

BOOKS

Kissinger as Chameleon

KISSINGER. By Marvin and Bernard Kalb. 577 pages. Little, Brown. \$12.50.

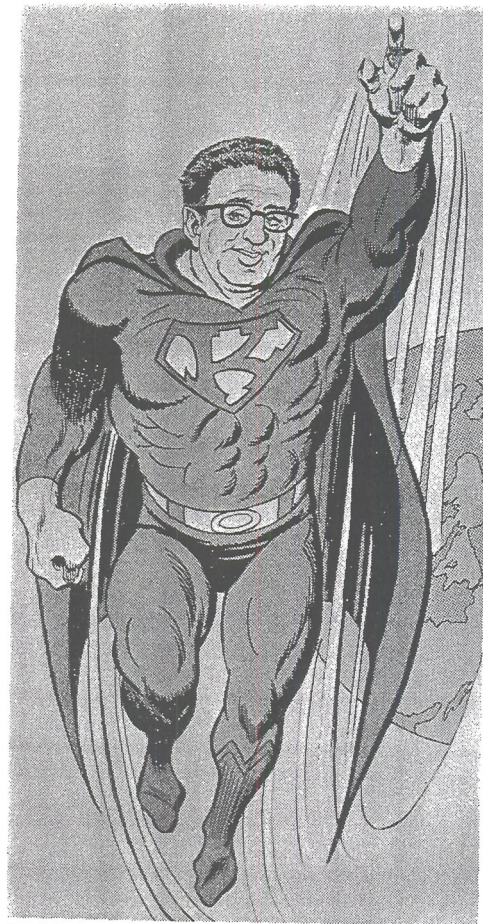
"This is Kissinger up close," proclaims the jacket blurb—but this fascinating study of America's illustrious Secretary of State may in fact be "Kissinger up too close." Not that the authors—two of CBS's most prominent correspondents—are Kissinger patsies, or that they didn't do an enormous amount of research among the Secretary's former Harvard colleagues, White House officials and fellow journalists. But, as they admit, "our primary source was Henry Kissinger—a series of private interviews, plus his backgrounders..." And for all its mild slaps on the Secretary's wrist, the book remains, essentially, a Kissingerian version of what is currently the most glittering career in American public service.

The Kalbs begin, with fine balance, at the beginning: Heinz Alfred Kissinger, Jew, soccer fan, pigtail puller, growing up in Nazi Germany; then the forlorn immigrant, living in New York's Washington Heights; next, the reluctant GI, and then the 23-year-old Harvard freshman. Kissinger's strengths blossomed ear-

ly. He was bright; what's more, he was clever. He displayed a particular talent for "academic apple polishing." "What an s.o.b.," recalled one contemporary, "a prima donna, self-serving, self-centered."

But once into their breezy, anecdotal account of Kissinger's conduct of recent foreign policy—the Vietnam negotiations, the SALT and Moscow summit talks, the opening to China—the Kalbs lean heavily on Kissinger-on-Kissinger and fall slightly off balance. Describing his handling of last October's Middle East crisis, for example, they accept Kissinger's account of himself as engaged in a "one-man fight with the Pentagon" to fulfill Israeli requests for military aid—leaving unexamined the Pentagon's subsequent claim that Kissinger actually set up this "good guy vs. bad guys" format to ward off the Israelis.

Brigand: In the murky White House atmosphere, the President's favorite adviser is painted as a "Lancelot among a band of brigands"; criticism of his warmanship is painstakingly mild ("It wasn't the first time that Kissinger would be wrong on Vietnam"); no reference is made to what Kissinger watchers generally regard as his weakest area of knowledge, international economics. And the Kalbs shy away from pinning down their



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Kissinger as Superman: True colors

subject's place in the Watergate puzzle

Yet the book is studded with revealing backstage vignettes. In response to the killings at Kent State, the authors quote Kissinger as saying: "I'm dead. Every war has its casualties. I am a casualty of this one." Clearly, the Kalbs infer, Kissinger was not challenging the wisdom of his boss's war policies but merely expressing personal pain at getting caught in the middle. During the bombing of Hanoi, Kissinger is glimpsed as the field marshal, poring over maps and obviously enjoying "barking out orders to admirals and generals." But on the subject of the President's favorite movie, "Patton," he was once overheard to say: "If I have to see that movie again, I'll kill myself." Strong on description and short on analysis, the Kalbs are tentatively helpful in predicting how Kissinger will behave as the impeachment heats up: "He feels strongly," discloses a well-placed source, "that you don't... walk out on the Presidency."

But in the end, Kissinger eludes definition. For all his admired grasp of basic principles, our most successful politician of the moment "has always," the Kalbs conclude, "been a political chameleon, able to take on the coloration of his environment." And his sleight-of-hand is masterful: Kissinger "tells you what he is *not*, but never what he is." Still, on one occasion, he may have shown his true colors. When one admirer came up and gushed, "I want to thank you for saving the world," the master chameleon unhesitatingly replied: "You're welcome."

—BRUCE VAN VOORST