

POLITICS AMONG REALISTS:
Morgenthau, Kissinger, and the Problem of Vietnam

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Hans J. Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger are considered to be staples of twentieth century classical realism. However, the men found themselves on opposite sides of the Vietnam War: whereas Morgenthau was a staunch anti-war advocate, Kissinger was often credited with escalating the war effort. This has left a tension in the perception of political realism: those who associate realism most with Morgenthau might see it as a “dove-ish” school of thought, while those who associate it with Kissinger may see it as a militaristic school of thought. To reconcile this tension, this article asks: how can Morgenthau’s and Kissinger’s philosophies help explain their attitudes toward the Vietnam War? The article concludes that Morgenthau and Kissinger developed different political philosophies. Morgenthau was principally concerned about prudence, whereas Kissinger believed it optimal to create order out of equilibrium. These contrasting philosophies led them to different perspectives on the Vietnam War.

Introduction

Hans J. Morgenthau and Henry A. Kissinger stand as two towering figures of classical realism. Their ideas and actions shaped the course of American foreign policy in the twentieth century. There is a clear and discernable overlap between them: both men self-identified as realists, recognized the Hobbesian state of nature under anarchy, and viewed global politics as a constant struggle for power. This has in part led international relations scholars to often seamlessly describe realism as a unitary theory that jumps from its foundational roots in Thucydides and Hobbes to Morgenthau and Kissinger.¹

Despite their seeming philosophical agreement, Morgenthau and Kissinger found themselves on opposite sides of the Vietnam War. Morgenthau was staunchly opposed to the U.S. policy and became one of the loudest critics of the war effort. In contrast, Kissinger was President Richard Nixon’s National Security Advisor and was largely credited with escalating the U.S. commitment. The rift between the two self-proclaimed realists was so strong that fifty-six-year-old Henry Kissinger eulogized Morgenthau by beginning, “Hans Morgenthau was my teacher. And he was my friend. I must say that at the outset because so many obituaries have stressed his

¹ G. John Ikenberry, “The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 1, 2006.

disagreement with policies which I have become identified.”² But this piece of history is often downplayed or outright ignored in international relations textbooks. The juxtaposition between Morgenthau and Kissinger is treated as a mere blip—a tiny accident of little importance in the development of realist thought.³

Morgenthau’s and Kissinger’s rift over the Vietnam War created tension in the perception of political realism. Those who associate realism with Morgenthau might see it as a military—averse school of thought, while those who associate it with Kissinger may see it as a hyper—militaristic school of thought. This article seeks to reconcile this tension by revealing the philosophical cause of Morgenthau’s and Kissinger’s disagreement.

To uncover this divergence, this article will begin by analyzing Morgenthau’s and Kissinger’s texts surrounding international relations theory. Turning attention away from their political philosophies, it will next analyze their contrasting arguments surrounding the Vietnam War. After placing these pieces of evidence in conversation with each other, it will finally answer the question: how can Morgenthau’s and Kissinger’s philosophies help explain their attitudes toward the Vietnam War?

At first glance, this topic may appear purely academic, but it will contribute to the literature surrounding international relations theory. Many scholars use Morgenthau’s and Kissinger’s texts to explain political realism, while many statesmen use their ideas to prescribe practical policies. This article’s use of philosophical analysis as a lens to study their positions on the Vietnam War suggests that Morgenthau and Kissinger developed different political theories within the realist school. This article argues that Morgenthau was principally concerned with prudence (pursuing one’s national interest), which led him to oppose the Vietnam War. Kissinger, in contrast, believed that an ordered equilibrium would create a framework for peace; this led him to widen the war effort in hopes of crafting a legitimate balance of power in Vietnam. The realization that Morgenthau and Kissinger developed different and distinct political theories could lead scholars to refine their understanding of political realism or provide a new philosophical foundation for statesmen’s actions.

Literature Review

There is no shortage of literature surrounding the life and thinking of either Morgenthau or Kissinger. Most of the scholarship does not place the two self—proclaimed realists in direct contrast with each other. Instead, much of the existing scholarship examines Morgenthau and Kissinger independently. To understand their relative attitudes toward the Vietnam War, many historians have concluded that their professional careers are responsible for shaping their behavior. The literature has thus been separated into two different sections. The first section being “Morgenthau the Academic,” groups scholarship that contends Morgenthau was shaped by his career in academia. The second section—“Kissinger the Statesman”—analyzes authors who believe Kissinger’s career in public service led him to advocate for more militant policies.

Morgenthau the Academic

² Henry Kissinger, "Hans Morgenthau: A Gentle Analyst of Power," *The New Republic*, August 1980, 12.

³ Jacob Heilbrunn, "The Case for Kissinger," *The National Interest*, July 2, 2020.

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In examining scholars' writings about Morgenthau, many of them note that his position as a tenured professor at the University of Chicago contributed to his dissent of the Vietnam War.⁴

Douglas B. Klusmeyer lays a foundation for Morgenthau's critique of the war effort in his essay, "Death of the Statesman as Tragic Hero: Hans Morgenthau on the Vietnam War." Klusmeyer acknowledges that Morgenthau saw the war as straining American power, and therefore it was consistent with his political philosophy.⁵ However, he also recognizes another source of dissent: the military—industrial complex's growing influence over academia.⁶ Morgenthau felt that the military—industrial complex stifled the intellectual freedom of academics, and thus Klusmeyer suggests that Morgenthau's public critique of the Vietnam War grew out of his bitterness as an academic.

