

# Cold War Intelligentsia

## The Ascendancy of Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger

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### INTRODUCTION

The rise of both Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski perhaps results from the ascendancy to political power of figures like John F. Kennedy. Kennedy assembled around him a team of academics, convinced that the best minds in the United States could craft the smartest policy, even without direct political experience. Ultimately, the catastrophe of Vietnam would prove Kennedy wrong, insofar as the United States government created chaos it could not control in Vietnam, and ultimately eroded public confidence in American institutions and government officials.<sup>1</sup> However, President Kennedy enabled the growth of a new political elite borne from the intelligentsia, especially amongst academic experts with PhDs in foreign policy, international relations, and area studies.<sup>2</sup> As a corollary to the rise of the academic elite is the subsequently increased opportunity for immigrants to influence the United States' foreign policy in a direct and highly public manner. Indeed, the elite created by the quintessential American political star, John F. Kennedy, ushered in an elite with accents and PhDs.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Brigham, *Reckless: The Tragedy of Vietnam and Henry Kissinger*, 244

<sup>2</sup> Justin Vaisse, *Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist*, 32-36

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Zbigniew Brzezinski was born into Poland's political elite, where his father served as a diplomat in Germany and later in the Soviet Union during Stalin's Great Purges.<sup>3</sup> Brzezinski came of age in the era of Hitler, but Hitler's occupation of Poland followed by the atrocities of Stalin east of the Iron Curtain--and especially in Poland--directed him toward lifelong conclusions on democracy and freedom that dominated both his academic work as a professor and his later work as a public figure.<sup>4</sup> He saw the United States, with all of its rhetoric on creating a world order with a basis in human dignity, equality, and human rights, as a nation with the resources and prestige necessary to suppress dictators and fascism. Moreover, for Brzezinski, the rhetoric represented a commitment to liberate countries under communist control from the forces of totalitarianism.

Harvard University finally brought Brzezinski, affectionately known as "Zbig," to the United States. Felicitously for Brzezinski, he arrived at Harvard with the identifier of being an Eastern European immigrant, a qualifier inscribed into his voice, at a time when the United States government sought to collaborate with universities to bolster academic fields with international foci. As Justin Vaisse writes, "the academic discipline of international relations was gradually asserting itself, carving out a specific identity within the rather chaotic field of political science."<sup>5</sup> The emergent fields of study often established a knowledge base in Americans intended to mirror the expertise acquired by a native. Thus, immigrant academics

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<sup>3</sup> "Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski And His Life On The World Stage"

<sup>4</sup> Justin Vaisse, *Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist*, 17

<sup>5</sup> Justin Vaisse, *Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist*, 4

flourished partially as a result of their backgrounds and familiarity with communist countries.<sup>6</sup>

Henry Kissinger came to the United States as a Jewish refugee fleeing Nazi Germany. The experience of being German, witnessing the rise of Hitler semi-democratically, fundamentally shaped his opinions on the democracy as a means to solve problems of social cohesion. Furthermore, in a quirk of the circumstance, the German government designated Henry Kissinger and his brother as “Bavarians” because their father, Louis Kissinger, descended from a Bavarian area.<sup>7</sup> The identification with Bavaria contributed to Kissinger’s worldview on the failures of democracy in protecting society against intolerance and human rights violations as well.

Germany in the 1920s represented the epicenter of cultural and political advancement in Europe and, by extension, the Western world. However, even within Germany, the state of Bavaria swept in modernist elements prior to their widespread presence in the intellectual discourse, chiefly an urban industrial economy, standardized education systems, and centralization of the bureaucratic apparatus.<sup>8</sup> Curiously, the modernist reforms initiated in Bavaria came from an absolutist monarch and were pressed onto a recalcitrant society through the clout of the monarch.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the absolutist monarch Maximilian II provisionally codified a legal protectorate for the Jewish population in the hopes of creating a more cohesive and, therefore, robust economy. Teleologically, the implementation of greater democracy and freedoms was met with protest, and print newspapers became avenues for the manifestation of

