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Dr. Henry Kissinger
Chairman, Kissinger Associates, Inc.
56th Secretary of State

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Moderator: Marie-Josée Kravis
Senior Fellow and Vice Chair of the
Board of Trustees, The Hudson Institute
Chair Emerita, The Economic Club of New York

Introduction

Chairman John C. Williams

Well, good afternoon. Good afternoon everybody. Welcome to the 709th meeting of The Economic Club of New York. I'm John Williams. I'm the President and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and I'm the Club's Chair. So The Economic Club of New York is recognized as the nation's leading nonpartisan forum for discussions on economic, social, and political issues. More than 1,000 prominent guest speakers have appeared before the Club over the past century, and we've established a strong tradition of excellence.

I'd like to extend a warm welcome to the students who are joining us virtually today, including those from Fordham University's Gabelli School of Business, Mercy College, Georgetown University, Harvard Kennedy School, and the Columbia Business School. I'd also like to welcome our 2023 Class of Fellows, both online and those in the room. They're a select group of diverse, next-generation business thought leaders, and they represent our largest class ever.

So now I'm honored to welcome our special guest, Dr. Henry Kissinger. Dr. Kissinger was born in Germany on May 27, 1923. That's four days shy of 100 years ago. And he's truly led a remarkable life, as we all know. He's perhaps best known for his work in

shaping international relations while serving as National Security Adviser and Secretary of State under President Richard Nixon, and Dr. Kissinger has won many honors. He's received the Bronze Star from the U.S. Army, the Nobel Peace Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Medal of Liberty, the Department of Defense Distinguished Public Service Award, and in 2020, he received The Economic Club of New York's Award for Leadership Excellence.

He's a prolific author. He's written 20 books and numerous articles on U.S. foreign policy, international affairs, diplomatic history, and artificial intelligence. Dr. Kissinger holds undergraduate, master's and PhD degrees from Harvard University. In addition, he was a member of the faculty of Harvard in both the Department of Government and the Center for International Affairs and was Director of the Harvard International Seminar. These are, of course, just a few of his many, many accomplishments.

Now, in just four days, Dr. Kissinger will achieve a milestone that many of us can only hope for – his 100th birthday – which we will celebrate a little later in the program.

Today's discussion will be in the form of a fireside chat. We're delighted to have Marie-Josée Kravis, the Chair Emerita of The Economic Club of New York and the Chair of the Museum of Modern Art, serving as our moderator. So, as a reminder, this conversation is on the record. We have media in the room and online. So Marie-Josée, I'll turn it over

to you.

Conversation with Dr. Henry Kissinger

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: Thank you, John. And thank you, Henry, for being here. I know that you've been heavily solicited, especially in this centennial year. So John Williams talked a lot about your achievements and your accomplishments, but I'd like to start a little earlier than that just for a minutes. We'll get to the issues. But talk about your first impressions when you came to the U.S. as a young teenager. You had to give up your soccer, your football team in Germany, and all of your habits and friends and so on, and left under duress with your family. What was your first impression of the U.S. when you very first arrived?

DR. HENRY KISSINGER: I arrived, actually it was Labor Day of 1938, it was September 5th. And we had left Germany two weeks earlier and visited a relative in London for two weeks and then came here. The first impression was of tremendous vitality of people in the streets. I thought the fire escapes in buildings were bolted in. The impression was, the major impact, I went to high school for a year and I had to write an essay of how I felt. And I wrote in that essay, I missed many of the people I grew up with, but then I think that here in America I can walk along the streets with my head erect because in Germany I was part of a discriminated minority and there were signs in every public

building that Jews were not welcome here.

And so the liberation of the human relationship was for me the greatest experience and also the fact that there was no discrimination whatsoever that I felt, towards an immigrant with an...well, I didn't even speak English when I came here. So I've developed a kind of patriotism that is resentful of attitudes that base politics and policies on the failures of the American society because my personal experience was the opposite all the way through.

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: Then, of course, you fought for that freedom. John Williams mentioned your Bronze Star, but Sergeant Kissinger was the rifleman. And then you were in counterintelligence, you witnessed the liberation of the Labor/Concentration Camp in Ahlem. And the war ended and you didn't come home, you stayed until 1947. And you wrote to your parents, and I'm going to quote, that you wanted to do, in our own little way, something to make all the previous sacrifices meaningful. Very touching for a young man at that time to really think about a cause that was bigger than yourself.