Seán Molloy expands on Klusmeyer's thinking in "Realism and Reflexivity: Morgenthau, Academic Freedom and Dissent." Molloy highlights that Morgenthau adamantly believed that the role of an academic was to be an "honest critic of government" because "legitimate dissent [directed] against government policy . . . is an essential safeguard of democracy."⁷ Through such a statement, Molloy articulates a potential motivation behind Morgenthau's public denunciation of the Vietnam War: that academics have a civil obligation to speak truth to power and critique the U.S. government when they see it necessary. As a result, Klusmeyer and Molloy locate Morgenthau's position in academia as the source of his public opposition to the war effort.

Kissinger the Statesman

Just as many authors point to Morgenthau's occupation in academia, many others articulate that Kissinger's career in public service was the ultimate source of his attitudes toward the Vietnam War.

In "'Dr. Kissinger' or 'Mr. Henry'? Kissingerology, Thirty Years and Counting," Jussi M. Hanhimäki describes a two—faced Kissinger. On the one hand, he acted as "Dr. Kissinger," the realist philosopher and academic. On the other hand, he was often personified by "Mr. Henry," the "power—hungry, bureaucratic schemer bent on self—aggrandizement."⁸ Hanhimäki's depiction is by no means flattering. It suggests that, at the first sight of political power, Kissinger was willing to compromise on his realist philosophy and instead pursue what would satisfy his career's needs. As a result, Kissinger's attitudes toward the Vietnam War effort may have been inconsistent with his political philosophy because they were crafted by "Mr. Henry."

Deviating slightly from Hanhimäki's interpretation, Thomas Schwartz argues that as a public servant, Kissinger was subject to domestic political pressures in his foreign policy calculus. Accordingly, he was ultimately forced to enact policies he personally disliked. In "Henry Kissinger: Realism, Domestic Politics, and the Struggle

⁴ Douglas B. Klusmeyer, "Death of the Statesman as Tragic Hero: Hans Morgenthau on the Vietnam War," *Ethics and International Affairs* 30, no. 1 (March 10, 2016): 64—65, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679415000623>; Seán Molloy, "Realism and Reflexivity: Morgenthau, Academic Freedom and Dissent," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 2 (August 14, 2020): 326.

⁵ Klusmeyer, "Death of the Statesman as Tragic Hero."

⁶ Klusmeyer, "Death of a Statesman as a Tragic Hero," 67.

⁷ Molloy, "Realism and Reflexivity."

⁸ Jussi M. Hanhimäki, "'Dr. Kissinger' Or 'Mr. Henry'? Kissingerology, Thirty Years and Counting," *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 5 (October 16, 2003): 638.

Against Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy,” Schwartz details the role electoral politics played in Kissinger’s Vietnam decision—making. Kissinger, Schwartz argues, was sympathetic to the anti—war criticism levied by thinkers like Morgenthau. Still, he saw an immediate withdrawal from the war as “politically unacceptable.”⁹ Schwartz expands on his thinking in another essay. In it, he contends that President Nixon had “candid thinking about partisan politics and elections as [he pondered] major foreign policy issues.”¹⁰ This statement suggests that electoral politics played a significant role in determining the Nixon administration’s policies regarding the Vietnam War. As a result, Kissinger may have been forced to act against his personal philosophy based on the demands of the President.

The authors that contrast the role of academia to the role of the statesman seem to make a compelling argument about the rift between Morgenthau and Kissinger over the Vietnam War. They suggest that their differences arise out of their different positions in society. Morgenthau—the tenured academic—saw his responsibility to speak truth to power. Kissinger—the ambitious statesman—was subject to the political process. The poverty of this thesis is that it presupposes a shared political theory between the two self—proclaimed realists. From this perspective, Morgenthau is thought of as a realist, and academia led him to act on his convictions. In contrast, Kissinger abandoned his realist inclinations. However, further examination is needed. While Morgenthau and Kissinger may have seemingly shared a political philosophy, it is possible that they developed differing political philosophies.

Methodology

This article’s interpretive design will examine Hans Morgenthau’s and Henry Kissinger’s political theories to explain their juxtaposing perspectives on the Vietnam War. For Morgenthau, this article deals extensively with *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, *Politics Among Nations*, and *In Defense of the National Interest*. For Kissinger, this article offers an analysis of *A World Restored*.

These texts provide a lens to view Morgenthau’s and Kissinger’s literature on the Vietnam War. To study Morgenthau’s critiques, this article engages with archival material in the Hans J. Morgenthau Papers at the Library of Congress. Morgenthau’s books, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States* and *Vietnam and the United States*, further articulate his thinking. To analyze Kissinger’s attitude toward the Vietnam War, this article similarly examines his own recounting in his essays, *Look* and *Foreign Affairs*, as well as his book, *Ending the Vietnam War*.

Secondary literature was used to accompany all these primary sources. By placing these pieces of evidence in conversation with each other this article will make sense of Morgenthau’s and Kissinger’s juxtapositions over the Vietnam War.

The Political Thought of Morgenthau

The political thinking of Hans J. Morgenthau can be traced back to his youth and upbringing in Coburg, Germany. Born in 1904, Morgenthau grew up with an

⁹ Thomas A. Schwartz, “Henry Kissinger: Realism, Domestic Politics, and the Struggle Against Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 22, no. 1 (March 15, 2011): 128.

¹⁰ Thomas A. Schwartz, “‘Henry, . . . Winning an Election is Terribly Important’: Partisan Politics in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 2 (March 2, 2009): 177.