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<sup>6</sup> Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 92-95

<sup>7</sup> Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 20

<sup>8</sup> Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 22

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 22-26

thoroughly undemocratic philosophies. Kissinger briefly mentions Bavaria in his writings, mostly as a case study in the weakness of democracy, and there is an interpretation amongst historians that he viewed a figure analogous to Maximilian II as the ultimate solution to contain the weakness of democracy--namely in terms of severely limiting its scope. The story of Germany, especially the absence of democratic opposition to Hitler in Germany, drove Kissinger to the conclusion that democracy could not be trusted to advance Western values.<sup>10</sup>

Following his immigration to the United States, Kissinger's path to Americanization passed through the army draft where he vividly experienced the insider-outsider status that defined his position in the United States. In the United States army, Kissinger appeared similar to all other American draftees, a first in his immigrant life.<sup>11</sup> However, when Kissinger applied to be a doctor in the US Army, he was turned away because the quota for Jewish doctors had already been reached. This, despite his demonstrated intellect and excellence in army classes and coursework, drilled into Kissinger an intuition that he could never truly be an insider to American society.

The same detachment that plagued Kissinger impacted Brzezinski, albeit the significant differences in its manifestation. Accordingly, despite their intelligence and success in academic spheres, both Brzezinski and Kissinger struggled to assimilate fully into American society. Historians have gathered through both tapes and primary accounts that Nixon and Kissinger had a successful and close professional relationship yet never achieved any degree of personal intimacy. Ultimately, Kissinger could never escape the status of being Jewish and the personality traits of being German. For Brzezinski, the issue was more

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 57-59

subtle, particularly because Brzezinski possessed a degree of extraversion and was generally well-liked.<sup>12</sup> Vaisse notes that Brzezinski's audiences for lectures heaped praise on his charisma, delivery, and intellect.<sup>13</sup> For both Brzezinski and Kissinger, the immigrant stigma ultimately limited their careers in public service and advising, as colleagues in government feared that the image of immigrant crafting foreign policy would be met with skepticism and distrust in middle America.

Zbigniew Brzezinski himself legitimizes the theory that his ascent in the American governmental apparatus was a liberal response to Henry Kissinger's similar presence in the prior decade, albeit an acknowledgement vocalized first in old age. Given that Kissinger was not allowed to appear on television for the first few years of his career, so as not to remind Americans that the person representing them on the global stage was, in fact, not a native-born American, the notion that Kissinger softened the pathway for Brzezinski seems reasonable. In the historical sense, Brzezinski faced more obstacles to acceptance than Kissinger, namely relating to the history of Poland as a Communist stronghold, in addition to his name, which was nearly unpronounceable to most Americans. However, both men shared the ambition to influence American foreign policy, and both men could not become political figures due to their immigrant status. Thus, becoming close advisors to the President was their best potential avenue to acquiring influence.

## VIEWS ON THE SOVIET UNION

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<sup>12</sup> Vaisse, Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist, 11. Admittedly, Vaisse notes that Brzezinski also had difficulties with the media, though he distinguishes the source as leaks from the State Department.

<sup>13</sup> Vaisse, Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist, 24-25

As an academic scholar of the Soviet Union, Brzezinski's work focused heavily on identifying weaknesses in the homogeneity of the Soviet Union that could be exploited to aid in toppling the alliance. Ideologically, Brzezinski saw the creation of a quasi-COMINTERN with inverse purpose--namely an alliance intended to accentuate nationalism within individual ethnic populations and geographic regions within the Soviet Union--as a mechanism to generate micro-erosions of unity and ultimately create a crisis of identity.<sup>14</sup> Though Brzezinski's approach first appeared in his doctoral and early post-doctoral work around 1950, the procedures outlined represent a nearly-belligerent approach to the Cold War, particularly in its declaration of deposing the Soviet Union. In comparison to Kissinger, Brzezinski saw less potential in collaboration with the Soviets as a pathway to world stability and more potential in collaborating with the Chinese. Indeed, Brzezinski focused on realigning the Soviet Union to operate in the image of the United States.

