right on the phone and accept that offer,” Rockefeller said. “You have no right to treat a president that way.”

Rather than displaying resentment, Rockefeller offered Kissinger a generous lump-sum severance gift, to be used to educate his children, which served to cushion the financial burden of going into government. In a “Dear Henry” note, he wrote: “As a token of my friendship and my appreciation for the work you have done in service to the people of this country, I am arranging to have a gift made to you in the amount of $50,000.” (This amounted to approximately $170,000 in 1990 dollars.) After checking with Nixon and the White House counsel’s office to make sure that it was legal, Kissinger accepted the gift, which helped to seal his professional and personal debt to Rockefeller.

Late on the afternoon of Friday, November 29, Kissinger called Dwight Chapin to accept the job. The following Monday morning, the forty-five-year-old Harvard professor walked with the president-elect to the podium of the ballroom at the Pierre Hotel.

There, a significant new wrinkle was added to Nixon’s plan to gut the power of State and other cabinet departments in favor of a strong White House staff: the shift would be done secretly, even deceitfully. “Dr. Kissinger is keenly aware of the necessity not to set himself up as a wall between the president and the secretary of state or the secretary of defense,” Nixon told the press. Kissinger would deal with long-range planning rather than tactics or operations, Nixon pledged, adding: “I intend to have a strong secretary of state.” None of those statements was true.

Nixon’s willingness to say the opposite of what he believed was an early sign of his penchant for conspiratorial and covert ways of conducting policy. Kissinger’s willingness to go along was, in turn, an early sign of precisely that: his willingness to go along. When he got to the podium, he claimed that what Nixon had said reflected his own thinking.

For the moment, the deception worked. Lavishing praise on Kissinger’s appointment, a New York Times editorial lauded the fact that he “intends to leave operations to the departments and is unlikely to arouse suspicion that he is arranging the flow of information to win the argument for his own view.” At a December 12 meeting with the incoming cabinet, Nixon asked Kissinger to give his views on Vietnam. Kissinger demurred; he replied that he considered it his job to pass along options, not give advice. Citing the event with approval, columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak reported that Nixon planned “to use his own staff strictly as an information-gathering device and leave to his Cabinet all of the major policy advice.”

In the meantime, Kissinger’s appointment met with broad approval. The Washington Post called it “reassuring,” adding that it was encouraging that Kissinger had taken his doctorate “under McGeorge Bundy.” (This mistaken assertion threw Kissinger into the first of what would be rather frequent private rages at the idiocy of American journalists.) Adam Yarmolinsky, a Harvard law professor who served in the Pentagon, declared: “We’ll all sleep a little better each night knowing that Henry is down there.” And William F. Buckley, Jr., whom Kissinger had been cultivating ever since he invited him to his Harvard seminar in 1954, wrote to him that “not since Florence Nightingale has any public figure received such universal acclaim.”

THE ODD COUPLE

Richard Nixon, who liked to portray his actions as bold and unexpected, often stressed how different he and Kissinger were. “The combination was unlikely,” he would recall, “the grocer’s son from Whittier and the refugee from Hitler’s Germany, the politician and the academic.” But it was some inner similarities rather than their surface differences that helped forge the murky bond that was to unite them. As each of them acquired the power he had long sought, they retained the personal insecurities that they found reflected in each other.

Both were practitioners of realpolitik, that blend of cold realism and power-oriented statecraft that tended to be, to use Kissinger’s description of Bismarck, “uncumbered by moral scruples.” They believed, as Kissinger had once written of his nineteenth-century subject, that “foreign policy had to be based not on sentiment but on an assessment of strength.”

In a conversation with Golda Meir, Nixon once twisted the golden rule into a power game, telling her, “My rule in international affairs is, ‘Do unto others as they would do unto you.’” At which Kissinger interjected: “Plus ten percent.” On a more personal level, ethical concerns were not paramount for either Kissinger or Nixon when it came to plugging leaks or circumventing the State Department.

Kissinger also wrote of Bismarck that he “knew how to restrain the contesting forces, both domestic and foreign, by manipulating their antagonisms.” Likewise, Nixon and Kissinger shared a mastery of manipulating antagonisms. Both of them could be suspicious and
secretive; they tended to think the worst of other people’s motives, and they liked to pit their perceived enemies against one another. Inveterate backbiters, they forged alliances by invoking mutual enemies and brooding about shared antagonisms. Just as Kissinger said of Bismarck that “he could never accept the good faith of any opponent,” so it was that Nixon and Kissinger invariably ascribed sinister motives to anyone who challenged them.17

“Kissinger and Nixon both had degrees of paranoia,” said Lawrence Eagleburger, long one of Kissinger’s closest aides and most astute observers. “It led them to worry about each other, but it also led them to make common cause on perceived mutual enemies. They developed a conspiratorial approach to foreign policy management.”18

In addition, they were both loners—and liked to think of themselves as such. This bred a fondness for secrecy and furtiveness. Because they were unwilling to share either information or credit, they tended to be evasive when dealing with subordinates or colleagues.

Likewise, they both relished pulling off surprises designed to astonish their adversaries. Instead of being carefully coordinated with the State Department, the negotiations on Vietnam and arms control and China would be done covertly, then dramatically revealed.

Heightening these similarities was Kissinger’s chameleon-like quality of taking on the coloration of those around him. By reinforcing each other’s prejudices and spending far more time together than was healthy, Kissinger and Nixon soon bonded together as co-conspirators against the bureaucracy and a hostile world.19

What truly bound Kissinger and Nixon together, however, was an appetite and affection for foreign policy. Most of their time together was spent as if in a two-person seminar, touring the horizon of world affairs and discussing avenues to be explored. With Kissinger paving the way, Nixon became the first American president to visit Moscow and Beijing, and he did it in the same year. To fathom foreign policy, Kissinger has said, a person must be constantly thinking of all the connections involved, even while shaving in the morning. Though he may not have done either perfectly, Nixon was one of the few men who would think about foreign policy while shaving.

