

Toast for Henry Kissinger
On his 100th Birthday
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Winston Lord

I am allotted less than five minutes to salute my mentor.....and tormentor. That is less time than it takes Doctor Kissinger to introduce himself.

I was tempted to honor my time limit by succinctly likening Henry to Chairman Mao: Both fostered a cult of personality, sentenced close associates to hard labor, and authored...little read books.

Like mountain climbing, working with Henry was a perilous expedition with tricky footholds. But we were bound together, and, despite tensions, the rope held.

During grim passages, we were sustained by the lure of lofty destinations. Upon arrival at the summits, the vistas were sublime.

While I do not fully share the sentiment of Albert Camus that “The struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart,” I am truly indebted to Henry for the climbs as well as the views.

During these expeditions, Henry’s sangfroid under pressure was uncanny.

When we sailed over the Atlantic on Air Force Two to negotiate secretly with the North Vietnamese, he serenely pitted white against black on a miniature chess board.

When Zhou En-Lai tore up our 1971 draft of the “Shanghai Communique,” less than 48 hours before our departure from Beijing, Henry coolly suggested revisions and instructed me to write a wholesale redraft while he slept. Four hours later I passed him the baton.

When Brezhnev lambasted Henry on Vietnam at the May 1972 Summit in Moscow, he calmly swallowed the spin as a charade for the ally in Hanoi.

When the Yom Kippur War erupted in October 1973, he smoothly edited a UN speech in between frantic calls with heads of state.

(SHIRTS STORY)

I can assure you that Henry's screech exceeded his rasp.

What did not exceed his grasp, however, was the rich array of negotiating styles that stemmed from histories: Confident China, the abiding Middle Kingdom, took the long view. Paranoid Russia, subject to invasions, haggled like rug merchants. Revolutionary North Vietnam, allergic to compromise, wielded talks like weapons. Wary Israel, surrounded by hostility, examined texts with Talmudic fervor.

Henry carved his historic legacy from a treacherous landscape that greeted him and the President in 1969: America whiplashed by demonstrations, riots and assassinations, mired in a distant quagmire, wrestling with a nuclear superpower, cut off from Asia's giant, losing ground in the Middle East.

Serving two Presidents for the next eight years, he opened the door to a fifth of humanity. He blended firmness and reconciliation to bridle the nuclear nightmare.

He negotiated an honorable end to a grievous conflict that had sowed discord.

He shuttled in the world's most explosive region to broker the first breakthroughs. He shifted the American stance on

a vast continent toward majority rule. In speeches across America, he sketched blueprints for looming agendas.

During a Constitutional crisis at home he maintained America's credibility and influence abroad. Amidst anguish and anger, he was our anchor.

In the half century since leaving office, he has wielded longer influence than any other statesman in recent history, as author, historian, tutor, mediator and pundit.

As he reaches his illustrious centennial, he tackles and trumpets artificial intelligence- an existential challenge for succeeding generations.

What an extraordinary performance of savvy, stamina, and sway.

Throughout this journey, Henry's indispensable companion has been Nancy. She is his compass. She guards his flanks. She kicks his butt. She soothes his soul.

Throughout this journey, Henry has harbored two competing impulses - the European sense of tragedy and the American immigrant's sense of hope. He had to act with cloudy conjecture. The more was known, the less room for maneuver.

The deeper the gulf between calculus and orthodoxy, the graver the loneliness. These perceptions shadowed Henry, but they did not shackle him. He retained the immigrant's vision of indefinite horizons. He strove to reconcile the just with the possible. He grappled with fateful choices, dilemmas he cites as "difficulties of the soul, provoking agonies." He transcended these dilemmas and transformed American diplomacy.

As for me, I feel like Sergeant Kissinger when he wrote to his parents from post-war Germany: "We thought we had moved worlds and given our youth to something greater than ourselves."