When Henry Kissinger Died at 100, It Could Be Said That His Death Was Premature

Secretary Kissinger on October 12, 1973 at Washington. AP

by Conrad Black

When someone dies at the age of 100 it is rarely deemed to be premature. In the case of Henry Kissinger, he maintained his unique aptitudes right to the end of his life and his insights on foreign and strategic policy matters were so perceptive and original and his gifts for repartee and aphorisms were undiminished; his demise would have been untimely even if he had lived for another 25 years.

Kissinger was both one of history's great foreign ministers and one of the world's outstanding academic historians of international relations and great power strategy. He was also

one of the world's most renowned and interesting personalities and one of its greatest public intellectuals for more than 50 years.

There have been other distinguished secretaries of State since Kissinger, such as George Shultz and James Baker. They, though, also held other cabinet positions, and their backgrounds were not in foreign affairs, and nor did they particularly specialize in foreign policy matters after they retired from government with the presidents whom they served.

Most people who have held the positions of secretary of state of the United States and national security advisor to the president are interesting conversationalists and generally well-informed and formidably experienced; it is almost always interesting to speak with them.

Yet throughout the 46 years after his government service, Kissinger was always extremely well-informed about almost every relevant subject in relations between the major countries in the world. He continued to know practically all the world's principal leaders and almost all of them sought his advice.

So Henry Kissinger always spoke with the same intellectual authority as he had when in high office but without as comprehensive a duty of discretion. I traveled with him in a number of countries over 40 years, and he was frequently conveyed about in official motorcades and spent more time with the leader of the country that he was visiting than with anyone else in it.

His sparkling sense of humor, even when somewhat mordant, never deserted him, and that same combination of his immense vocabulary, pronounced German accent, and syntactically correct but complicated sentence structure made him a memorable conversationalist and invariably rewarding author. As a twentieth century memoirist, he is surpassed only by

Charles de Gaulle.

Because he spent his post-government years receiving important visitors in New York and traveling intrepidly around the world right up to the last few months, he was always splendidly informed.

Because he was not only a man of great foreign policy experience but probably the most knowledgeable and up-to-date authority on any contemporary foreign policy issue, the entire last half of his life was a ceaseless round of receiving confidential information and giving solicited expert advice.

Unlike the views of any other foreign policy expert, Kissinger's views were sought as avidly and distinguishedly as at the height of his power. When most of the world's leaders came to New York in the autumn for the general assembly of the United Nations, Henry Kissinger's always crowded social schedule required him to scramble from morning to night meeting with the dignitaries of many countries.

Kissinger always said that he would retire from this hectic schedule if the number of such visitors to New York in the autumn who asked to see him significantly declined; instead, it steadily increased. Another element of his uniqueness was his extraordinary wit, including a largely unsuspected talent for self-deprecation.

I once arrived for lunch with him in London five minutes late and apologized at once and again as we were parting, whereupon he said: "Don't apologize, you are feeding my megalomania."

Among the other factors that made him one of the most respected and sought-after personalities in the world for many decades was the astonishing and unprecedented trajectory of his career and the fact that he was overwhelmingly successful as Secretary of State and national security advisor.

Meritocratic rises even to stratospheric heights are not

uncommon and there have been frequent such careers in the United States. Yet to arrive as a refugee from the Third Reich a couple of months before Kristallnacht in 1938 aged 15 and to be back in Germany seven years later as military governor of a German city almost the same size as the one his family fled (Furth), and to produce ten years later a seminal work on grand strategy in the nuclear era that was carefully read by the president of the United States (and the supreme Allied Commander in Western Europe under whom he had served), and to become the most influential national security advisor in the history of that office in his mid-40s, an outstanding foreign minister, and one of the best-known personalities in the world for half of his centenarian life has been a career stranger and more brilliant than fiction.

To some extent there has been a tug-of-war between Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon, as there was between Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, about the apportionment of credit between them for their foreign policy accomplishments. At the least, it may be said that Henry Kissinger was an extremely skilled negotiator in intensely complicated and world historic matters, a skillful executant of Mr. Nixon’s China initiative and in the withdrawal from Vietnam while preserving a non-Communist government in Saigon.

The belief of both men that when North Vietnam violated the peace, with heavy resumed American air support, the South could defeat the Communists on the ground as they had in April 1972 between their return from China and the equally historic visit to Moscow, was probably justified.

They had salvaged the Democrats’ war, which the Democrats deserted and finally exploited the Watergate debacle to cut off all aid to South Vietnam and deliver that country to the vengeance of the Communists. Henry Kissinger’s recurrently successful shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East began a peace process that will ultimately be successful.

Both men, and some of their officials, deserve credit for the greatest arms control agreement in the history of the world up to that time, SALT 1, which also restored American nuclear superiority.

Henry Kissinger was intensely political and was constantly building and maintaining relationships. He had the acute sensitivity to his status that was probably amplified by the life-and-death insecurities of his youth in Nazi Germany. He was also, in matters of his own health and safety, a man of imperturbable coolness and bravery. He was never detectably fatigued by a schedule of work and travel that would have worn down a young man.

Through the disasters of Watergate and the collapse in Vietnam he was never rattled or discouraged. We were attending a conference together in Belgium in 2001 when he phoned me at 3 o’clock in the morning to say that he had lost the sight of one eye; I accompanied him to a hospital where he was informed that he had had a thrombosis in that eye and that the sight would not be restorable.

He took the names of the attending doctors and nurses and subsequently wrote them personally to thank them and he returned to the conference and chaired a session at 8 o’clock in the morning without mentioning to anyone how his condition had changed overnight.

It is an immeasurable misfortune that he never held high office after 1977. He would have avoided most of the foreign policy blunders of subsequent administrations. He was admirably loyal to his friends, and, even more than most great men, to those who knew him well, Henry Kissinger is unique, unforgettable, and irreplaceable.