Despite sharing all of these traits, Kissinger and Nixon had a major personality difference that made them fundamentally dissimilar. Kissinger was acutely aware of the world around him and self-aware of his role in it. Nixon was not.

This difference was manifest in many ways. Kissinger was painfully sensitive to every critic’s opinion, whereas Nixon tended to withdraw into Walter Mitty-like fantasies and pretend to be impervious to what others thought. Kissinger struggled to co-opt his enemies and ingratiate himself with his critics; Nixon brooded about getting even. Kissinger relished personal interaction; Nixon dreaded it. When Kissinger got angry, he would rage at those involved; Nixon would shrink from confrontation, avoid dealing with people, and stew about getting revenge.

When challenges arose, Kissinger became intellectually engaged, almost obsessively so; Nixon became detached, almost eerily so. Kissinger’s mind mastered details; Nixon remained aloof from even some of the major components of issues he faced. Kissinger’s analytic lucidity took him straight to the core of any problem; Nixon’s more intuitive approach led him to roll a problem around for hours on end as he brooded on various conflicting options.

One of the most perceptive comparisons of Kissinger and Nixon came in a 1973 speech by Thomas Hughes, a State Department veteran who had departed to become president of the Carnegie Endowment:

Both were incurably covert, but Kissinger was charming about it. Both abhorred bureaucracy, but Nixon was reclusive about it. Both engaged in double-talk, but Kissinger was often convincing. Both were fiercely anti-ideological, but Nixon had recurrent relapses. Both jealously guarded against any diffusion of power, but Kissinger dispensed balm. Both were inveterate manipulators, but Nixon was more transparent. Both insisted on extremes of loyalty, but Kissinger endeared himself to his critics. Both had a penchant for secrecy, but neither uniformly practiced what he preached. Both were deeply suspicious, but Kissinger was irrepresibly gregarious. Neither was widely admired for truthfulness, but Kissinger excelled at articulation. Neither worshiped the First Amendment, but Kissinger mesmerized the press.20

Each February during his first term, Nixon would give an intimate birthday dinner upstairs in the White House for Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt. The tart-tongued Washington insider, who had an embroidered pillow in her salon that read, “If you can’t say anything nice come sit here beside me,” was the doyenne of the two groups that Nixon most resented yet felt a curious compulsion to impress: Georgetown society and the Washington establishment. Usually there were only six people at the dinner: the Nixon’s, Mrs. Longworth, Kissinger, columnist Joseph Alsop, and his wife, Susan Mary. “Nixon would have Henry perform,” said Mrs. Alsop, “and he would sit back and beam with pride, as if Henry were some sort of prized possession.” Whenever an issue came
up, Nixon would lean over to his dinner partner and say, “Mrs. Longworth, I think you’ll be interested in what Henry has to say about that.”

Such was Nixon’s initial attitude toward Kissinger: pride, perhaps a bit of awe, all tinged with the sort of resentful delight that an unpopular kid might feel when he finds himself showing off a possession that makes other people respect him.

Heightening his pleasure at having Kissinger by his side was that he had once belonged to Rockefeller, whom Nixon envied. “If someone worked for Rockefeller,” said Haldeman, “Nixon coveted him and assumed he was good because he belonged to someone who could buy whatever he wanted.” Nixon never enjoyed the Kennedyesque aura that lured intellectuals naturally to his side, nor could he afford to buy the best and brightest minds, as Rockefeller could. But now that he was president, he could pry away one of Rockefeller’s crown jewels. “He took a certain delight in that,” speech writer William Safire noted.

In addition, Nixon admired Kissinger’s detached kinship to the American establishment: he had been embraced by the East Coast foreign policy elite, yet by breeding and temperament he could never become a true insider, and he was contemptuous of the conventional wisdom that formed the establishment consensus. Unlike a McGeorge Bundy, for example, Kissinger was not born into the establishment, and unlike John McCloy or Dean Rusk, he would never be fully absorbed into it. Throughout his career he would be solicitous toward venerable establishment pillars, such as McCloy and David Bruce and later Cyrus Vance. But privately he tended to be condescending about their crowd.

To Nixon, who had always been snubbed by the foreign policy elite, even when he was an international lawyer in Manhattan in the 1960s, Kissinger’s case seemed the ideal: to be courted but not seduced, to be an outsider who felt condescending toward the elite rather than the other way around. Among Nixon’s little fantasies was that he was proud of not caring what people in those hallowed precincts thought of him. With Kissinger as his Tonto, that dream seemed more convincing.

Nixon nevertheless quickly became rather wary of Kissinger’s quirky personality and ambition. “I don’t trust Henry, but I can use him,” he told one of Kissinger’s rivals at the outset of the administration. To Elliot Richardson, who began as undersecretary of state, Nixon warned: “Watch Henry! Check on him!”

Nixon became particularly distressed by the conflicting extremes of Kissinger’s personality: his insecurity and paranoia on the one hand, and his ego and megalomania on the other. Although Nixon loved fomenting rivalries, he hated to deal with them. As a result, the feud between Kissinger and Secretary of State William Rogers quickly got out of hand, and Nixon’s perversive glee turned to despair.

Kissinger’s socializing with the Georgetown set and the media elite would also become a source of resentment. On some evenings, Nixon would call John Connally or Al Haig or Bob Haldeman to his hideaway and make fun of where Kissinger might be. “I guess Henry’s out with his Georgetown friends,” he’d say, then brood for a moment. “He would joke about it,” Connally recalled, “but it bothered him badly.” Nixon suspected (not without reason) that Kissinger was regaling dinner parties with tales of his own triumphs and how he was holding in check a mad president’s dangerous instincts. Most of what Kissinger said on the social circuit echoed back, amplified, to stoke Nixon’s suspicions even further.