DR. HENRY KISSINGER: Well, before counterintelligence, I was in the infantry with the 84th Infantry Division that came from Northern Illinois and Southern Wisconsin. And then only after our ___ ended Germany was I assigned to counterintelligence. And, of course,

it meant I was coming back to the country that had discriminated in the governing capacity. And so I had to reflect about how to execute it. I participated in a policy of reconciliation because I thought these patterns could be reversed, not the opposite. But while I was in the Army, I had become quite self-conscious about my accent before it became a trademark. (Laughter)

And while I was with the Infantry Division, nobody ever mentioned my accent, so I thought I had lost it, but going to Harvard soon cured me of that illusion. People invited me but I have to say, Harvard was wonderful to me as the possibility of developing and becoming, it was basically a second immigration for me, coming out of the Army. I stayed one year at the European Intelligence School as a civilian and then Harvard admitted me and taught me some of my intellectual potential. And it was the most significant experience in my life even if my politics and Harvard politics have separated since then. I would say not Harvard politics but academic politics because of the university's goal is further than Harvard, in their view.

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: But, in fact, you refer to that in your book, *The White House Years*, and here you are brought into the administration by President Nixon. And you mentioned the fact that as you go into public life, that high office really consumes intellectual capital – it doesn't create it – and how important it is when one assumes office to have that stock of intellectual capital. And I wonder if you might

comment on that and comment on leaders today and whether the intellectual, the stock of intellectual capital, measures up to what you think is required.

DR. HENRY KISSINGER: Well, first, when Richard Nixon appointed me as his Security Adviser, I had never met him. And I had spent many years, about 15 years, as an adviser and, in time, close friend of Nelson Rockefeller. And Nixon appointed me totally unexpectedly. And he never wanted, or he was afraid of being rejected, so when he offered me the position, he did it in a way that I didn't recognize that he had done it. So he had to call me back a second time. And I have a lot of eager students that ask me how do you get into this position. And my advice is always never aim at the position. Do what is most important.

Well, anyway, when he offered it the second time, I said I cannot just accept it. I have to talk to Nelson Rockefeller. With 99 out of 100 people that interview you, they would have told you, I'll relieve you of this problem. But then I went to, Nelson Rockefeller said, when I asked him, he said, you have to consider that he's taking a much greater chance on you than you're taking on him, and therefore, you have an obligation to accept it. And so this is how that relationship formed.

And once you are in that high office, I think the Security Adviser today is the most important element in the administration in the forming of foreign policy with the president

because every foreign policy and national security issue goes through his office, and it's an interesting psychological problem. The Cabinet members are ten minutes away. The Security Adviser is 30 seconds away from the Oval Office. And in almost every administration, in foreign policy, the most sensitive tasks are given to the Security Adviser and not to the Secretary of State. That's inherent, and it's also inherent, a kind of tension. It hasn't been visible in this administration, but it's been true of many administrations between the Secretary of State and the Security Adviser.

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: But then you then came to a position where you held both positions. You were National Security Adviser and Secretary of State.

DR. HENRY KISSINGER: Yes, I had both positions.

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: Was there tension? Was there tension?

DR. HENRY KISSINGER: The State Department is an absolutely unique institution. It has its people who dedicate their life to the service of their country and operate abroad so they basically think that the Secretary of State or the President couldn't have passed the Foreign Service Exam. So they ___ to impose a policy on them that they have not generated is a task for any person coming in. But then it's the nature of these positions, of the President and the Secretary of State, all these politicians. So many problems

present themselves every day that you don't have the opportunity to reflect creatively about where you're going.

And I had the benefit, first, because the president I served knew an enormous amount about foreign policy from his own travels, and I had studied the making of peace at the end of the Napoleonic War that led to a century of relative tranquility in Europe. So in those positions, you consume capital. You don't create it. You learn how to manage the bureaucracy. You don't learn to ask where you should be going.

So if you don't get into this position with some substantial background, academic or practical, that has caused you to reflect about the purpose of actions, there's always a danger that you get consumed by tactics and then it's – I know favorable things about Richard Nixon, it's not what you frequently hear. But I started having supported Nelson Rockefeller who remained my close friend through this whole period, but the great strength of Nixon was that he had formed opinions about the nature of international strategy and tried to conduct policy and that's what I also believed.

