



# Speak to the Heartland: Lessons from Kissinger's Defense of Détente

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Twice in October 2017, Sen. John McCain (R-Az.) spoke eloquently to public audiences about the liberal world order that his and his father's generation helped to build and the moral obligation the United States has to defend it from threats at home and abroad.

Battling terminal cancer, McCain has entered the twilight of his public life. But in these speeches, McCain has called for a national, not a personal, convalescence. He has sought to rally a weary nation to a view of American morality and purpose in the world consistent with the internationalism that the country practiced with great effect from 1945 until the past year.

In both method and message, McCain's speeches recall an earlier campaign of public addresses launched decades ago by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to fortify America's resolve as an international leader in a beguiling world after a decade of domestic tumult and bitter war. In the face of a resurgent present-day isolationism that repudiates the post-war international order that has advanced human dignity, prosperity, and peace, McCain's revival of Kissinger's campaign is a venerable act of public service. And it is an effort that bears expanding by others inspired by his example at this seminal moment.

## I. The Heartland Speeches

On dozens of occasions from August 1974 through October 1976, Kissinger, the German-born, Harvard-educated, and gravelly accented Secretary of State, brought his vision of American foreign policy not to faraway capitals but to Middle America. Delivered to civic groups and universities in cities across the country, the so-called "heartland speeches" sought to explain the moral purposes behind American foreign policy and defend Kissinger's strategy of détente with the Soviet Union. These speeches "attempted to build a domestic consensus by educating people about America's role in the world," said Winston Lord, who oversaw them at the State Department.<sup>[1]</sup>

Each address was different. Some of them focused on topical controversies, like the proper role for Congress in promoting human rights, Arab-Israeli diplomacy following the 1973 war, and American intervention in the civil war in

Angola, among others. But regardless of the particulars, Kissinger grounded his discussions in broader themes. He consistently argued that America had been a force for immense good in the world since the end of World War II, that unity both domestically and with allies was indispensable to success, that the world was inescapably economically interdependent, and that adroit statecraft could and should further moral purposes “in a world where power remains the ultimate arbiter.”[2]

Kissinger spoke at moment of low American morale, similar in some respects to today. Addressing an audience in Laramie, Wyoming in February 1976, Kissinger observed that Americans “have passed through a decade and more of tragedy.”[3] During that time, Americans had “been witness to assassination; we have suffered through a tragic war that shattered our domestic unity; and we have endured our greatest constitutional crisis since the Civil War,” the resignation of President Richard Nixon.[4] Considering these agonizing experiences, “Americans have a right to ask: The world may need us, but do we need the world?” Kissinger said in Birmingham in August 1975, “Do our policies abroad serve American interests and American ideals?”[5]

Kissinger answered any doubters by emphasizing the uniqueness of the American experience. Given America’s material abundance and the security afforded by vast oceans, U.S. skepticism of foreign entanglements was not new. Americans had long oscillated between international engagement and withdrawal, “between trying to influence international developments and seeking to isolate ourselves from them,” he said in 1975.[6] When the United States did emerge on the world stage, it almost immediately seized the mantle of global leadership and sought to promote universal goals, “to ‘make the world safe for democracy.’”[7] This pursuit of maximalist ends led to “disillusionment” with imperfect outcomes and a rising “tide of isolationist sentiment.”[8]

But this instinct for retreat was misplaced. Kissinger told an audience in Detroit in November 1975 that “bitter experience” showed that America’s safety and prosperity was “inextricably linked” to world peace and prosperity.[9] It was time the U.S. “outgrew some of the illusions that characterized the long-past period of our isolationism,” like “the idea that we are always being taken in by foreigners.”[10]

Reviewing the history of the three decades of the American-led world order, Kissinger found that the United States had much to crow about: rebuilding Europe and Japan after the devastation of World War II; shaping the commercial and financial system; building alliances that maintained stability and defended liberal values; resisting aggression; mediating conflicts; and promoting decolonization and development.[11] America had not been played by foreign nations so much as it had transcended their petty squabbles. “No other nation has made such a contribution,” Kissinger said.[12] America’s actions were “without precedent in human history.”[13]

The Vietnam war punctured America’s sense of invincibility and righteousness. Now Americans knew their country “does not possess the power to right every wrong or to solve every problem.”[14] The U.S. “can neither escape the world nor dominate it,” Kissinger said in New York in 1976.[15] But such constraints did not excuse the United States from its responsibilities for leadership, they made them all the more necessary. “The best hope for a planet beset by war, poverty, and tyranny is a strong, committed, vigilant America,” he said in Laramie.[16]