During his five and a half years in office, Nixon’s admiration for Kissinger would gradually become more infected by jealousy and suspicions of disloyalty. With no personal affection to serve as a foundation for their relationship, what had been a love-hate alliance eventually tilted toward the latter. As the president’s dependency on Kissinger grew, his resentment and bitterness increased.

So oddly matched in many ways, so oddly repelled by one another: Kissinger and Nixon formed a curious pair. Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins? Woodrow Wilson and Colonel Edward House? No, in each of those cases the assistant was more subservient to the president.

Perhaps the best comparison is the relationship Kissinger wrote about as a graduate student: Metternich and Emperor Francis I of Austria. When Metternich became foreign minister in 1809, Austria had been beaten down in spirit by the Napoleonic wars and was, in Kissinger’s words, a “government which had lost its elan and its self-confidence, which knew its limits but hardly its goals.” America was in much the same way at the end of 1968, having lost not only the will to prevail in Vietnam but also the confidence that it had a worthy role to play in the world.

Francis I was far more pedantic, thickheaded, resistant to new ideas, and meddlesome than Nixon. But, like Nixon, he used his police to spy on political enemies, and he read their reports with relish. A taste of Kissinger’s later attitudes toward Nixon’s grim deter-
mination can be found in his description of Francis I: “Dour and suspicious, unimaginative and pedantic, he had seen so many convictions that he regarded mere persistence as an ethical value.”

Francis I and Metternich believed they lacked the domestic consensus needed to conduct an open and forthright foreign policy, so they resorted to one based on deception, cunning, and maneuver. The emperor, through a succession of hard knocks, became cynical about the will and loyalties of his people; Metternich arrived at this disdain intellectually. The same could be said of Nixon and Kissinger. The way they perceived their predicament in 1969 was not at all that different from Kissinger’s description of the one perceived by their predecessors in 1809: “Since Austrian policy could not draw its strength from the inspiration of its people, it had to achieve its aims by the tenacity and subtlety of its diplomacy.”

One Saturday afternoon in the summer of 1970, Kissinger was in San Clemente with Nixon. The president suggested that the two of them, along with his chum Bebe Rebozo, drive up to find the small house in Yorba Linda where he was born. There, seized by an emotional nostalgia and anger at having his privacy invaded, he ordered the two cars of Secret Service agents and press to go away, leaving him alone with Kissinger, Rebozo, and a Secret Service driver. Nixon, more relaxed than Kissinger had ever seen him, pointed out the landmarks of his young life and discussed the random events that had led him to become a politician.

“The guiding theme of his discourse,” Kissinger later recalled, “was how it had all been accidental.” But Kissinger saw in it a different theme, that of an insecure man who lacked a strong sense of who he was and where he came from. “Nixon had set himself a goal when he was complaining about Nixon’s weird personality,” recalled Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a colleague from both Harvard and the Nixon administration, once noted of Kissinger: “It was his obsession that no one ever should appear closer to the president than he, while neither should anyone be seen to hold this president in greater contempt.”

Kissinger also came to see Nixon as a shy man, one who dreaded meeting new people or conveying a disappointing decision to someone’s face. “The essence of this man is loneliness,” Kissinger would tell friends. Nixon would hole up in his hideaway office, slump in a chair, and write notes on a yellow legal pad. For hours or even days, he would shield himself from outsiders, allowing only a small circle of aides to join him in his rambling ruminations. “He was a very odd man, an unpleasant man,” Kissinger later let slip into an open microphone at a diplomatic dinner. “He didn’t enjoy people. What I never understood is why he went into politics.”

Not surprisingly, Nixon instilled distrust among those around him. For Kissinger, who was prone to paranoia, the reaction was acute. Soon after he took office, Kissinger had aides or secretaries listen in on his phone conversations with the president (as well as other callers), using a “dead key” that would allow them to pick up the telephone undetected. The aides would prepare a memo of the conversation.

Whenever there would be a particularly strange or frightening phone call from the president, or when he seemed either drunk or out of control, Kissinger would emerge from his office and ask who had been taking notes. Then he would roll his eyes. Can you believe that? he would grumble. Did you hear what “that madman” said? When a presidential call became particularly rambling or woolly, Kissinger would signal wildly for an aide to pick up and share the horror.

Kissinger’s rants against Nixon became a carefully guarded secret. He referred to him as “our drunken friend” and “the meatball mind.” “If the president had his way, there would be a nuclear war each week!” Kissinger would say to his aides in a conspiratorial growl. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a colleague from both Harvard and the Nixon administration, once noted of Kissinger: “It was his obsession that no one ever should appear closer to the president than he, while neither should anyone be seen to hold this president in greater contempt.”

But even as he was denigrating Nixon, Kissinger would throw in a few words of tribute to his courage. “Genuinely heroic,” was a phrase he would sometimes use. “Kissinger always paid tribute to Nixon’s decisiveness when a crisis finally came, even to us staffers, even when he was complaining about Nixon’s weird personality,” recalled former aide Winston Lord. In times of crisis, Kissinger insisted, Nixon would steel himself against outside pressures and take bold, forceful
steps. It was a “joyless, desperate courage,” according to Kissinger, one that seemed tinged by “his fatalistic instinct that nothing he touched would ever be crowned with success.”

