

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI – SOME OBSERVATIONS ON JUSTIN VAISSE’S BIOGRAPHY

Donald Pienkos

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee,
Bolton 614 3210 N. Maryland Ave.
Milwaukee, WI 53211
dpienkos@uwm.edu*

Abstract

In this paper the author takes up some significant aspects of the career of Zbigniew Brzezinski. Using Justin Vaisse’s recent biography as his point of departure, Pienkos evaluates Brzezinski’s place in American and Polish political history. He then discusses his contributions as an academic specialist on Cold War Soviet and East European affairs, as an influential figure in American foreign policy, and as a public-spirited activist on international political issues. He goes on to look at his relationship with the Polish ethnic community in America and his concern for Poland.

Key words: *Brzezinski’s place in history, Brzezinski on ‘Totalitarianism’, The ‘Peaceful Engagement’ thesis, Brzezinski and Kissinger compared, Mentoring President Carter, Democratic party ‘Hawks’ and ‘Doves’, Brzezinski the ‘Hawk’*

In 2018 the first full length biography of Zbigniew Brzezinski was published in the United States. Its author was Dr. Justin Vaisse, a policy analyst for the French government. In fact, two impressive works about him preceded it. One by Dr. Patrick Vaughan appeared in Poland in 2010. The other is a collection of essays published in 2013 by Professor Emeritus Charles Gati, a longtime Brzezinski friend and colleague¹ [Vaisse 2018; Vaughan 2010, Gati 2013]. Perhaps this panel will be another step in focusing greater attention on a public intellectual who, in Vaisse’s words, was a true “grand strategist” in the field of international politics.

¹ Brzezinski does merit greater attention. Vaisse notes that Henry Kissinger had already been the subject of twelve biographies by 2016.

Born in Poland in 1928, Brzezinski became a citizen of the United States in 1956, and died in the U.S. in 2017. His long career included his activity as prolific and influential author and academic, his political involvement and service as National Security Advisor to the President of the United States, and his many years after as a highly visible public intellectual.

This presentation was given in Poland. It thus seemed appropriate to place Brzezinski in the pantheon of great Poles of history. There is a way to do this. Back in 1943, in the darkest days of World War II, Stefan Mizwa, head of the Kosciuszko Foundation of New York, and Professor Oskar Halecki, a founder of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America, published an impressive work titled *Great Men and Women of Poland*. Were that book to be updated, Pope John Paul II and the Solidarity movement's Lech Walesa would be in it. Brzezinski too. Although he left Poland with his family in 1939 at age eleven when his father, a member of the Polish foreign service, was sent to Canada, Brzezinski's concerns, and his career, always revolved around Poland, its fate and its future² [Mizwa 1943].

Here is a second measure of Brzezinski's significance, this time as an American. Indeed, Brzezinski belongs to one of the smallest, most select of "clubs" – one composed of nationally recognized university scholars who went on to make the extraordinary leap into leadership positions in the American political arena. By my count, this "club" includes just four members," all of them political scientists. The first was Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson, who went on to become President of the United States. He was followed after World War II by Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor, and then Secretary of State to two U.S. Presidents; Daniel P. Moynihan (Ambassador to the United Nations and later a U.S. Senator from New York), and Zbigniew Brzezinski³.

Dr Vaisse gives great attention to Brzezinski's scholarship from his days as a young faculty member at Harvard University in the early 1950s, when Harvard had become the country's premier "cold war" university. In other words, it was a time when Harvard established itself as a key center for critically needed research and analysis on the Soviet Union, the United States' global rival after 1945.

Here, two of Brzezinski's works stood out. One was *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, which he co-wrote with Carl J. Friedrich in 1956. The second was *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict* (1960). Both publications became highly influential, in the academic community as well as in U.S. government circles. They are also central to understanding Brzezinski.

² Other Poles who merit inclusion in such an updated work would have to include Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński and General Władysław Sikorski. Besides Brzezinski, Americans of Polish origin with consequential careers in U.S. political life that involved Poland include U.S. Senator Barbara Mikulski, Gen. Edward Rowny, and U.S. Congressmen Roman Pucinski, Clement Zablocki, and Edward Derwinski, and possibly John Gronouski, a member of the U.S. Cabinet, an ambassador to Poland in the 1960s, and later the president of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America (PIASA). Charles Rozmarek and Aloysius Mazewski each played extraordinary roles as leaders of the organized Polish American community during and after World War II. For biographies of the Polish Americans noted here, see James S. Pula (2011).

³ Looking to the future, Professor Michael McFaul is another possible "club" member. McFaul, a specialist on Russian politics, served briefly as U.S. ambassador to Russia in the Obama administration and remains a player in current Democratic party politics.

In *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, Friedrich and Brzezinski presented a systematic, comparative, and empirically testable analysis of the aims, character and aims of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and Fascist Italy. In so doing, they went far beyond what had already appeared on this subject, most notably by George Orwell in his famous novel, *1984*, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by the philosopher, Hannah Arendt.

Their work clearly presented the thinking of both authors - together and individually. Friedrich's principle contribution was his list of what he saw as the six key characteristics that defined totalitarian regimes. His analysis, which Brzezinski supported, was controversial and quickly came under attack – from leftist scholars and political leaders who were incensed that anyone would dare to place the Soviet Union in the same camp with Hitler's Germany, its ideological opposite, then from historians and social scientists who had a field day in finding various faults with the list⁴ [Friedrich & Brzezinski 1956: 6-10].