Kissinger tied a vibrant international order to unity at home and with allies abroad. National unity was “the foundation of our achievements,” he said in St. Louis.[17] A foreign policy based on “a positive and cooperative spirit” was the responsibility of Americans “of all political persuasions.”[18] Overseas, America’s alliances were “the cornerstone of world stability and progress,” and Washington’s “first priority.”[19] The United States shared with its allies a “moral unity”[20] grounded in “common conceptions of the dignity of man, a common vision of a linked destiny, and a common interest in peace and prosperity,” he said.[21]

America’s leadership in the world was both a moral imperative rooted in the United States’ best traditions and a practical necessity. “We have never seen ourselves as just another nation-state pursuing selfish aims,” Kissinger said in what has been described as the most important of the heartland speeches.[22] an address before a luncheon in Minneapolis in July 1975 entitled “The Moral Foundations of Foreign Policy.”[23] “We have always stood for something beyond ourselves.”[24] But engaging in the world was not mere altruism. No global stability “is conceivable without America’s active participation in world affairs,” he said.[25]

Remaining true to American ideals while surviving “in a world of sovereign nations and competing wills” took “the courage to face complexity and the inner conviction to deal with ambiguity,” Kissinger said.<sup>[26]</sup> He warned of charlatans peddling “easy slogans” and called on Americans to recognize “that our great goals can only be reached by patience and in imperfect stages.”<sup>[27]</sup>

At the time, the *New York Times*' Leslie H. Gelb wrote that the speeches amounted to a public barnstorming unparalleled for a foreign policy since Woodrow Wilson toured the country for the League of Nations.<sup>[28]</sup> Gelb predicted the speeches would be part of Kissinger's “legacy”—“thoughtful documents that remain the starting point for debating American foreign policy.”<sup>[29]</sup>

While Jimmy Carter's election led to Kissinger's early retirement from public service, his heartland speeches won him “adulatory” press coverage,<sup>[30]</sup> and America remained a steward of the international order.

## II. McCain Speaks

In the decades since, Kissinger's heartland speeches have been largely forgotten. Certainly, public debates about American foreign policy have continued, but the need to defend America's place at the heart of the global system as a force for principled, pragmatic policies had seemingly passed.

The rise of a populist movement openly hostile to international ideas and institutions has changed that, and for reasons that the Kissinger of the mid-1970s might recognize. As then, today, more than a decade of foreign wars, an economic recession, and domestic disunity have left many Americans—the chief executive among them—pondering the most basic questions of America's world role. As Kissinger put it in June 1975: “What are our interests in the world? What should be our commitments? Where do we go from here?”<sup>[31]</sup>

Whether he was aware of Kissinger's heartland speeches or not, recently John McCain took it upon himself to proffer an answer to those questions.

On October 16, 2017, before an outdoor crowd in Philadelphia, McCain spoke with pride of the global role America has played since the Second World War. “[W]e have been a blessing to humanity,” he said, arguing that the “better world” America brought forth and defends “has liberated more people from tyranny and poverty than ever before in history.”<sup>[32]</sup> He rejected the “half-baked, spurious nationalism” popularized by the kind of charlatans Kissinger warned against, “who would rather find scapegoats than solve problems.”<sup>[33]</sup> Instead, he called on his audience to support an America that remained “the last best hope of earth.”<sup>[34]</sup> Like Kissinger, McCain said this was a moral and practical necessity. The United States has a “moral obligation” to champion its ideals abroad: “the cause of our security and the security of our friends, the cause of freedom and equal justice.”<sup>[35]</sup> In a world where these ideals and its leadership are absent, the U.S. “will not thrive” and “wouldn't deserve to.”<sup>[36]</sup>

McCain returned to the theme on October 30 before the brigade of midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. While America helped build and sustain “an international order based on liberty, mutual security, free markets, and the rule of law,” the country has recently lost its way, he said.<sup>[37]</sup> Today, too many Americans “ignore our moral and historical knowledge and seek escape from the world we've led so successfully,” McCain said.<sup>[38]</sup> Where Kissinger believed Americans' retrenchment resulted from their “illusions,” McCain said their contemporary isolationism arises because they are “asleep to the necessity of our leadership and to the opportunities and real dangers of this world.”<sup>[39]</sup> Cocooned in ideological echo chambers, Americans unrealistically insist that we “get all our way all the time.”<sup>[40]</sup> In the meantime, the “rules, values, and aspirations” of the world order are under attack from domestic doubters and foreign saboteurs.<sup>[41]</sup> But a world without American leadership will be a world that is “less just and less free and more corrupt,” he said.<sup>[42]</sup>