Kissinger’s tributes to Nixon’s decisiveness rang somewhat hollow. Nixon did make some tough decisions, but in most of the major crises during his tenure, he was far from heroic, as Kissinger well knew. During preparations for the Cambodian invasion, Nixon went to Camp David with his drinking buddy Bebe Rebozo; when he called Kissinger, he was slurring his words and shouting profanities. Over the next few days, he took a drunken trip up the Potomac on the Sequoia, paid a spooky visit to the Pentagon, and made a predawn appearance with his valet at the Lincoln Memorial. During Kissinger’s secret trip to Moscow after the mining of Haiphong harbor in April 1972, Nixon went with Rebozo to Camp David and spent his time firing off posturing cables. And during both the 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi and the nuclear alert following the October 1973 Middle East war, Nixon was out of touch.*

THE COURTIER’S INSTINCTS

As a refugee, with a full share of the insecurities and ambitions that come from being a smart outsider, Kissinger had learned how to cultivate the patronage of powerful people. He could maneuver, amuse, impress, and occasionally dazzle. But more important, at least in the strange case of Richard Nixon, Kissinger had learned how to flatter.

Even while he was denigrating Nixon behind his back, Kissinger was fawning to his face. During his trip to Europe a month after taking office, Nixon “desperately wanted to be told how well he had done,” Kissinger recalled. He obliged. That same month, after his first meeting with Soviet ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin, Nixon called Kissinger to his office four times to hear him tell him how well he had done. Again, Kissinger obliged.

After a later meeting with Dobrynin, Kissinger gushed: “It was extraordinary! No president has ever laid it on the line to them like that.” It was around then that Kissinger first met Pat Nixon at a reception. He told her how impressed he was by her husband, lavishing praise on his grasp of issues and his sense of command. She frowned. “Haven’t you seen through him yet?” she asked.

* See Chapters 13, 19, 21, and 23.

Kissinger’s flattery extended to writing Nixon mash notes. Before an April 1971 speech on Vietnam, for example, Kissinger sent him a handwritten missive: “No matter what the result, free people everywhere will be forever in your debt. Your serenity during crises, your steadfastness under pressure, have been all that have prevented the triumph of mass hysteria. It has been an inspiration to serve. As always, H.” The words of this and other notes were so fulsome that one could almost forget that the descriptions of Nixon’s “serenity” were not exactly sincere.30

Kissinger’s entire demeanor would change whenever he was talking to the president. Peter Peterson, then Nixon’s international-economics assistant, said that when Kissinger would visit his Georgetown home, he would belittle Nixon relentlessly. Then a call would come on the red line. “Oh, yes, Mr. President,” Kissinger would say over and over again. Recalled Peterson: “The contrast was striking between how he talked about Nixon to his friends and how he acted in Nixon’s presence.” Henry Brandon also remembered Kissinger getting presidential calls at his house. “He was so deferential he seemed like a totally different person.”11

As with many of Kissinger’s character quirks, he was fully aware of his obsequiousness and could trick the balloon with his self-deprecating humor. He often told the tale of Nixon returning to his cabin at Camp David and announcing, “I scored 126.” Replied Kissinger: “Your golf is improving, Mr. President.” To which Nixon growled, “I was bowling.” When Kissinger’s direct line from the president rang while a reporter was there, Kissinger dryly noted: “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea just because I was on my knees when I answered the phone.”

After a visit to brief former president Johnson down on his ranch, Lady Bird drove Kissinger back to the air base and asked how he thought her husband’s demeanor struck him. Kissinger, in telling the story on himself, recalled that he mumbled something about “serenity in retirement” and she almost drove off the road. “I suppose flattery has to be related to reality, however vaguely,” he would say.32

Nixon’s White House tapes, when they are finally released, will be particularly damaging to Kissinger because they will show him fawning over even Nixon’s most hair-raising notions, according to those who were there. In 1982, Kissinger ran into John Ehrlichman at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles. “Sooner or later those tapes are going to be released, and you and I are going to look like perfect fools,” Kissinger told Nixon’s domestic adviser. Speak for yourself, Ehrlichman thought. “He was obsequious naturally,” said Ehrlichman. “He would lard things unbelievably. Nixon would make an
outrageous statement, and instead of humming and staring at the ceiling like I would do, Kissinger would eagerly rumble in with, ‘Yes, Mr. President, your analysis is absolutely correct and certainly very profound.’ I would cringe.”

The most egregious cases came when Nixon seemed to bait Kissinger, saying things—especially about Jews—that cried out for Kissinger to challenge him. Kissinger never would. Once, Nixon phoned and started a rambling attack on Jews and blacks as Winston Lord listened in on a dead key. “Why didn’t you say something?” Lord asked afterward. “I have enough trouble,” Kissinger told his aide, “fighting with him on the things that really matter; his attitudes toward Jews and blacks are not my worry.”

Nixon seemed to take a fiendish glee in launching into diatribes against Jews and watching as Kissinger shifted feet nervously, afraid to contradict him. “Nixon would talk about Jewish traitors,” Ehrlichman recalled, “and he’d play off Kissinger, ‘Isn’t that right, Henry? Don’t you agree?’ And Henry would respond: ‘Well, Mr. President, there are Jews and then there are Jews.’” Kissinger sometimes made his Jewish aides keep a low profile in order not to inflame Nixon’s bias. “Nixon shared many of the prejudices of the uprooted, California lower-middle class from which he had come,” Kissinger later said in explaining the president’s anti-Semitism.34

Even his second wife, Nancy, as protective and devoted as any spouse could be, was bothered by Kissinger’s willingness to play along with the president’s prejudices. At one of her first meetings with Nixon, he began attacking Rockefeller. Kissinger did not protest, just mumbled, “Oh, yes,” and nervously tried to change the subject. Nancy, who worked for Rockefeller and admired him deeply, was upset. “I was about to say something,” she later recalled, “and Henry knew it and his eyebrow shot up to keep me quiet.”

When asked about this incident, Nixon insisted that Kissinger had always remained loyal to Rockefeller. “He knew that Rockefeller and I had been rivals for years,” Nixon said. “If he had wanted to pander to me, he could on occasion have said something critical of Rockefeller.”