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overwhelming sense of isolation and rejection. Wanting any close friends, he annually wrote to Santa Clause asking “for a brother, a sister, a dog, a cat, or a bird—anything living.”¹¹ As a Jewish person in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century, Morgenthau experienced not only loneliness, but also brutal antisemitism. Citizens of Coburg paraded while chanting “Kill the Jewish swine”; they spat on him in class; and they even offered Adolf Hitler honorary citizenship.¹²

To come to terms with the world around him—to make sense of the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler’s Nazi regime—a young Morgenthau found solace in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. To the nineteenth century German philosopher, human action can be distilled to a single drive: the will to power. Christoph Frei paraphrases Nietzsche’s philosophy by suggesting, “To want to have, and to want to have more, therein lies the essence of life. Having less than all cannot satisfy man as ‘there is no limit to the ego’s possessive urge.’”¹³ Morgenthau found this Nietzschean conception of human nature so accurate that he wrote that “Nietzsche towers” over all other philosophers in his diary.¹⁴

Just ten years after the diary entry, Morgenthau escaped Nazi Germany and made his way to New York on July 28, 1937, bringing his Nietzschean perspective with him. Pursuing a career in academia, he initially struggled to develop a stable career as he jumped from university to university. That was, however, until he was offered a professorship at the University of Chicago.

Within his first few years in Chicago, Morgenthau published *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* in 1946. The most interesting of his writings, it challenged the liberal rationalist approach to foreign policy that he believed dominated the United States. Liberal academics and policymakers of the era, Morgenthau recognized, optimistically thought that human reason would act as “the philosopher’s stone, the magic formula, which, mechanically applied, [would] produce” world peace.¹⁵ These academics and policymakers believed that if the United States constructed a liberal international order that was founded on democracy and free trade, human reason would dictate that “peace is a necessary condition” for human flourishing, and thus war would become a relic of the past.¹⁶

But Morgenthau saw this as highly improbable. He condemned liberalism because it “misunderstood the nature of man” and “misconstrued the nature of politics and political action altogether.”¹⁷ To Morgenthau, human reason could not cure the ills of international politics because humans are not driven primarily by reason. Morgenthau used his Nietzschean thinking to assert that the “root of conflict and concomitant evil stems from the *animus dominandi*, the desire for power. This lust for power manifests itself as the desire to maintain the range of one’s own person regarding others, to increase it, or to demonstrate it.”¹⁸ In other words, humans have an inherent craving for power; people do not seek power just for their survival; but, because they revel in their ability to dominate over others, they aspire

¹¹ Hans Morgenthau, interview by Bernard Johnson, in Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 13.

¹² Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, 20–21.

¹³ Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, 104.

¹⁴ Hans J. Morgenthau, May 11, 1927, in Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, 100.

¹⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 95.

¹⁶ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 48.

¹⁷ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 5.

¹⁸ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 192.

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to become like God. Morgenthau saw this to be the ultimate source of international conflict: the Athenians' siege of Melos, Napoleon's invasion of Russia, and Hitler's pursuit of global domination were all driven by the *animus dominandi*.

But Morgenthau recognized that statesmen's desires could never be fully realized. He wrote:

Pushing the individual beyond his natural limits toward a transcendent ... is reached only in the imagination but never in reality. The attempt at realizing it in actual experience ends always with the destruction of the individual attempting it, as the fate of all world conquerors from Alexander to Hitler proves and as the legends of Icarus, Don Juan, and Faust symbolically illustrate.¹⁹

While the *animus dominandi* governs human impulse left unrestrained, statesmen will inevitably suffer from hubris. They, like Napoleon, will set out for an improbable task, causing the destruction of their empire. They, like Icarus, will fly too close to the sun, causing their wings to melt. From this recognition, Morgenthau concluded that statesmen should resist the urge to bend to their human nature and avoid crafting universalist policies.

Scientific Man vs. Power Politics constituted Morgenthau's favorite of his own writings throughout the entirety of his life.²⁰ Two years after publication, Morgenthau's first printing of *Politics Among Nations* was issued. The textbook won almost immediate praise and fame. Within a few years it became the standard textbook on international relations among the Ivy League schools and in over ninety other universities across the United States.²¹ Moreover, the textbook inspired the thoughts of some of the twentieth century's greatest policymakers and thinkers, such as George F. Kennan, Walter Lippmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Raymond Aron, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and Henry Kissinger.²² Then in 1951, Morgenthau once again put pen to paper, publishing *In Defense of the National Interest*. The book elevated his reputation. He was now not only well known among international relations scholars, but he rose to the level of a public intellectual.²³ If *Scientific Man* was Morgenthau's plea for the foreign policy community to observe the world through the lens of realism, *Politics Among Nations* and *In Defense of the National Interest* were his descriptions of how statesmen should behave in such a world.

The international arena Morgenthau described in *Scientific Man* is most perilous. It is a world in which states are in "a constant struggle for power" and seek to impose their will and dominance on others. In such a reality, Morgenthau believed that it would ultimately be dangerous for a country to engage in a moral—based foreign policy:

Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their universal formulation, but that they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place. The individual may say for himself: "*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus* (Let justice be done, even if the

¹⁹ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 194.

²⁰ Matthew G. Specter, *The Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought between Germany and the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 147.

²¹ Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, 73.

²² Barry Gewen, "The Book That Shaped Foreign Policy for a Generation Has More to Say," *New York Times*, May 9, 2020.

²³ John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 211.