So it developed into a series of policies which I'm not here to defend one way or the other. I tried to explain what my basic view of strategy and foreign policy is that America had to adapt its purposes to the feasible with a long-range view in every administration. And that's the biggest task of every administration and, Marie-Josée, invented this

subject and it was not that I asked her to. But I'm happy that she did because it's important to understand some of our current debates and some of the issues as they develop. And that's where I come from basically, from my experience of this country as an immigrant and from the vision of America that developed through the observation and living through intense crises in the world and, which in my view, America is a key to their solution.

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: So take us back to one of those very important strategic decisions – the opening up to China and your first encounters with the Chinese leadership and how that shaped the China-U.S. relationship. And with that context, we can talk a little later about the current relationship, but take us back to your first encounters and the framework for pursuing that strategy.

DR. HENRY KISSINGER: Well, the relationship with China, today some people occasionally say why did you open up to China altogether and thereby create a problem? But the problem of China at that time was present. It was the most revolutionary country in the world. It encouraged upheaval everywhere. It was in a way a key to the Vietnam War because its supply routes and its supplies together with the Soviet Union enabled the Vietnamese to keep that war going.

And so we were determined from the beginning to see whether a contact with the

Chinese could be established. It reached a point where at DeGaulle's funeral in Paris, there was a reception by the French President of all the visiting dignitaries and Nixon said to me when you see the Chinese ambassador, walk up to him and say we want to have communique with them. Well, that would have been a sensation if that happened. There were too many people there and he never stood alone for long enough for me to do that.

But we then instructed the ambassador in Warsaw, who the American ambassador in Warsaw and the Chinese ambassador in Warsaw had been designated by the Geneva Agreement of '54, as contact points for negotiations about Taiwan. And they had had 162 meetings when we came into office and they all ended the first day with the Chinese demanding the return of Taiwan and the Americans demanding that the Chinese agree to a peaceful pursuit of that objective. And that ended the conversation. There was nothing else for 25 years.

So we had instructed our ambassador in Warsaw at the next social occasion where the Chinese were present to walk up to them and say America wants a serious dialogue, and then we got the message back that they were ready to discuss the turnover of Taiwan, and we replied we will talk only about all the problems. And out of this, I won't go through all this, emerged Nixon's decision to send me as his representative to China.

I had been dealing with the Soviet Union leaders and representatives until then. And the Soviet ___ during the day, took the Berlin ultimatum, and the Soviet negotiating tactic, maybe partly because of their insecurity, is to begin with a set of demands coupled with some sort of military pressure. So the Chinese approach was quite different. What had happened which I didn't know, but prior to my visit, Mao decided China was in trouble and therefore needed to open up.

At that moment, there were 42 Soviet divisions at the Northern border of China, and they had been placed there within a recent period. And he had moved, he had freed four ___ that had been purged and humiliated out of their positions in concentration camps and asked them to write a strategy for where they were that showed that the national feeling of China, and for most of the time, transcends even political difficulties and nightmares, and they recommended opening to the United States.

So that's what they did. But they did it in a, they did it the way Zhou Enlai, who was Prime Minister at the time, there was an opening session in which I was prepared for a series of demands. And I had a list of our demands with me which we had generated before. But he began the discussion, I had an opening statement which said somewhere, that I thought was very eloquent, so now we find out that I was in a land of mystery to us. Zhou Enlai had said, what's so mysterious about China? There's over a billion of us and we don't feel mysterious to each other. So maybe we should make it a

task to learn not to be mysterious towards each other as countries and then we can make progress.

And actually my first visit to China, of which the main result was that it invited Nixon to China, did not discuss the grievances. It discussed the international situation as if we were two college professors. It's publicly available. And so ever since, my approach to China and my interpretation of China, my impression is they always aim at first for a conceptual agreement of answering the question, what are we trying to do? We might not agree on that, but that creates a framework from which you can then go to the concrete issues.

And I think in the current situation it is, in my opinion, more useful when the top leaders meet to concentrate on the essentials of what the purpose of the meeting is rather than trying to fix some practical problem, unless, of course, it can be that a problem is itself very practical and needs a very general...and Taiwan is in a unique position in that respect.

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: And, in fact, Mao did talk to you about Taiwan.

DR. HENRY KISSINGER: Well, the evolution of that is important because I think it has

some relevance to the current situation. After the secret visit, I made another visit to China to prepare the communique that Mao and Nixon were going to, that was over nearly three months. It was three months before Nixon would get there because we thought that if Nixon and Mao deadlocked and Nixon was in China at that point, that would be a very difficult situation.