Kissinger later defended his actions by saying that challenging Nixon was futile, “almost suicidal.” “Nixon’s favor depended on the readiness to fall in with the paranoid cult of the tough guy,” he said. “The conspiracy of the press, the hostility of the Establishment, the flatulence of the Georgetown set, were permanent features of Nixon’s conversation, which one challenged only at the cost of exclusion from the inner circle.” Besides, Kissinger argued, it was easier to fall in with Nixon’s “most extravagant” musings than to challenge them because they rarely led to anything.

One reason that Nixon was such a complex man was because of the many contradictory aspects to his personality. H. R. Haldeman, for example, compared him to a quartz crystal: “Some facets bright and shining, others dark and mysterious. . . . Some smooth and polished, others crude, rough, and sharp.” And each of them changed, he added, depending on what light was striking it.

William Safire, a Nixon speechwriter and author of the most colorful memoir of his first term, used a layer cake as an analogy. The icing was the public face, “stern, dignified, proper”; the first layer “a progressive politician”; just below that “an unnecessarily pugnacious man.” Other layers included “the hater,” “the realist,” the courageous “risk-taker,” and “the loner.”35

Kissinger likewise came to see in Nixon an odd admixture of conflicting traits. “Several warring personalities struggled for preeminence in the same individual,” he later noted. “One was idealistic, thoughtful, generous; another was vindictive, petty, emotional. There was a reflective, philosophical, stoical Nixon; and there was an impetuous, impulsive, and erratic one.” Nixon’s grim ambition was the result, Kissinger believed, of “the titanic struggle” among his various personalities. “Most men mature around a central core; Nixon had several. This is why he was never at peace with himself.”

Because Nixon was a man of many facets—some enlightened, others murkier—Kissinger could later claim that the dark deeds of their tenure, such as the wiretapping and the humiliation of the State Department and the petty deceptions, were done at Nixon’s behest. At worst, this defense runs, Kissinger was merely a facilitator, a person who made it possible for Nixon to do what he wanted. But because Nixon was multifaceted, the opposite argument can also be made: Kissinger could, if he had chosen, have appealed to Nixon’s better instincts, as some other aides in the White House tried to do. If Kissinger had done so, would the conduct of policy have been more open and honest? Did Kissinger reinforce Nixon’s dark side by catering to it?

Perhaps to a small degree. But Nixon would have been Nixon, with or without Kissinger at his side. There were plenty of people around Nixon—including Secretary of State William Rogers—who practiced a more open and forthright style; but the president quickly shunted them aside in favor of those more comfortable with being devious.
To get anything done, Kissinger quickly learned, required catering to Nixon’s prejudices. “If you bucked Nixon on his petty biases and idiosyncratic pronouncements,” Ehrlichman said, “he’d cut you dead. He wouldn’t see you or return your memos.” People who fought Nixon’s darker musings, such as advisers Herb Klein and Robert Finch, soon faded away. “It would have been crazy to challenge Nixon or take a heroic stand against his prejudices,” recalled Diane Sawyer, who served as one of his press assistants. “He would just shut you off. If you were going to get something done, you had to keep elasticity in the relationship.”

So Kissinger became an enabler for the dark side of Nixon’s personality, someone who joined in his backbiting, flattered his ideas, and never pushed him into a corner. Honorable men were often ridiculed by Nixon as prissy and weak. He preferred those who could be brutal, from Patton to Connally to Colson. A willingness to talk tough and applaud ruthlessness was the best way to become Nixon’s co-conspirator against a hostile world.

Did Nixon’s dark side infect Kissinger? If the president had been an open, uncomplicated, and forthright gentleman, would Kissinger, with his chameleon-like traits, have become that way, too? “It would have been very different under Rockefeller,” Kissinger would sigh over dinner at a French restaurant with some of his aides after their first year in office.

Perhaps to a small degree. But Kissinger’s own dark streak—tinged with paranoia and insecurity and furtiveness—ran deep. He was conspiratorial when he had worked under Robert Bowie at Harvard. Even under the open and gregarious Rockefeller, Kissinger had waged petty turf battles with perceived rivals. And later, when Gerald Ford became one of America’s least devious presidents, Kissinger still found himself embroiled in pointless bureaucratic struggles.

Nixon’s thirst for flattery and Kissinger’s penchant for providing it helped to seal a complex relationship, but it did not make Kissinger a social chum like Bebe Rebozo or Robert Abplanalp. Indeed, he and Nixon never developed a personal warmth toward one another. “Henry, of course, was not a personal friend,” Nixon later told David Frost, flinging in the “of course” as a subtle Nixonian put-down. “We were associates, but not personal friends. Not enemies, but not personal friends.”

Even so, Kissinger quickly became Nixon’s favorite person to talk to and have at his side. And with a man so complex and conflicted, proximity translated into power.

Within a year Kissinger and Nixon would be talking five or six times a day, in person or by phone, sometimes for hours on end. In the morning, after the regular briefing, Nixon would sometimes keep Kissinger in the Oval Office for two hours. In the afternoons, he would summon him to the hideaway in the Executive Office Building.

Nixon loved rambling discussions. He would poke at a situation from all sides, make pronouncements, circle back, make contradictory ones. The habit would hurt him during Watergate; the tapes show him suggesting certain courses of action—such as paying off the burglars—when in fact he was engaged in a Nixonian ramble. The habit also gave Kissinger extraordinary leeway to shape foreign policy tactics.

Instead of arguing against Nixon’s most harebrained orders, Kissinger learned simply to ignore them, the way Haldeman had with Nixon’s request to install a private phone line to Kissinger’s office at Harvard. “It was part of the assistant’s task—expected by Nixon—to winnow out those ‘decisions’ that he really did not mean to have implemented,” Kissinger later said. “A good rule of thumb was that the president’s seriousness was in inverse proportion to the frequency of his commands.”