McCain did not deliver his remarks in front of a green screen or from the Senate floor. And he did not reduce his argument to 280 characters or a meme. He gave serious speeches to live audiences outside the Beltway. While they lacked the length and professorial erudition of Kissinger's addresses forty years ago, McCain's speeches received positive coverage from coast-to-coast.<sup>[43]</sup>

### III. The Heartland Speeches 2.0

As McCain recognized, we have reached a critical juncture.

While people of good faith can look at American misadventures over the past years and find much to criticize, too many go further. They openly question the American-built international system itself, as if it were an act of largess or a malevolent imperium and not an engine for prosperity, human dignity, and peace.

Kissinger spoke to the heartland during a similar moment of national soul-searching. Americans then saw the bitter loss in Vietnam as a repudiation of the global role the United States had played for the previous generation. But that demoralizing failure did not invalidate all American endeavors in the world, Kissinger argued. The danger was that a significant setback would drive the U.S. to abandon the entire enterprise of world leadership, which would have left the United States and the world worse off. "If frustration, despair or a desire for novelty alters the American perception of our international responsibilities and causes us to dismantle our accomplishments," Kissinger said, "we will produce instability in the world and create untold dangers for our country."<sup>[44]</sup>

In this day, frustration and grievance on the part of some have led to a novel development: the intentional retreat from America's position at the center a rules-based, rights-oriented world order that, ironically, has not failed, but succeeded in promoting peace and progress. For reasons unsupported by the record of the past three generations, America is hobbling itself. Long the convener of like-minded nations, the champion of multilateralism, and the inviolability of security pledges, the U.S. is risking its credibility, rejecting multilateral agreements (which other countries are embracing without the United States), pursuing zero-sum economic mercantilism, and promoting transactional values instead of transcendent principles. The net result is a world where the United States cedes its leadership to China and other nations that do not share its values and do not promote its interests. Such a world will be less stable and more dangerous for the United States, just as Kissinger predicted decades ago.

Considering Kissinger's experience and the current moment, the time is ripe to repeat McCain's example and expand his public campaign for liberal values and American internationalism. We need a "Heartland Speeches 2.0."

In a time of profound cynicism of public institutions, the task of defending America's global role cannot fall to a single person or Cabinet official. It should be shared by the country's citizenry itself. Public figures and private citizens alike should join in this straightforward effort: They should give speeches to public audiences about the value of the international order America built and should renew.

The notion of informed speeches in front of seated audiences may seem quaint in our Snapchat era of spastic, nongrammatical effusions. But the success of McCain's two addresses shows that thoughtful reflections on foreign affairs have their place. As Michael Gerson argues, "most foreign policy views of the public are shallowly held" and "leaders play a disproportionate role in legitimizing or delegitimizing opinions on things such as trade, foreign aid and Russia."<sup>[45]</sup>

The consistent message of these renewed heartland speeches should be one of ecumenical internationalism. They need not settle specific controversies—like the Iraq war, Libya, the Iran Nuclear Deal, or the Trans-Pacific Partnership—but they should make the broader arguments, as both Kissinger and McCain did, that American leadership of a rules-based order is vital for world peace, prosperity, and dignity.

Speakers should make the case that the world we live in today—that is the wealthiest, safest, and most democratic in world history<sup>[46]</sup>—did not arise by accident and will not be maintained through apathy. They should push back against the twin impulses of cynicism and complacency. And they should explain how alliances among democratic nations maintain global peace, how free markets improve lives, and how the rule of law and the respect for equality enable human flourishing the world over.

Given rising ethnic resentments, they should also make the case for a nationalism divorced from nativism. As Kissinger, a Jewish refugee, said, “Nationalism without a consciousness of human community, including a concern for human rights, is likely to become an instrument of oppression and a force for evil.”<sup>[47]</sup>

Critically, these speeches must be nonpartisan. Increasingly, policy debates, whether on the environment, guns, or other contentious topics, are filtered through Americans’ partisan lenses. A policy proposition is measured less by its intrinsic value than by the party identity of the person proposing it. The Heartland Speeches 2.0 should aim to save American internationalism from red- or blue-Rorschach tests. As Kissinger repeatedly emphasized in the heartland speeches, “[l]eaders of both parties and many backgrounds . . . built a national consensus for responsible American world leadership, for a foreign policy based on both principle and pragmatism.”<sup>[48]</sup> The post-war consensus of American global leadership transcended party, and so it should today.