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world perishes),” but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care.²⁴

At the individual level, people have the right to self—sacrifice in order to uphold morality or justice. However, Morgenthau argued that the state cannot. The state’s obligation is to its own citizens. Its primary responsibility is to ensure “national survival” to preserve the population’s wellbeing.²⁵ But Morgenthau understood that power is finite. Diplomatic, military, and economic resources allocated toward a moral crusade are resources that cannot be allocated toward a state’s national security. In a world driven by the *animus dominandi*, statesmen must focus on their survival. “REMEMBER,” he boldly proclaimed, “*that no nation’s power is without limits.*”²⁶ If a country were to forget this and instead downplay its national interest it might face “national suicide.”²⁷ Alas, well intentioned policy might bring about hubris and self—destruction.

After calling on statesmen to divest from the crusading spirit, Morgenthau turned his attention to an alternative way to craft foreign policy. Instead of being guided by a conception of justice, he advised that policymakers allow themselves to be guided by prudence—the quality he placed on a pedestal as the “supreme virtue in politics.”²⁸ Morgenthau defined *prudence* as the ability to “[weigh] the consequences of alternative political actions.”²⁹ The prudent statesman would be calculated in his decision—making process. He would think and act in terms of “interest defined as power.”³⁰ He would consider the risks and rewards that his country will incur from any given action.³¹ If a given policy were to threaten his country’s relative power, the prudent statesman would avoid it. If a given policy were to secure it, the prudent statesmen would embrace it. In short, Morgenthau believed that the greatest statesmen crafted policies intended to advance their national interests.

The Political Thought of Kissinger

The development of Kissinger’s political thinking shares many common themes with Morgenthau’s. In 1923, Kissinger was born to an Orthodox Jewish family in Fürth, Germany. Raised as devout to the Jewish Faith, the young Kissinger attended synagogue every morning and studied the Torah on Saturdays.³² Like Morgenthau, Kissinger witnessed the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the subsequent rise of Hitler’s Third Reich. In the first five years of Kissinger’s life, Hitler visited Fürth

²⁴ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 10.

²⁵ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 10.

²⁶ Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 242.

²⁷ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 35.

²⁸ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 11.

²⁹ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 11.

³⁰ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5.

³¹ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 18. Morgenthau reveres Alexander Hamilton for the way in which he deliberated American support for revolutionary France. Unwilling to allow liberal principles to subordinate American security, he asked: “If the United States were to join France against virtually all of Europe, what risks would the United States run, what advantages could it expect, what good could it do to its ally?”

³² Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger: 1923—1968: The Idealist* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 53.

twice,³³ and during the Holocaust, at least thirteen members of Kissinger’s family were brutally killed.³⁴ Young Kissinger himself risked physical brutality. He later recalled: “I used to sneak out to catch the local soccer team play, even though, as a Jew, you ran the risk of getting beaten up if you were there and they recognized you.”³⁵ Ultimately, the dangers posed by the rise of antisemitism led Kissinger and his family to emigrate in 1938. Their destination was the United States.³⁶

Kissinger’s early life in Nazi Germany greatly impacted his personal philosophy. Witnessing the worst of humanity, he found truth in the Hobbesian conception of human nature. As his biographer, Walter Isaacson, wrote:

His worldview was dark, suffered with a sense of tragedy ... The Nazi experience could have instilled in Kissinger either of two approaches to foreign policy: an idealistic, moralistic approach dedicated to protecting human rights; or a realist, realpolitik approach that sought to preserve order through balances of power and a willingness to use force as a tool of diplomacy. Kissinger would follow the latter route. Given a choice of order or justice, he often said, paraphrasing Goethe, he would choose order. He had seen clearly the consequences of disorder.³⁷

The Weimar Republic was wanting in its stability. Its weaknesses allowed Hitler to come to power and implement his Final Solution to the Jewish Question. Kissinger reckoned that instability and disorder allowed the worst of human impulses to run free.³⁸ This pessimism led Kissinger to believe that the responsibility of statesmen is to produce and preserve order in the world.³⁹

Years later, while a doctoral candidate at Harvard in 1954, Kissinger completed his dissertation, “Peace, Legitimacy, and Equilibrium (A Study of the Statesmanship of Castlereagh and Metternich).” Three years later, it was published as *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812—1822*.⁴⁰ In the first sentence of the text, Kissinger revealed his ultimate purpose. During a period in which “thermonuclear extinction” was ever—present, one should look “nostalgically to periods when diplomacy carried with it less drastic penalties” to understand the art of peacemaking.⁴¹ By studying the nineteenth century Concert of Europe, Kissinger hoped to understand how peace and stability could be achieved in contemporary international politics.

After the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, the great powers of Europe—Russia, Great Britain, Austria, Prussia, and France—convened at the Congress of Vienna to settle the terms of peace. The product of the negotiations, the post—French

³³ Barry Gewen, *The Inevitability of Tragedy: Henry Kissinger and His World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 57.

³⁴ David E. Sanger, “Henry Kissinger Is Dead at 100; Shaped the Nation’s Cold War History,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2023.

³⁵ Gewen, *The Inevitability of Tragedy*, 68.

³⁶ Gewen, *The Inevitability of Tragedy*, 73.

³⁷ Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 31.

³⁸ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 31.

³⁹ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 29.

⁴⁰ Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 291.

⁴¹ Henry A Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812—22* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), 1.

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Revolutionary order—which lasted until the end of the nineteenth century—was the resulting masterpiece of the toil and ingenuity of two European diplomats: Viscount Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary, and Klemens von Metternich, the Austrian Foreign Minister. As Kissinger noted, Castlereagh engineered a balance of power which Metternich legitimized among the European great powers.⁴² Through such a process, Kissinger contended that they crafted “stability based on an equilibrium of forces.”⁴³ In *A World Restored*, Kissinger attempted to challenge universalist liberal aspirations by highlighting the importance of crafty power—based calculations, just like Morgenthau before him.