The Quiet Coup

In order to understand the audacious power grab that Kissinger engineered in December 1968—which his aide Roger Morris later dubbed the “coup d’état at the Hotel Pierre”—one must begin by noting that it was done at Nixon’s behest. Although he had declared when announcing Kissinger’s appointment that “I intend to have a strong secretary of state,” in fact he intended the opposite. “From the outset of my administration,” he later admitted with a bit more candor, “I planned to direct foreign policy from the White House.”

To do so required a change in the policy-making structure that would sap the traditional powers of the State and Defense departments and centralize control in the West Wing, specifically in the hands of Nixon and Kissinger.

Because he regarded the government bureaucracy as his enemy, Nixon was determined to create a cadre of courtiers beholden only to him, a Byzantine system in which the palace guards maneuvered to
tional Air Missions, which ran the White House planes, to keep me fully informed," Laird later said.

In addition, the U.S. Army Signal Corps was providing Laird with secret reports on most overseas White House conversations. The White House had two phone systems at the time: the White House Communications Agency, which was run by the Army Signal Corps, and the civilian-operated White House switchboard. The Army Signal Corps's was more sophisticated and supposedly more secure. It was used to connect Nixon and Kissinger to phones and facilities around the world, it handled the calls from Air Force One, and it established the communications setup whenever Nixon traveled. For example, in 1969 the Army Signal Corps spent $307,000 for communications equipment in Key Biscayne plus $161,000 more for a system on Grand Cay, the island owned by Nixon's friend Robert Abplanalp.

Also unbeknownst to Kissinger, his practice of having his secretaries listen in and transcribe his telephone conversations became another method for the military to keep track of him. "A naval aide would back up Kissinger's staff in monitoring calls and preparing the transcripts," said former navy chief Zumwalt. "It meant I had my own spies. I could see who was saying what about whom. Haig and Kissinger especially—each would get to the president and put in a few digs when the other was traveling." 29

At the end of 1971, a scandal would erupt involving a navy yeoman on Kissinger's staff who was spying for the Joint Chiefs. 3 But this military spy ring, outlandish as it was, paled in comparison to the intelligence that Laird was able to get on his bureaucratic rivals. Laird's ability to thwart Nixon and Kissinger at their own game highlighted yet another drawback of their love of secrets: they could never be sure who also knew them.

**KISSINGER'S POWER GROWS**

For Nixon, meetings of the full National Security Council quickly became bothersome. Whenever a subject was discussed there, it meant he had to deal personally with the objections of Rogers and Laird as well as put up with the time-consuming and leaky process of having the matter considered within the bureaucracies of both their departments. One morning in early June 1969, at his daily private meeting with Haldeman, he decided to make official what had been evolving for five months: Kissinger's role would be elevated at the expense of the secretaries of state and defense. Instead of considering most foreign policy matters at full NSC meetings, Kissinger and Nixon would decide things alone.

"Cut NSC to one every two weeks—or once a month," Haldeman's notes of the conversation read. "More brought privately to President for his discussion with Kissinger." Later in the conversation, Nixon returned to the subject even more worked up. From now on, he told Haldeman, Kissinger should come directly to the president on issues, rather than putting them on the agenda for a full NSC meeting. Then they could come to a decision without Rogers and Laird. "No appeal," Nixon added, as he often did, for emphasis. 31

This suited Kissinger just fine. From the start, he had been seeking to make foreign policy in private with Nixon whenever possible. For the very first NSC meeting, which dealt with Vietnam options, he had Halperin do a two-page cover memo summarizing the plans put forth from State and other agencies. There were little boxes for Nixon to initial. Kissinger looked at it and told Halperin, "Fine, but now tell him what to do." Halperin was a little taken aback, having heard all of Kissinger's pronouncements about how the NSC staff would merely pass along options. The summary documents, with Kissinger's recommended course of action, were to become another of the secrets that Kissinger had to keep from the State Department and the rest of the government. 32

The press, which was at first thrown off the scent by what Nixon had said about delegating power to his cabinet officers, quickly caught on to the power shift. After just three weeks in office, Time put Kissinger on its cover. "Kissinger is already widely suspected in Washington of being a would-be usurper of the powers traditionally delegated to the State and Defense departments," the magazine noted. "Humility is not his hallmark." The New York Times likewise reported that Kissinger "is taking over the responsibility for coordinating foreign policy in the Nixon Administration, a mandate formerly assigned to the Secretary of State." 33

So NSC meetings became a formality. Nixon would open them with a statement of the topic and turn to Kissinger to present the issues. The position papers from the various agencies would be distributed to each NSC principal, but only Nixon and Kissinger had the summary and recommendation page. "It was a heady experience to be asked to draft presidential decisions before NSC meetings had even been held," staffer William Hyland recalled.

Nixon would also have "talking points" prepared by Kissinger's staff. These would even predict what Laird or Rogers was going to say

---

* See Chapter 18.
and provide a scripted response for the president to deflect their objections. Nixon would follow it carefully, putting his initials in each box as he went along.  

Kissinger's main source of power over the bureaucracy was his chairmanship of the NSC's Senior Review Group, which determined what issues should reach the president and when. But he quickly set up a covey of other committees, all of which he chaired, to give him better control over specific topics. They included:

- The Washington Special Action Group, set up after North Korea's downing of the EC-121 plane, which handled breaking events and crises.
- The Verification Panel, formed in July 1969, which ostensibly analyzed whether compliance with different arms control proposals could be verified by U.S. intelligence, but which was soon in charge of managing all arms negotiations.
- The Defense Program Review Committee, which considered the funding requests for weapons and other military needs.
- The Vietnam Special Studies Group, set up in September 1969, which coordinated military and diplomatic policy regarding the war.
- The 40 Committee, a new name for an older panel, which was in charge of authorizing covert actions by the CIA and other agencies.