Brzezinski's academic work interpreted the progression of the Cold War and the generalized state of hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union as reactions to the relationships between Eastern and Western Europe in the earlier parts of the twentieth century. In particular, Brzezinski strongly criticized the Eisenhower administration's policy of liberation, which essentially represented a continuation of the Truman Doctrine of containment.<sup>15</sup> The liberation policy, in Brzezinski's mind, included an assumption of military involvement in Europe that Brzezinski found both unsustainable and unnecessary. In accordance with his writings, the Soviet Union

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<sup>14</sup> Justin Vaisse, Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist, 20

<sup>15</sup> Väyrynen, Raimo. "EAST-WEST RELATIONS AND GLOBAL CHANGE: THE FOREIGN POLICY IDEOLOGY OF ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI."

of the early 1950s possessed a far weaker military presence than that of the United States, in addition to strong internal instability following the death of Joseph Stalin.

Under these conditions, the United States should have mitigated the hostilities with the Soviet Union and capitalized on the numerous, though ultimately unsuccessful, uprisings and skirmishes. One such instance Brzezinski believed the Americans should have capitalized on was the forced rejection of funds from the Marshall plan. Brzezinski drew upon the initial interest of Polish Prime Minister Jozef Cyrankiewicz in attending the conference, followed by the later rejection of the Marshall plan in favor of a lucrative trade deal with the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Brzezinski wrote of such events as missed opportunities to quell the conflict with the Soviets.

A second event Brzezinski drew upon as a missed opportunity for the United States was the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 wherein a student protest progressed into a national uprising against the Hungarian Communist Party, which ran all arms of the government.<sup>17</sup> In a sense, Brzezinski indirectly criticized the West's inaction in Hungary, which served as the first major test of Soviet control since the end of World War II, thereby rendering the West's inaction all the more puzzling and short sighted. Ultimately, following the uprising, Communist party membership in Hungary decreased from 800,000 to 100,000 in a matter of months--a statistic Brzezinski believed should have been encouragement for the United States to exploit the weakness of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>16</sup> Roberts, Geoffrey. "Moscow and the Marshall Plan: Politics, Ideology and the Onset of the Cold War, 1947." .

<sup>17</sup> ["Study Prepared for US Army Intelligence "Hungary, Resistance Activities and Potentials" \(January 1956\)"](#)

Brzezinski settled on what would become his favorite phrase, namely peaceful engagement, at some point in the early 1960s. Peaceful engagement essentially represented a cultivation of relationships with smaller nations in the Soviet bloc so that these same countries could ultimately develop a pro-Western position and disassociate from the Soviet Union and ideology. However, he did not advocate the direct overthrow of the Soviet Union, most likely as a result of his views on the German question following both World Wars, wherein German separation created a host of hostilities, particularly between West Germany and Poland. Brzezinski's ultimate strategic vision lied in the creation of a "Greater Europe" that shared and spread Western values and included cooperative components with the United States as well.<sup>18</sup> Implicitly, Brzezinski strove to create an ideological NATO based on greater values than specific opposition to the Soviets; he wanted an alliance that transcended security-based cooperation and ultimately reflected cultural and political similarities.<sup>19</sup>

Brzezinski applied his antagonism toward the Soviet Union in his political work as the National Security Advisor to President Carter. In a series of controversial decisions, Brzezinski encouraged Carter to send aid to Mujahideen insurgents prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Though the United States had little strategic value added from the distribution of aid, Brzezinski and then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates believed the Soviets were entering a situation

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<sup>18</sup> Väyrynen, Raimo. "EAST-WEST RELATIONS AND GLOBAL CHANGE: THE FOREIGN POLICY IDEOLOGY OF ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI." *Current Research on Peace and Violence* 2, no. 1 (1979): 20-37.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40724866>.