Kissinger first analyzed Castlereagh’s success in contributing to European equilibrium. Castlereagh, he noted, sought to construct a balance of power—the phenomenon where “a Europe in which hegemony was impossible.”⁴⁴ If no single country was strong enough to dominate Europe, Castlereagh believed an equilibrium would reign, deterring the outbreak of war. Kissinger saw Castlereagh’s desire to engineer balance as a testament to his statesmanship. At the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, some of the great powers—principally Russia—sought the absolute destruction of France. Although anti-French sentiment rang strongest in his own country, Castlereagh himself became the voice of moderation.⁴⁵ Castlereagh saw France as a necessary component of the European equilibrium: if France were destroyed or left too weak, Russia would be capable of obtaining hegemony. Kissinger praised Castlereagh for allowing France to retain its pre-war borders.⁴⁶

Kissinger did not see this as the only instance in which Castlereagh contributed to Europe’s balance of power. At the Congress of Vienna, Tsar Alexander I of Russia was overcome with the lust for power and thus indicated his desire to expand the boundaries of the Russian Empire to swallow Poland.⁴⁷ But Castlereagh saw Alexander’s ambitions as a threat to European equilibrium. Russia’s control of Poland would strengthen its relative power, thereby upsetting the continental balance.⁴⁸ After several months of skilled negotiations, Castlereagh persuaded Alexander to budge. Rather than annexing Poland outright, Alexander agreed to simply become the constitutional monarch of an independent Kingdom of Poland.⁴⁹ Kissinger praised Castlereagh’s statesmanship for establishing a foundation for European stability.⁵⁰

Kissinger saw the balance of power as just one component of the framework for a stable order. Legitimacy constituted the other necessary piece to the puzzle. Kissinger stated that legitimacy “implies the acceptance of the framework of an international order by all major powers, at least to the extent that no state is so dissatisfied ... that it expresses its dissatisfaction in a revolutionary foreign policy.”⁵¹

⁴² Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 5; Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 29—55. In *Diplomacy*, Kissinger similarly examines President Theodore Roosevelt. In a testament to Roosevelt’s statesmanship, Kissinger observes how he skillfully crafted an equilibrium in Asia through the Treaty of Portsmouth.

⁴³ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 1.

⁴⁴ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 147.

⁴⁵ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 139.

⁴⁶ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 142.

⁴⁷ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 153.

⁴⁸ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 154.

⁴⁹ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 171.

⁵⁰ Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 307.

⁵¹ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 1.

The balance of power was not enough for Kissinger. The great powers of the era needed to consent to the structure of the international order, which Metternich skillfully accomplished. Following the Vienna negotiations, Tsar Alexander introduced the concept of the Holy Alliance: “a fraternal association of sovereigns, guided by the precepts of Christianity.”⁵² Turning the alliance into an expression of legitimacy, Metternich co—opted it and transformed it into a great power alliance against democracy and revolution.⁵³ Through such an action, the great continental powers recognized what they saw to be a legitimate principle that held the new order together. As a result, they mutually recognized and upheld it. For blending Castlereagh’s balance of power with legitimacy, Kissinger praised Metternich for contributing to the equilibrium.⁵⁴ This marriage of concepts created the foundation for Kissinger’s political thought.

Prudence vs. Equilibrium

Morgenthau and Kissinger appeared to speak the same realist language. After all, the pursuit of the national interest shown by Morgenthau’s prudence and the balance of power shown by Kissinger’s equilibrium remain the core tenets of political realism. If truth be told, Morgenthau often spoke of the balance of power,⁵⁵ while Kissinger often used the language of the national interest.⁵⁶

But the two men interpreted the balance of power differently. For Morgenthau, the balance of power was a tool to advance the U.S. national interest. Writing *In Defense of the National Interest*, Morgenthau noted that the U.S. interest has historically been to pursue and maintain regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. He also realized that threats to American regional hegemony did not arise from the Western Hemisphere itself, but from outside sources, principally Europe.⁵⁷ As a result, Morgenthau wrote:

Since a threat to our national interest in the Western Hemisphere can only come from outside it—historically, from Europe—we have always striven to prevent the development to a European nation’s interfering in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere or contemplating a direct attack upon the United States. These conditions would likely arise if a European nation, its predominance unchallenged within Europe, could look across the sea for conquest without fear of being menaced at the center of its power; that is, in Europe itself. It is for this reason that the United States has constantly...pursued policies aiming at the maintenance of the balance of power in Europe.⁵⁸

Morgenthau was keen to realize that, through the European balance of power, no single European country would be strong enough to displace American power in the Western Hemisphere. In this sense, he treated the balance of power as a means to an end. It was merely a tool to be used for pursuing American interests in the world.

⁵² Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 188.

⁵³ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 189.

⁵⁴ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 190.

⁵⁵ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 5.

⁵⁶ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 56—67.

⁵⁷ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 5.

⁵⁸ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 5.