The enhanced role of the NSC staff was reflected in its funding. Walt Rostow in 1968 had a budget of $700,000. By 1971, Kissinger's budget was $2.2 million. The staff had almost doubled to 46 assistants and 105 administrative personnel.

One source of power in Washington is having direct access to information, rather than having to go through channels. Kissinger never felt very comfortable with CIA director Richard Helms, a patrician who shunned bureaucratic conspiracies, so he ordered the CIA to send more raw data—rather than merely assessments and conclusions—to the NSC staff. "It skewed our way of writing estimates, especially about the Soviets," Helms said. "The estimates had to provide a vast amount of data so Kissinger could make up his own mind."

Kissinger also began to deal directly with the military. Early in 1969, he called Admiral Zumwalt, the chief of naval operations, regarding a matter involving Africa. Laird got upset. Dealings with the military should go through him, he insisted. Kissinger responded that as a representative of the president he had the right to deal directly with the military. A few weeks later, when Zumwalt and Kissinger met at a social event, the navy chief noted that he shared Laird's objections to dealing outside of the chain of command. But Kissinger was adamant. It was a matter of both power and principle, he felt, and he insisted that he had the right to deal with all members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff directly. "From then on," says Zumwalt, "every time we got together for business, he referred to it as a 'nonmeeting.' " Without Kissinger's knowledge, Zumwalt kept Laird fully informed.

Kissinger's desire to control foreign policy, it should be noted, was not wholly unwarranted. By riding herd on the bureaucracy he was able to dispel some of the stale thinking that permeated the State and Defense departments.

For example, in the summer of 1969, he ordered a study on chemical and biological weapons. He was dubious about whether they had much use in a war-fighting strategy, and assumed correctly that little thought had been given to the issue. By asking for a range of feasible options, Kissinger guaranteed that the possibility of eliminating the program would be listed, if only as an extreme option to set off the policy the military preferred.

What came back was a mass of opaque prose that caused Kissinger to bellow, "I can't even read this paper." But he knew that an opportunity had been uncovered. He had his staff sharpen the wording so that the options became clearer. In making his decision to renounce first use of chemical weapons and to dismantle production of biological ones, Nixon stressed the novelty of the review process and how well it had worked.

By the end of their first summer, Kissinger and Nixon were no longer communicating by memos; instead, they were spending hours in rambling conversations. Nixon would tour the world every morning, his remarks ranging from grand strategic concepts to petty biases about various leaders and peoples; along the way he would cast a few aspersions on the State Department or engage in some bureaucratic gossiping. Kissinger would guide him along like a deferential tutor, praising his observations, adding a few insights, and pointing out various perfidies and idiocies of the State Department. Haldeman began to resent the time Kissinger monopolized, but he knew that these were the type of discussions that their boss relished: private, conspiratorial, a curious blend of the high-minded and petty.

THE BACK CHANNEL

One of the basic rules of American diplomacy is that all official contacts with foreign governments are handled through State Department channels—even the negotiations done by special presidential envoys, such as those that Harry Hopkins conducted for
Franklin Roosevelt. The advantages to this procedure are the same as its disadvantages: all the relevant agencies get to weigh in with their expertise and objections, diplomatic initiatives are made to conform to established policy, and the information (even when given a high classification) goes into the bureaucratic mill to be distributed to scores of analysts, department heads, and diplomats who have successfully asserted their need to know such matters.

Not surprisingly, this process did not appeal to Nixon or Kissinger. The type of foreign policy they envisioned involved secret maneuvers, dramatic surprises, and a desire for the White House (meaning Nixon and Kissinger) rather than the State Department to get credit. Thus was born a complex system of “back channel” operations that Kissinger set up to bypass the State Department. The most central of these, involving a secret negotiating conduit to Moscow, was known simply as The Channel.

In describing how this process developed, Kissinger later wrote: “Nixon increasingly moved sensitive negotiations into the White House where he could supervise them directly, get the credit personally, and avoid the bureaucratic disputes or inertia that he found so distasteful.” That sentence is true. But it would be just as true—in fact, as time went on, more true—if Kissinger's name was switched for Nixon’s. Neither man could have back-channeled the State Department without the involvement and active encouragement of the other, but Kissinger was perhaps the more eager to do so. “I undoubtedly encouraged it,” Kissinger would later concede. “Like the overwhelming majority of high officials, I had strong views and did not reject opportunities to have them prevail.”

Even as an academic, Kissinger had been in favor of short-circuiting the usual policy-making channels. At a seminar in the spring of 1968 at the University of California, almost a year before he entered government, he discussed the need to keep the bureaucracy “working away in ignorance” while key decisions were made. He explained:

One reason for keeping decisions to small groups is that when bureaucracies are so unwieldy and when their internal morale becomes a serious problem, an unpopular decision may be fought by brutal means, such as leaks to the press or to Congressional committees. Thus the only way secrecy can be kept is to exclude from the making of the decision all those who are theoretically charged with carrying it out.

The underlying assumption here is that decisions made without public scrutiny are better than those made after an open discussion.

But even if one accepts this premise, one can still be taken aback by the disdain for democracy implied by his assertion that there is something “brutal” about allowing a congressional committee or newspaper readers to know about the debate.

Kissinger began setting up the back channel to the Soviet Union within weeks of coming into office. At a reception at the Soviet embassy, an official came up to him and said that Ambassador Dobrynin, who was nursing the flu in his upstairs apartment, would like Kissinger to come up and meet him. With the well-practiced heartiness that had made him a Washington social figure, Dobrynin greeted Kissinger and suggested that they address each other by their first names. After discussing the various “opportunities” for better relations that had been lost, Dobrynin requested a meeting with Nixon to deliver a letter from his leaders.