And so we tried to work out the communique and its outlines ahead of that. And so we came up with an outline that was somewhat unprecedented in the sense, usually communiques at the end of the meetings, as you can read in the newspapers every day, have a list of agreements and of tentative consensus. In this agreement, in this communique each side lists its own position separately and often differently from the other, but it's part of a common communique.

And so that gave us a chance, in a communique, to state our position on Taiwan fully. And we stated it as opposition to any military use, to any military attempt to take over Taiwan. But we also put into that communique a general statement of One China, which was expressed as that the Chinese people have asserted a belief in One China. The United States does not contest or challenge that proposition. We didn't choose between Taiwan and Beijing. We just stated it as a general. So this became part of the communique before Nixon met Mao.

And then when Nixon and Mao finally met, Mao pretended that he, when any concrete issue that came up, Mao said, I'm a philosopher, I don't deal with issues like this. Let Kissinger and Zhou Enlai deal with that. But when it came to Taiwan, he had a complete position and he said that a bunch of counter-revolutionaries, we don't need them for 100 years, and other phrases that said we will ask for them someday. But he made it clear that this was not now. And therefore, this created the framework that then was elaborated in the Nixon administration and continued in every other administration, until very recently, of an autonomous Taiwan that would not be sovereign and would not be challenged.

But under it, Taiwan developed into what it is today, a thriving democratic institution or whatever label you want to give it. And that is what's the key issue now.

So when we, we keep saying we believe in a One China solution, but we act as if we are wanting to create a Two China solution or an independent Taiwan. So that is a nuance on which we managed to bend it. But under that old system, Taiwan could receive military aid. So it was not part of our policy to abandon Taiwan and it has gone on for over 50 years without direct challenge. And, of course, Mao also said someday we'll ask for it.

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: But that's exactly it, Henry. We're 50 years or halfway through his 100 years. There's now a war in Ukraine. The chessboard has

changed somewhat with Russia and China somewhat closer than certainly you had wished. You had hoped that the U.S. could be, and you've said it many times, closer to the Soviet Union and closer to China than the two of them would be with each other. It's a different situation or do you think that it isn't?

DR. HENRY KISSINGER: Yes, the situation is quite different. China has become stronger than anybody anticipated and that is a reality in itself. I was not in government when the major decisions on the economic recovery were taken. But nobody, I remember, it was a group of very senior CEOs who went to China around '75. And they came back and said the situation for economic development was hopeless because the economy was used to promote employment for its own sake without any direction of where the economy is _____. Well, anyway, it turned out to be totally wrong and over 20 years the Chinese developed their military capacity and above all, their industrial capacity that made them one of the great economic powers, the second economic power in the world.

When you conduct foreign policy, geopolitically as I believe it should be, one has to understand that other country's capacity and therefore the basis of the relationship was bound to change when China became an intense economic competitor. When we opened to China, China ranked below Honduras in terms of foreign trade with the United States. Twenty years later, it had developed the capacity that we now are aware

of. And so now the issue is, is this a strategic issue or an ideological issue or both?

Some people think or act as if it were a purely ideological issue that can only be ended by the transformation of the Chinese system. I'll leave that question open. If the day-to-day conduct of policy is aimed at the transformation of the system, that means that we are in a state of permanent confrontation. And as technology grows and is acquired by both sides, and as the essence of the new technology is that geography no longer protects because distance no longer matters. And that difficulty of identifying targets disappears because every target is ___ and vulnerable. And when you add to it all the cyber and other, then a conflict militarily between the two sides takes on another dimension.

And so my view is we need to be always strong enough to resist any pressures, and we must always be ready to defend what we define as our next vital interest. But we must also be real about what our next vital interests are and stay within those bounds and then to see what are other issues, like the development of technology, like climate, like issues that affect us all. We can come to some understanding that reduce the dangers of a world that happens because we can't control the exuberance of tactical people.

And I always urge people to read about the outbreak of World War I, read about July 1914 where no country intended to go to war, but dragged itself into a war that killed

over 20 million people and which they then couldn't settle. There were some discussions in 1916 and the leading countries at that point had decided they wanted peace without victory, but they had already lost over a million and a half people and they didn't know how they could go back. So they had to come to America to help solve it. But it took us a while to get ready, even to think of it, and then another while to do it.