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For Kissinger, the balance of power served a higher end. It was a method to provide order and stability in a world defined by chaos. It was a tool to tame the darkest human impulses. By channeling the wisdom of Castlereagh and Metternich, Kissinger believed statesmen could transcend the brutality of the world and usher in an age of peace that is principally defined by the absence of great power war. As Francis Fukuyama described, Kissinger “lucidly” held “that international peace was best guaranteed not through law or international organizations, but through a distribution of power that moderated the ambitions of the strong.”⁵⁹

Morgenthau had great skepticism about the realities of Kissinger’s notion of equilibrium. Although he recognized the stabilizing potential of the balance of power system,⁶⁰ Morgenthau was apt to note that it would be dangerous to pursue:

All nations actively engaged in the struggle for power must actually aim not at a balance—that is, equality—of power, but at superiority of power in their own behalf. And since no nation can foresee how large its miscalculations will turn out to be, all nations must actively seek the maximum of power obtainable under the circumstances.⁶¹

Morgenthau understood that humans are fallible creatures, and they often err and misread situations. No statesman can accurately describe the exact power distribution of the world at a given moment. In crafting an equilibrium, they may easily and unintentionally devalue their own relative power. Morgenthau thus contended that equilibrium is “incapable of practical application.”⁶²

This contrasting understanding of the balance of power lies at the crux of the two self—proclaimed realists’ philosophies. Morgenthau saw the pursuit of national interest as the guiding principle, while Kissinger was perpetually intent on crafting order in the world through equilibrium. This juxtaposition can be best illustrated during the Vietnam era wherein discussions involving the national interest and avoiding hubris, equilibrium, and building world order were all present.

Prudence in Vietnam

In 1955, Vietnam fell into a bloody civil war. Led by Ho Chi Minh, the Northern part of the country forged a revolutionary movement, hoping to drape the entirety of the country under a united communist flag. But such dreams were not shared by all of Vietnam; South Vietnam, in contrast, militarily attempted to resist North Vietnam’s revolutionary efforts. Consistent with the ideological fervor of the Cold War, Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy offered aid and support to the anti—communist elements. But both presidents refused to send American combat troops to Vietnam. However, everything changed on August 2, 1964, when the North Vietnamese purportedly attacked the U.S.S. *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin. In response to the apparent aggression, President Lyndon B. Johnson committed the United States to a full military engagement in Vietnam, pulling the country into an all—consuming war for the next decade.

Although he was just a professor, Hans Morgenthau’s publications made him an established figure in the foreign policy community. He was held in such high regard that he was invited to work as a consultant for the United States Department of State under President Harry Truman. Again in 1962 he was invited to return and work as a

⁵⁹ Francis Fukuyama, “A World Restored: Europe After Napoleon,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 1, 1997.

⁶⁰ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 173.

⁶¹ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 215.

⁶² Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 215.

regular consultant for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. However, he was fired for his opposition to the war effort in 1965.⁶³ At the outset of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Morgenthau became an honest critic of American policy. His criticism stood unwavering until the United States finally withdrew from Vietnam in 1973.

Morgenthau's analysis was wholly consistent with his theoretical framework. At the foundation of Morgenthau's dissent rested the notion that the Vietnam War was a moral crusade not waged to advance the U.S. national interest. In reconstructing the arguments that were made in support of the war, Morgenthau recognized that the U.S. government sought to contain the spread of communism. But Morgenthau pointed out that there are two underlying assumptions embedded in the strategy of containment: "the unlimited expansion of the Soviet Union as a revolutionary power and the monolithic direction and control the Soviet Union exerted over the world Communist movement."⁶⁴ If communism was a monolithic ideology under the absolute authority of the Soviet Union, then the United States needed to prevent the spread of communism to curb the Soviet's relative power. Therefore, the *telos* of containment was not to crush the spread of communism for moralistic reasons, but rather to block a rival great power from expanding its influence.

Still, Morgenthau recognized that communism was not the monolithic ideology that many Americans perceived it to be. He instead observed "that communism [had] lost its monolithic character and [had] taken on the quality of polycentrism."⁶⁵ There were a plethora of different types of communist countries. Those that "identified with the Soviet Union," those that "identified with China," those that "[straddled] the fence between the Soviet Union and China," and "independent" communist states.⁶⁶ Using these categories, Morgenthau observed that Vietnam was an independent state. He saw that Vietnamese nationalism allowed Vietnam to "retain a considerable measure of independence vis—à—vis both the Soviet Union and China."⁶⁷ If the spread of communism in Vietnam did not equate to an expansion of Soviet power, the ultimate purpose of American intervention was ideological. It was to "stop communism" and promote liberalism for moralistic purposes.⁶⁸ Morgenthau maintained that prudent statesmen should only pursue their countries' national interests. He realized that the Vietnam War offered no real benefit to the United States' relative power.

Morgenthau critiqued the war effort not only because it failed to advance U.S. security, but also because it threatened its own national interest. Morgenthau saw Vietnamese nationalism as an incredibly resilient force. Historically, it prevented

⁶³ Louis B. Zimmer, *The Vietnam War Debate: Hans J. Morgenthau and the Attempt to Halt the Drift into Disaster* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), xvi.

⁶⁴ Hans J. Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1969), 131.

⁶⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, "A New Foreign Policy for the United States: Basic Issues," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 23, no. 1 (January 1967): 9, HJM—B104. The abbreviation "HJM—B" suggests the location of the source (box 104) in the Hans J Morgenthau Papers at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

⁶⁶ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Vietnam and the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1965), 67.

⁶⁷ Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States*, 132.

⁶⁸ Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States*, 132.

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imperialist countries, such as China, from strangling the Vietnamese population and subjecting it to their authority. For this reason, Morgenthau maintained that Vietnamese nationalism acted as a bulwark against the encroaching Russian or Chinese powers. If these great powers attempted to control the Southeast Asian country, the Vietnamese people's spirited nationalism would allow it to retain its independence.⁶⁹ Thus Vietnamese nationalism supported the U.S. national interest, as it prevented America's rivals from augmenting their relative power.