The method for a Heartland Speeches 2.0 would be deceptively simple: Speakers should give speeches before local audiences in cities and towns outside of the Acela corridor. Serious arguments are made, and minds changed in person and by thoughts longer than a sentence. These speeches may not go viral, but they may help persuade one’s neighbors that they should not stand by idly while Washington retreats from the world. Furthermore, too often, foreign policy mandarins talk among themselves on the coasts about idiosyncratic policies. To fortify the center, speakers must make the case not at the intricate level but at the general: for instance, not just why NATO should be enlarged, but why NATO or any alliance is vital. And they must bring that message to where Kissinger brought his, to the vast country that lies between K Street and Sand Hill Road.

Consider how this campaign might look. Imagine a factory owner in Paducah, Kentucky addressing a local business roundtable on the benefits he sees from trade with Mexico. A veteran addressing a religious congregation in Dayton, Ohio about the bravery she witnessed serving alongside NATO allies in Afghanistan. And a container-ship captain speaking to a university in Jacksonville, Florida about the indispensability of widely accepted maritime laws, backed by American and allied navies, for the protection of sea lanes and global commerce, among others.

Speeches such as these could bolster support for the internationalism that has done well for America and the world. They may also help reweave our domestic fabric. When little unites Americans and tribal forces increasingly unravel national unity, a shared belief in the positive role America can and should play in the world could be a source of renewal. “This conviction of our uniqueness contributed to our unity,” Kissinger said in Minneapolis in 1975, “[it] gave focus to our priorities, and sustained our confidence in ourselves.”<sup>[49]</sup> So it could again.

To some, Kissinger may be an odd model for reflections on morality, order, and justice in American foreign policy. Polemicists have felled forests criticizing his tumultuous tenure.<sup>[50]</sup> But one does not need to resolve the debates about Kissinger’s conduct in office to embrace the heartland speeches’ underlying truths. In short, we should learn from his shortcomings and not disregard all that the international order has done right because of them.

As for the heartland speeches themselves, some historians have dismissed them as “paying lip service to American ideals” while promoting an “unapologetic realpolitik.”<sup>[51]</sup> It is a measure of the moment that the speeches read as positively Wilsonian when compared to the “vulgar realism”<sup>[52]</sup> en vogue today. In truth, they were not “the pronouncements of a cold-blooded cynic, with no concern at all for issues of morality and principle,” as John Lewis Gaddis wrote.<sup>[53]</sup> Instead, they represented a sustained argument “to draw from the balance of power a more positive capacity to better the human condition,” as Kissinger said in 1975.<sup>[54]</sup>

For three-quarters of a century, in fits and starts, through accomplishments and tragedies, America has led the world in a largely successful effort to do just that—to apply power and principle to build what McCain called “a better world.” It was not preordained, and its future success is not guaranteed.

“History haunts us all,” Kissinger foreboded in Milwaukee in July 1975.<sup>[55]</sup> Indeed, it does. Without vocal defenders of the better world America helped create seventy years ago, history may return with a vengeance.

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#### NOTES:

[1] Quoted in Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 659.

[2] Henry Kissinger, “The Moral Foundations of Foreign Policy,” *The Department of State Bulletin*, 73, no. 1884 (Aug. 4, 1975): 161 (address before the Upper Midwest Council and other organizations at Bloomington (Minneapolis), Minn. on July 15). Kissinger’s speeches are hereinafter short-cited as “Kissinger, [city of address], [page number].”

[3] Henry Kissinger, “America’s Destiny: The Global Context,” *The Department of State Bulletin*, 74, no. 1914 (Mar. 1, 1976): 249 (address at the University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyo. on Feb. 4).

[4] Kissinger, Laramie, 249.

[5] Henry Kissinger, “American Unity and the National Interest,” *The Department of State Bulletin*, 73, no. 1890 (Sept. 15, 1975): 389 (address before the Southern Commodity Producers Conference at Birmingham, Ala. on Aug. 14).

[6] Kissinger, Minneapolis, 162.

[7] *Ibid.*, 163.

[8] *Ibid.*, 163.