And so in the end, these huge casualties occurred but that was nothing compared to what a major high-tech war is today. So my views are always we absolutely have to defend our vital interests and we must stand by the countries that have cooperated with us. But we must see what possibilities might exist in the direction that I have sketched and that takes two, and it requires for China to adopt a similar attitude. And that's the key issue now.

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: So, Henry, we could go on about China, but we have only a few minutes left and I'd like you to comment on Ukraine. And you mentioned, in fact, possibilities, discussions, dialogue. Is that in your framework for Ukraine?

DR. HENRY KISSINGER: Well, with Ukraine, I strongly favored the creation of an independent Ukraine at the end of the 1988 period. And I thought it was essential to have an independent Ukraine. And therefore, I favored the defense of Ukraine, and I

strongly support the administration policy to this point. I think now we are at a point where we have achieved our strategic objective in the sense that the attempt, military attempt of Russia to absorb Ukraine has failed.

And now we are in a phase where the lines between the countries will have to be drawn and one has to remember that the Ukraine that was within the Soviet Union was a creation in part of Stalin who put a lot of Russian-speaking ___ into Ukraine. Well, I agree also that Russia should not make any gains as a result of military action. But I also think, and I have said so publicly, that the time has come to begin talks about a cease fire, preferably maybe after the offensive that is now planned. And I have not agreed that there is no communication with Russia whatsoever in this period because Ukraine will be the most heavily armed country in Europe as a result largely of American action, which I strongly support.

And I think, therefore, and I'm assuming that Russia will be obliged either as a result of immediate military action or as a result of the diplomacy that develops out of it, to return, to give up the essence of the conquests they have now made. But I am also thinking that the Russia that has existed now for 600 years has been an element at key periods of equilibrium against Sweden, against France, against Germany, and now the issue has become global. The center of Asia has been partly stabilized by the existence of an autonomous Russia. So we should have an outcome which we have practically reached

of a strong, independent, autonomous Ukraine.

And now I am in the strange position, when the proposal to include NATO, Ukraine into NATO, was first made, I opposed it on the grounds that I thought the better strategy was to build Ukraine into a bridge between Russia and the West and not an outpost for either tempting conflict. That policy was not carried out and contributed to the war, but nothing excuses the scale with which Russia has conducted the war and the methods that they used.

So now that we are at this point, I believe that at the end of the successful war, Ukraine should be a member of NATO to protect it against Russian attacks and to restrain or constrain its own temptations for further aggression to its territory. And I think this, it's a more stable outcome than the outcome about which I read so much of, keeping it totally neutral and poor and advance into it, then it can defend itself by itself. I support the support we've given it, but I'd rather have it part of an international system than as a separate component. So that is going to be a big debate and strangely the countries who came together in defending Ukraine when it was attacked don't seem to want to undertake a commitment to defend Ukraine. In peace, it seems to me easier to carry out, but that is going to be a key issue in the future. With the current strategy, I think it has to take its course through this offensive. But I don't want to get into that.

CHAIR EMERITA MARIE-JOSÉE KRAVIS: And we've run out of time. And it is your birthday, and we do want to wish you a very happy, healthy birthday, and hope that we can continue to benefit from your insights and your visits to the Economic Club because we always learn so much and you always broaden our perspective. So, Henry, thank you for being with us.

(Singing Happy Birthday)

CHAIRMAN JOHN C. WILLIAMS: Well, Happy Birthday, Dr. Kissinger, and many thanks to both of you for an outstanding discussion and sharing your time with us today. So thank you for that – a very insightful discussion, which I can see everybody appreciated.

So there are a lot of new faces today, so my role here is to let you know that the Club will host a complimentary One Member-One Candidate Reception at the University Club tonight at 6 pm. We invite all members to bring your perspective member candidates. June is also shaping up to be a great month for guest speakers. June 6th, we have Marc Rowan, the CEO of Apollo Global Management. On June 26th, we have Karen Karniol-Tambour, Co-Chief Investment Officer of Bridgewater Associates. I'd also like to give a reminder about our member peer exchange events where members gather to discuss shared topics of interest. Members hosted two last week and there's more to

come this summer.

And finally, I'd like to take a moment to recognize the 362 members of the Centennial Society, who are joining us today. Their contributions continue to be the financial backbone of support for the Club. And thank you to those members who have joined us online, and for those in the room, please enjoy your lunch. Thank you.