The U.S. effort to bring liberal democracy to the Vietnamese people would ultimately destroy this nationalism and damage the U.S. national interest. By intervening in Vietnam, the United States would inevitably cause the "destruction of [Vietnam's] human and material resources."⁷⁰ Through such actions, Morgenthau argued that the United States would destroy "the social fabric of Vietnamese nationalism"—the very nationalism that was hostile to U.S. rival powers.⁷¹ This did create "a political, military, and social vacuum into which ... the Soviet Union or China will move," thereby allowing U.S. competitors to expand their relative power.⁷² As Morgenthau believed that the United States' involvement in Vietnam would ultimately threaten its national interest, he declared that "we should never have gotten involved in this war," and concluded that the United States must withdraw from Vietnam.⁷³

Equilibrium in Vietnam

In examining Kissinger's attitudes toward the Vietnam War, some scholars have attempted to distance the former National Security Advisor from the war effort. Niall Ferguson argues that, until 1965, Kissinger "remained committed to the strategy of winning the guerrilla war against the Vietcong."⁷⁴ But after touring Vietnam as the consultant to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., he developed profound "anxieties about the course of the war."⁷⁵

Regardless of Kissinger's private beliefs about the initial decision to intervene, he, unlike Morgenthau, did not see it possible for the United States to simply withdraw. In 1969, Kissinger penned an article in *Foreign Affairs*, contending:

The commitment of 500,000 Americans has settled the issue of the importance of Viet Nam. For what is involved now is confidence in American promises. However fashionable it is to ridicule the terms 'credibility' or 'prestige,' they are not empty phrases; other nations can gear their actions to ours only if they can count on our steadiness. The collapse of the American effort in Viet Nam would not mollify many critics; most of them would simply add the charge of unreliability to the accusation of bad judgment.⁷⁶

To Kissinger, the American commitment to Vietnam had ramifications that extended beyond the small, Southeast Asian country. He feared that an immediate withdrawal

⁶⁹ Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States*, 132.

⁷⁰ Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States*, 132.

⁷¹ James R. Schlesinger et al., "Viet Nam Showdown: What Should We Do Now? Schlesinger, Morgenthau, Baldwin, Khan, Kissinger Answer the Questions Baffling Everyone," *Look Magazine*, August 9, 1966, 24, HJM—B104.

⁷² Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States*, 132.

⁷³ Schlesinger et al., "Viet Nam Showdown," 24.

⁷⁴ Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 592.

⁷⁵ Ferguson, *Kissinger*, 669.

⁷⁶ Henry A. Kissinger, "The Viet Nam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs*, October 19, 2021.

would lead to the collapse of American legitimacy. If the United States abandoned South Vietnam, other American allies and partners might fear that the United States would be unwilling or unable to come to their defense. As a result, they might bandwagon with U.S. adversaries. “In short,” Kissinger concluded, “we are no longer fighting in Vietnam only for the Vietnamese. We are also fighting for ourselves and international stability.”⁷⁷

Kissinger therefore believed the United States needed to pursue an honorable peace. In his attempts to achieve this peace, Kissinger dusted off his nineteenth century history books and once again grounded himself in his meditations on Castlereagh and Metternich. He hoped to create a stable equilibrium in Vietnam by wedding a balance of power to legitimacy. If it could be achieved, Kissinger thought the United States could bring an end to the war.

Reenacting the role of Castlereagh, Kissinger approached the problem by pursuing a balance of power between North and South Vietnam. In June of 1969, the Nixon administration prepared to establish the policy of Vietnamization. The policy was a response to the growing American fatigue over the war effort. Nixon’s administration implemented Vietnamization to train and strengthen the South Vietnamese forces so they could “defend themselves without American troops.”⁷⁸ Yet, Kissinger opposed this policy. As it suggested an American withdrawal from Vietnam, Kissinger pointed out that it would ultimately cause South Vietnam’s relative power to fall. “The North Vietnamese ... were not interested in symbols but in the balance of forces on the ground. They coolly analyzed the withdrawal, weighing its psychological benefits to America in terms of enhanced staying power against the decline in military effectiveness represented by a shrinking number of American forces.”⁷⁹ If the United States declared it would pull out of Vietnam, Kissinger pointed out that it would ultimately cause the South’s relative power to fall.

To craft a balance of forces, Kissinger advised escalating the war effort. Most famously, Kissinger advocated for the Cambodian incursion to destroy the North Vietnamese sanctuaries.⁸⁰ Reflecting on Kissinger’s decision—making, his biographer Barry Gewen writes:

Kissinger called for stepped—up activities that went beyond anything Nixon himself was willing to contemplate (at least in those early months). He proposed mining North Vietnam’s harbors and the bombing of Hanoi along with other cities. He was looking for ‘savage, punishing blows’ that would break the will of what he called ‘a fourth—rate power.’⁸¹

Here, Kissinger followed in Castlereagh’s footsteps and embraced a balance of power calculation in Vietnam. If the United States intensified its behavior, a balance of forces might be struck between the opposing Vietnamese factions. Under such circumstances, Kissinger reasoned, North Vietnam would recognize the futility of the war and an equilibrium would bring its end. Because of this logic, Kissinger never regretted his escalation of the war effort, “only that it did not go far enough.”⁸²

⁷⁷ Schlesinger et al., “Viet Nam Showdown,” 26.

⁷⁸ Henry A. Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrinsication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 81.

