’s *Henry Kissinger and American Power* ; three of Louis Kissinger’s sisters were sent to camps. “What is there to discuss?” Henry Kissinger later said when asked about it.

In 1940, the Kissingers were living with many other German refugees in New York City at 615 Fort Washington Avenue, near West 187th Street; his mother became a caterer to support the

family. Like many New Yorkers, he failed his driving test. He went to George Washington High School, studied business administration at City College of New York, and was drafted in January 1943, the year he became an American citizen. He trained in South Carolina and was taught engineering in Pennsylvania. Kissinger returned to Europe in November 1944, where he did intelligence work, was promoted to sergeant, came upon a concentration camp, performed “detection, interrogation and detention” in the course of denazifying Germany, and earned a Bronze Star.

Then he came home. “When I went into the Army I was a refugee, and when I got out I was an immigrant,” Kissinger said. (Decades later, his mother would carve the opposite side of this coin when she accompanied Henry to Germany for him to receive an honorary degree: “First you get chased away, and then you get treated like royalty.”)

He married Ann Fleischer in 1949 while still at a swelling postwar Harvard, where he was in the class of 1950 with a scholarship and a credit for one year at CCNY; in 1952, he started a magazine; he managed and fundraised for the International Seminar, which [brought](#) journalists and poets and politicians and painters and scholars from around the world to Harvard for six summer weeks (“Kissinger gamely volunteered to spy on attendees for the F.B.I.”

The New Yorker

wrote in passing); he received his Ph.D. in 1954; he published

Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy

in 1957, showing himself a proponent of a “limited” nuclear war (“Now we live under the threat of a Russian all-out attack,” noted the New York

Times

in its review, buying what he was selling: “The very fact of our preparedness should assure peace”) and that year was named associate director and lecturer at the new Center for International Affairs.

He consulted a bit just briefly with the White House early in the Kennedy administration on the strength of Kissinger’s book *The Necessity for Choice*, published in 1961, and got tenure. And he spent time with his good friend Nelson Rockefeller.

Nancy Maginnes married Henry in 1974. She had studied under Kissinger at Harvard, then went to work in 1964 as his researcher on a Rockefeller task force; that was the same year Henry and Ann divorced. Fascinated by foreign affairs, Maginnes stayed on with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

While Kissinger was in Rockefeller's office at 15 West 54th Street, advising Rockefeller on what post-election role he might play in the upcoming Nixon regime, Nixon's office phoned — asking for Kissinger. Nixon recruited Kissinger and requested that Rockefeller continue to serve as governor of New York instead of in the White House. Offered the job of national security adviser, Kissinger canvassed his academic friends, who all begged him to accept, wanting for themselves some measure of influence or, more nobly, hoping that Kissinger would temper Nixon.

They thought the worst of Nixon, and they'd be proved mostly right.

Henry Kissinger had met Richard Nixon already, back in 1967, at the anti-communist agitator Clare Boothe Luce's apartment. But the two, the antisemite and the child of the Holocaust, neither being particularly outgoing, had little to say to each other. It was unlikely that it would come to pass that they'd be paired forever in the minds of generations to come, as that history becomes both fuzzier and more clear, as two very different kinds of criminals from a distant and highly predictive era.

In May of this year, Kissinger celebrated his 100th birthday. Diane von Furstenberg and Larry Summers, Samantha Power and Eric Schmidt alike attended [an enormous party](#) at the New York Public Library. Shortly thereafter, he visited China yet again. He had by now outlived most of his "eminent detractors," his son David wrote saltily in the *Washington Post*

. These extra years have given him time to offer his thoughts on our newest wars. His refusal to go away has kept him from disappearing into history. His presence has served to keep his name topmost in the minds of young people today as the example of what America should not be.