<sup>19</sup> "Zbig National Policy Goals"

<sup>20</sup> White, John Bernell Jr., *The strategic mind of Zbigniew Brzezinski: how a native Pole used Afghanistan to protect his homeland.*



analogous to the one the United States had faced in Vietnam. In Afghanistan, Brzezinski saw an opportunity to entangle the Soviet Union in a Vietnam-esque, prolonged and teleologically worthless expedition. Indeed, Brzezinski possibly imagined the domestic scorched-earth of the United States during the Vietnam War and projected that an equivalent internal conflict would destroy the brittle unity of the Soviet Union.

Henry Kissinger, on the other hand, projected a willingness to cooperate with the Soviet Union in the name of national security. Though Kissinger was no less an ardent Cold War than Brzezinski, Kissinger subscribed to a result-driven approach to foreign policy, a belief that oftentimes placed abstract values at odds with pursuing problematic anti-communist policies. Indeed, there exists a pattern of Kissinger overlooking flagrant missteps and inaccuracies in the name of pragmatism. In a taping of a conversation between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, Nixon mentions his problems with the Soviet Union's actions against its Jewish population. Kissinger, a Jewish refugee, responds with "Soviet Jews? It's none of our business," in a quote that becomes emblematic of Kissinger's willingness to suspend moral values in a binary between morality and pragmatism.<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, Kissinger's pragmatism creates the ultimate paradox of his career, namely the notion that a man driven to public policy by an abhorrence for Hitler's appeasers became an enabler of near-appeasement in Asia and Eastern Europe. Kissinger actively pursued détente with the Soviets, fully convinced that diplomatic means would yield a more favorable result to the United States than the type of militancy advocated by Brzezinski.<sup>22</sup> Historically, there is evidence for Kissinger's

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<sup>21</sup> "From the Lost Nixon Tapes"

<sup>22</sup> Conversation with Henry Kissinger at the Council on Foreign Relations

point of view, in that he was successful in bringing about two iterations of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty--agreements between the United States and Russia that limited both the quantities and positioning of ballistic missile launchers. However, the lack of definition in Kissinger's convictions handicaps the public perception of the progress made under his strategic vision.

## ON VIETNAM

In their writings on Vietnam, Brzezinski and Kissinger present a remarkable degree of alliance, particularly in their steadfast identification as Cold Warriors. Ultimately, Brzezinski demonstrated his consistency and concurrence with the standard American mentality in the Cold War over the issue of Vietnam. Brzezinski, as an academic, absolutely accepted the domino theory as necessarily true. He embodied the prevailing theory that communism in one nation threatened its neighbors, a mindset he perhaps based on his experience with the Soviet Union, which had similarly garnered support along the outskirts of its borders for Communist ideology.

If applied to Vietnam and South Asia, Brzezinski's academic work argues the advancement of the domino theory in reverse. If the United States can influence a "regional influential" in Southeast Asia through soft power, then that power can be utilized to influence its neighboring countries. Thus, saving one nation not only stops the proverbial dominoes from falling, but political and cultural successes can lead to the creation of regional dominoes that ultimately serve the purpose and goals of the United States.

Moreover, even after the Vietnam war negotiations concluded and the rampant waste of resources, human lives, and time became apparent, Brzezinski maintained that the war was

not a mistake. He firmly maintained that the mistakes of the war lied within the American failure to define winning, and especially the failure to clearly define upper bounds for what America was willing to pay for each win. He saw the past transgressions of American leaders as underestimating the costs and challenges of the war and lying to the American public about the developments of the war. However, despite the problems Brzezinski saw in the war, he believed that the American position was fundamentally the historically correct one and that abandoning the effort would have been a mistake on the international stage.

Henry Kissinger ultimately appears as a harsher critic of the Vietnam War than Brzezinski, based on writings and interviews. Despite Kissinger's eventual role in the progress and development of the effort in Vietnam, his essay entitled "The Viet Nam Negotiations," published in the January edition of *Foreign Affairs*, outlines the challenges and mistakes of the United States in dealings with Vietnam.<sup>23</sup> The essay portrays a stunning and accurate analysis of the situation in Vietnam, years prior to the similar conclusions of historians and other academics.