Kissinger later said that Nixon wanted Rogers excluded from the meeting; Nixon recalled that it was Kissinger who wanted it that way. No doubt they were both right. In any event, the thankless task of informing the secretary of state that Kissinger rather than he would attend the first meeting between the president and the Soviet ambassador—a breathtaking breach of diplomatic procedure—fell to Bob Haldeman. His notes show that Nixon blamed the decision on Kissinger; Haldeman did the same when he talked to Rogers.

At the meeting, Nixon told Dobrynin that he should discuss any sensitive issues privately with Kissinger rather than the State Department. “Kissinger had suggested that we develop a private channel between Dobrynin and him,” Nixon recalled. “I agreed.”

“The Channel was thus formally established,” says Kissinger. Thereafter Dobrynin would visit as often as once a week, usually coming through a little-known door to the East Wing of the White House and meeting Kissinger in the Map Room where Franklin Roosevelt used to plot war strategy.

It took a while for professional diplomats to get the hang of the new way of operating. Jacob Beam, who was appointed ambassador to Moscow mainly because he was one of the only foreign service officers to treat the peripatetic Nixon decently while he was out of office, was asked by Nixon and Kissinger to draft a letter to Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin and to keep it very secret. Beam did, but he quite naturally sent a report to Secretary Rogers. It caused an uproar: Rogers was upset (understandably) at being excluded from a meeting involving a letter to a Soviet leader, and Kissinger was outraged that Beam had violated “a private talk.”

Each use of a back channel, on its own, could probably have been justified as necessary for creative diplomacy. But when the litany
of double-dealings is examined—the dozens of major negotiations that were conducted by Kissinger secretly from the State Department—it becomes clear that less exalted motives were also at play.

One consequence was that there was no incentive for officials to be flexible, to reexamine established policy or to come up with compromises. Once they began to suspect that Kissinger was secretly doing things on his own, they could remain pristine and adhere to the line favored by their bureau or agency.

Kissinger would later be defensive about the extent to which he used back channels, and it would show in the shifting array of justifications that he offered. Primarily, he pinned it on Nixon. “These extraordinary procedures were essentially made necessary by a President who neither trusted his cabinet nor was willing to give them direct orders,” he later wrote. Kissinger also blamed Rogers, and everyone else in the bureaucracy, who resisted many of the president’s policies. If policy-making had been left to the proper channels, he argued (with some merit), creative approaches would have been stifled by the inertia of the system.

In the short run, the back channels worked. The approach “was weird and its human costs unattractive,” Kissinger wrote, “yet history must also record the fundamental fact that major successes were achieved.” Among the back-channel successes: a SALT agreement, an opening to China, a Berlin accord, a Moscow summit, and eventually a peace treaty for Vietnam. But handling the negotiations in secret from the State Department did not make the SALT outcome sturdier, the China opening smoother, or the Vietnam settlement any speedier.40

Whether or not the ends justified it, the back channel complicated American foreign policy. The Soviets became adroit at whipsawing the U.S. by playing off one channel against the other. Pakistan was treated with absurd tenderness during the Bangladesh fighting because it was serving as the back channel to China. North Vietnam triumphed in the war of public diplomacy because the U.S. became addicted to the secret channels.

In addition, reliance on secret channels wasted the time and creativity of Kissinger’s staff. Winston Lord had to organize three versions of many briefing papers, for example. “If I wrote a memcon of a meeting and then had to do sanitized versions because other parts of the bureaucracy were not supposed to know something, it would take three times as long,” he later said. “It was like juggling a double or triple bookkeeping system.”

It also squandered the staff’s sense of moral worthiness. “Some secrecy is necessary in government,” said Tony Lake, “but Henry crossed the line from secrecy to deceit.” During the secret Paris peace talks on Vietnam, Lake would have to write a memo for the president that fully—sometimes fulsomely—reported on what Kissinger did. Then there would be paragraphs deleted before it was given to David Bruce, and then an almost totally sanitized version for other officials.

“The levels of knowledge and duplicity were like a Mozart opera in complexity,” Lake said. “One reason I quit was because I kept finding myself writing misleading memos.”41

Kissinger and Nixon relied on the channel more because it suited their personalities than because it suited the security interests of the nation. They both had a penchant for secrecy, a distaste for sharing credit with others, and a romantic view of themselves as loners. Neither had the ability to rejoice in someone else’s success. Neither believed he had much to learn from professional diplomats or congressmen. Nor did either have any faith that public input and the messiness of democratic debate might lead to wiser decisions. “They developed a conspiratorial approach to foreign policy management,” said Lawrence Eagleburger. “They tried not to let anyone else have a full picture, even if it meant deceiving them.”

Nor can vanity be discounted. “The Channel was done largely to feed Kissinger’s ego and grandeur, if I may be so blunt,” said Georgi Arbatov, the veteran Soviet expert on the U.S. “And perhaps for Dobrynin’s ego, too.” Kissinger, in retrospect, admitted that it was hard for him to judge “to what extent less elevated motives of vanity and quest for power played a role.” But, he was willing to admit, “it is unlikely that they were entirely absent.”42

The “Henry-Handling Committee”

Kissinger’s obsession with Rogers began to get on Nixon’s nerves. On a trip to San Clemente their first summer in office, even as he was basking in frequent visits to Nixon’s patio and afternoon swims together in the Pacific, Kissinger continued his tirades against Rogers to all who would listen. “The president got into a snit,” Haldeman recalled, “and asked us to form a Henry-Handling Committee to deal with it.”

Haldeman’s notes from the meeting capture Nixon’s mood: “Kissinger is on Rogers kick again . . . . Comes in 2-3 times a day . . . . Insists Rogers is trying to get him . . . . Just keep this off his [Nixon’s] desk.”

So Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and John Mitchell invited Kissinger