[9] Henry Kissinger, “Building an Enduring Foreign Policy,” *The Department of State Bulletin*, 73, no. 1903 (Dec. 15, 1975): 841 (address before a dinner meeting sponsored by the Economic Club of Detroit and other local organizations in Detroit, Mich. on Nov. 24).

[10] Kissinger, Detroit, 848.

[11] Kissinger, Laramie, 249.



[12] *Ibid.*, 250.

[13] Kissinger, Minneapolis, 161.

[14] Kissinger, Detroit, 842.

[15] Henry Kissinger, "Moral Promise and Practical Needs," *The Department of State Bulletin*, 75, no. 1951 (Nov. 15, 1976): 599 (address before the Synagogue Council of America at New York, N.Y. on Oct. 19).

[16] Kissinger, Laramie, 250.

[17] Henry Kissinger, "The Challenge of Peace," *The Department of State Bulletin*, 72, no. 1875 (June 2, 1975): 705 (address before the St. Louis World Affairs Council at St. Louis, Mo. on May 12).

[18] Kissinger, Detroit, 849.

[19] Kissinger, St. Louis, 708.

[20] Kissinger, Detroit, 843.

[21] Kissinger, St. Louis, 708.

[22] John Lewis Gaddis, "Rescuing Choice from Circumstance: The Statecraft of Henry Kissinger," in *The Diplomats: 1939-1979*, eds. Gordon A. Craig & Francis L. Loewenheim (Princeton, N.J., 1994): 585.

[23] Kissinger, Minneapolis, 161.

[24] *Ibid.*, 162.

[25] *Ibid.*, 164.

[26] *Ibid.*, 167.

[27] *Ibid.*, 167.

[28] Leslie H. Gelb, "The Secretary Will Take Support Where He Can Find It," *New York Times*, Feb. 29, 1976, 136.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Isaacson, 659; see also Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 245

("Kissinger's words received favorable treatment in the press, but they failed to persuade his audience at home or his critics abroad.").

[31] Kissinger, St. Louis, 705.

[32] John McCain, "Remarks by Senator John McCain at 2017 Liberty Medal Ceremony," Oct. 16, 2017, <https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2017/10/remarks-by-senator-john-mccain-at-2017-liberty-medal-ceremony>.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] John McCain, "McCain Remarks to Brigade of Midshipmen at U.S. Naval Academy," Oct. 30, 2017, <https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/speeches?ID=44FDA6A0-E3FB-444A-B6C8-F215F8288762>,

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] *Ibid.*

[43] See, e.g., Joe Trinacria, op-ed, "Four Better Takeaways From John McCain's Liberty Medal Speech," *Philadelphia Magazine*, Oct. 17, 2017, <http://www.phillymag.com/news/2017/10/17/john-mccain-liberty-medal-speech/>; Editorial, "John McCain Reminds us How Important—and How Tenuous—American Leadership Is," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 18, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-mccain-trump-nationalism-20171018-story.html>.

[44] Kissinger, St. Louis, 705.

[45] Michael Gerson, op-ed, "Trump's Breathtaking Surrender to Russia," *Washington Post*, July 20, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-breathtaking-surrender-to-russia/2017/07/20/bde94e10-6d6c-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-breathtaking-surrender-to-russia/2017/07/20/bde94e10-6d6c-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc_story.html).

[46] See generally Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking,



2011), chapters 6-7; Zack Beauchamp, "The World is Getting Better All the Time, in 11 Maps and Charts," Vox, July 13, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/13/8908397/11-charts-best-time-in-history>.

[47] Kissinger, New York, 603.

[48] Kissinger, Birmingham, 395.

[49] Kissinger, Minneapolis, 162.

[50] See, e.g., Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (New York: Verso, 2002).

[51] Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 435; see also Isaacson, 660 ("Although he included some sentences of pro forma praise for American ideals, he tended to follow them with sentence that began with 'But.' . . . By the end of the speech, the *but*s had clearly won.").

[52] Daniel W. Drezner, op-ed, "The Vulgar Realism of Rex Tillerson's State Department," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/05/30/the-vulgar-realism-of-rex-tillersons-state-department/>.

[53] Gaddis, "Rescuing Choice from Circumstance," 586.

[54] Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, rev ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 340.

[55] Henry Kissinger, "The Global Challenge and International Cooperation," *The Department of State Bulletin*, 73, no. 1884 (Aug. 4, 1975): 153 (address before a dinner meeting sponsored by the University of Wisconsin Institute of World Affairs and other organizations at Milwaukee, Wis. on July 14).



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