Kissinger essentially outlines the American difficulty in Vietnam to be that "military successes cannot be translated into permanent political advantage."<sup>24</sup> In essence, Kissinger sees the United States failing to win the political and psychological

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<sup>23</sup> Kissinger's essay was sent to the publisher prior to his appointment as Nixon's National Security Advisor. Indeed, when Kissinger was notified of the appointment he tried to stop the publication of this essay, for he feared it would be interpreted as the position of the United States in the forthcoming negotiations; he was concerned over the messages sent to both the American public and the Vietnamese, as the essay outlines a strong rebuke of the war in Vietnam and implicitly suggests the relative unimportance of Vietnam in the global context.

<sup>24</sup> "The Viet Nam Negotiations."

battles in Vietnam while the Vietcong are able to do so in a consistent manner. He connects this failure with fundamental axioms on the nature of guerilla warfare, which in particular conclude that “the guerilla wins if he does not lose,” a particularly explanative adage in the case of Vietnam. Though the North Vietnamese could not match the military force of the United States, they could maintain the farce of victory by exhausting American resources and strategically applying their insider knowledge of their nation.

Furthermore, Kissinger points to another concern in the Vietnam effort, namely the concept that Nixon would popularize as “Vietnamization.” He writes, “American victories were empty unless they laid the basis for an eventual withdrawal,”<sup>25</sup> and argues that the teleological goal of the United States lies in the withdrawal from Vietnam rather than the maintenance of stasis, and that the protracted effort to uphold the status quo in Vietnam hurt the American cause by wasting resources and deteriorating public support.

Lastly, Kissinger reaches the conclusion that “the failure to analyze adequately the geopolitical importance of Vietnam contributed to the current dilemma.” Into this contention is infused an implication of Vietnam’s unimportance.<sup>26</sup> This assertion in particular highlights the discrepancies between Kissinger’s worldview and that of Brzezinski, as Kissinger overtly disregards the domino theory in his conclusions while Brzezinski supports the Vietnam war solely from the perspective of containing Communism. In such assertions, Kissinger also reveals his aversion toward ideology and geopolitical doctrines.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

In the era of Jimmy Carter, Brzezinski and Kissinger were bitter rivals, politically and academically, and oftentimes served as foils for each other. Kissinger, always the pragmatic German, was frustrated by the idealism and tailored media personality of Brzezinski. In recent years, to the displeasure of Kissinger, Brzezinski began appearing frequently on television news, where Brzezinski's daughter, Mika, frequently hosted him on her show. These media appearances would often create a character extremely favorable to Brzezinski and advanced the narrative that he was Kissinger's equal, a claim Kissinger would likely dispute.

Indeed, Brzezinski's ability to charm audiences likely shielded him from a register of attacks for promoting violence and foreign wars, a quality that stands in stark contrast to the attacks leveled upon Henry Kissinger who indeed was so widely criticized for his actions in Vietnam that he was unable to accept his Noble Peace Prize in person until 2016 at an event that ultimately and fittingly served as the final joint appearance between himself and Brzezinski. In this appearance, Brzezinski finally acknowledged that "a great deal of my past is intertwined with the previous speaker [Kissinger]." <sup>27</sup> He then proceeded to recall an anecdote of their first meeting, at Harvard University, wherein Kissinger introduced a course in the political science department taught by his doctoral advisor. As Brzezinski's story advances, he claims to have left the course description speech mid-sentence, supposedly out of offense at the disproportionate levels of German political philosophers pedaled by Kissinger. Notwithstanding the nostalgic value of the anecdote, Brzezinski intended to depict the world of the 1970s wherein political

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<sup>27</sup> "Nobel Peace Prize Forum Oslo 2016 with Dr. Henry Kissinger and Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski",

divisions remained contained within the confines of their own ideologies rather than vastly disparate worldviews.

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