⁷⁹ Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 84.

⁸⁰ Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 156.

⁸¹ Gewen, *The Inevitability of Tragedy*, 268—269.

⁸² Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 271—2.

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Consistent with his political philosophy, Kissinger also played the role of Metternich, attempting to season the balance of forces with legitimacy. To reiterate, Kissinger conceived legitimacy to be the acceptance of an international framework, an international agreement, so that no party feels dissatisfied enough to revolt against it.⁸³ The balance of forces alone could not bring an end to the conflict. It needed to be paired with the acceptance of the Vietnamese order by both parties. Kissinger secretly negotiated with the North Vietnamese government to construct a legitimate peace. Beginning in January 1972, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, a North Vietnamese diplomat, met in Paris to discuss the war's end.⁸⁴ One of the central components of Kissinger's negotiations was to push the North Vietnamese to "respect the Demilitarized Zone in order to emphasize the separate character" of the two Vietnams.⁸⁵ Still, Tho refused this stipulation. To force North Vietnam's acceptance of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) provision Nixon and Kissinger dropped over 20,000 tons of bombs during the Christmas Bombing of 1972.⁸⁶ After a year of intense negotiations and military bombardments, Kissinger momentarily succeeded in legitimizing the DMZ. Years later, he recalled "[Tho] agreed to the draft ... He agreed to our formulation of the Demilitarized Zone."⁸⁷ Through combining the pursuit to a balance of power and legitimacy, Kissinger revealed his philosophical consistency between his academic writings and approach to the Vietnam War.

In the end, Kissinger failed to produce his desired results. "The acid test of a policy," Kissinger wrote in *A World Restored*, "is the ability to obtain domestic support."⁸⁸ In his writings, Kissinger offered a sobering critique of Castlereagh. Although he developed the ideal framework for statesmanship, he tragically failed to gather domestic support for his balance of power initiative, leading to its eventual collapse.⁸⁹ Kissinger was a near carbon copy of Castlereagh. The American public refused to support Kissinger's brand of realism. In response to his militant diplomacy, protests exploded and the anti-war movement refused to yield any support to Kissinger.⁹⁰ Equilibrium was never established. The North Vietnamese knew that once the United States withdrew they would be able to quickly overtake South Vietnam—and they did just that.⁹¹ Kissinger's resemblance to his nineteenth century mentor was uncanny. Although Kissinger approached equilibrium as described in *A World Restored*, he—just like Castlereagh—failed to legitimize his principles domestically.

Conclusion

Although both realists, Morgenthau and Kissinger developed diverging philosophies. This contrast inevitably led the two men to conceive juxtaposing perspectives on the Vietnam War. Morgenthau was primarily concerned with prudence and saw the war effort to be a threat toward America's national interest and therefore called on the U.S.

⁸³ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 1.

⁸⁴ Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 374—375.

⁸⁵ Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 384.

⁸⁶ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 483; Earl H. Tilford Jr., *Set Up: What the Airforce Did in Vietnam and Why* (Montgomery: Air University Press, 1991), 263.

⁸⁷ Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 422.

⁸⁸ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 326.

⁸⁹ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 326.

⁹⁰ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 269.

⁹¹ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 640—648.

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government to withdraw. Kissinger on the other hand followed in Castlereagh's and Metternich's footsteps. He saw it necessary to produce an ordered equilibrium in Vietnam.

Morgenthau's and Kissinger's juxtaposing political philosophies can teach the foreign policy community more about the nature of realist thought. Although both men developed contrasting philosophies, they are both remembered as classical realists. Realism is not a systematic and unified theory of international relations, but rather a lens in which statesmen can view the world—a pessimistic lens, but a lens, nonetheless. From this understanding of political realism, the theory alone cannot offer a set of policy prescriptions. Instead, it can help scholars and statesmen observe international politics and think through its challenges by teaching them to be wary of human nature, avoid hubris, and pursue stability.

Despite their philosophical and political differences over the Vietnam War, the two still shared the lens they viewed the world with. The memory of the Holocaust left a permanent and tragic stamp on their joint consciences, reminding them to regard politics in terms of power calculations while also deterring against moralistic and ideological approaches to foreign affairs. In this vein, Morgenthau praised Kissinger for being one of the six greatest Secretaries of State in American history, elaborating:

Homer characterizes his heroes with stereotyped adjectives. Thus Achilles is 'striding mightily,' Athena is 'endowed with owl—like eyes,' Odysseus is *polytropos*, that is, 'many—sided' or 'of many appearances.' Kissinger is indeed *polytropos*. From that quality stems the fascination with which friends and foes, colleagues and strangers behold him. That quality encloses the secret of his success. Kissinger is like a good actor who does not *play* the role of Hamlet today, or Caesar tomorrow, but who *is* Hamlet today and Caesar tomorrow.⁹²

Kissinger, pessimistic about the human condition, acted in accordance with this philosophical precept. In spite of the public drama surrounding Morgenthau's critique of the war effort, Kissinger remained the United States' Homeric hero in Morgenthau's mind.

Morgenthau's and Kissinger's shared quality of the belief in the inevitability of tragedy surrounding international relations is the baseline for heroic statesmanship. But the ultimate test is to reconcile the tension elicited by the two self—proclaimed realists. To know when to pursue the national interest and when to pursue balance and legitimacy, when to act for prudence and when to act for equilibrium, when to be a Morgenthau and when to be a Kissinger—*this* is the real acid test of statesmanship.

⁹² Hans J. Morgenthau, "Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State," *Encounter* 43, no. 6 (1974): 60, 58, HJM—B107.

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