Brzezinski's specific contribution was somewhat different. He focused on the impact of the revolutionary movements of Bolshevism and Nazism. He saw them both as having the goal of destroying, and replacing, the traditional institutions and associations that had been essential components of the pluralistic societies they overthrew and whose existence defined what non-totalitarian regimes were all about. He called their effort the "totalitarian break through".

While Vaisse notes that Brzezinski later disassociated himself from using the controversial word, "totalitarianism" in his writings, the essence of his analysis remained. For him, the Soviet experience under Lenin and Stalin was nothing less than a monstrous calamity rooted in the Bolsheviks' success in penetrating, even destroying, the integrity of the voluntary institutions of pre-1917 Russia – namely the Church, the communications media, the fledgling political parties, labor unions and cooperatives, the private economic sector, even the family.

In the 1980s the consequences of that profoundly misguided effort were plain to see. By then the Soviet Union, aside from its superpower military might, was experiencing a general economic and societal decline with no end in sight. In fact, Brzezinski predicted its implosion in his work, *The Grand Failure*, published in 1989. Indeed, the legacy of over seventy years of Soviet communism can still be found in the Russia of today⁵.

⁴ The six characteristics: a one party regime dominated by a single all-powerful leader; a regime that justifies its rule by its revolutionary ideology; a regime willing to apply mass terror on the society through its security police; a regime possessing a monopoly of weapons in the society; a regime completely controlling mass communication and propaganda; and one that is committed to total control over the economy. Critics of the "totalitarian syndrome" abound. For example, Norman Davies (1996: 945-948) lists 18 key features of Totalitarianism, not just six. See also Frederic Fleron (ed.) (1969) and Robert Burrowes (1969: 272-294).

⁵ On Brzezinski on his "Totalitarian Break Through" thesis, see Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956), pp. 294-300. Also Brzezinski, (1989), *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Scribners. Elements of post-Soviet Russian politics rooted in the Soviet past include the regime's dealings with legitimate opposition political parties, its control of interest groups, its management of the media, its handling of elections, and its treatment of its critics. A question still worth asking is how Russia might have developed had the Bolsheviks not come to power. This matter was first made as early as the late 1920s in a series of academic works by émigré authors gathered together by Professor Paul Vinogradov (1854-1925).

Brzezinski's *Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict* was significant and for two reasons. First – his work ushered in the academic study of the states and peoples of “Eastern Europe” – that long ignored region lying between Germany and Russia. Second, and even more important, and as the book's title makes plain, Brzezinski laid out his view that the very idea of monolithic communism was a myth. Already as a young state department consultant in the early 1960s he was making the case that the Soviet imperium faced serious and growing problems in dealing with its supposed satellites in Eastern Europe. This led him to make what became his single most important contribution to U.S. government policy during the Cold War – the idea of “peaceful engagement” [Brzezinski & Griffith 1961: 642-654; Brzezinski 1965].

His argument for peaceful engagement was notable in avoiding the two prevailing U.S. views of the time about Cold War Eastern Europe. One had pushed the potentially dangerous dream of America's backing the region's “liberation” from Moscow's rule. The other in effect consigned them to Soviet domination⁶.

Instead, Brzezinski focused on an inherent flaw in the Soviet imperial idea - the failure to appreciate the reality of the nationality factor in affecting, and infecting, Moscow's domination over the many and diverse peoples it ruled – in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania (and by inference the Baltic states and the Ukraine). Moreover, he foresaw that the post Stalin Soviet regime faced growing problems in maintaining its dominion over them, as state socialism's claim to be the highway to general prosperity and social equality faded away.

It followed that it was important for the United States to recognize this reality and to reach out and communicate America's solidarity of values with the peoples behind the iron curtain - and over the heads (or beneath the feet) of their bosses. Indeed, his idea hit home. Already in 1964 President Johnson was speaking about “building bridges” with the captive peoples of Eastern Europe – a phrase that was in essence what Brzezinski called “peaceful engagement.”

What happened in and after 1989 in Eastern Europe and in the USSR itself was in large measure the realization of what Brzezinski had written about and predicted. Only the United States' involvement in the endless Vietnam war, followed by the effort of Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, to establish a new order (called *détente*) in its relations with the Soviet Union in the early 1970s, detoured Washington away from doing more to promote peaceful engagement. (A gleam in the direction of “peaceful engagement” did come in 1975, with U.S. support of the “human rights” provisions in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, a step in the direction Brzezinski had advocated.)⁷ Two things ring out from this summary. One is the accuracy of Brzezinski's view about the future collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the amazing implosion of the Soviet Union itself. The second is the constancy of his argument.

Here Brzezinski's “essentialist” thinking differentiated him from his rival Kissinger, the “pragmatic realist.” This difference is something Vaisse does not stress

⁶ On the “liberation” or “rollback” idea, see Laszlo Borhi (1999). For one expression of the idea of seemingly consigning Eastern Europe to Soviet dominion, see the debate over the so-called Sonnenfeldt doctrine in Donald Pienkos (1991: 170-171).

⁷ President Johnson was advised to remain silent when the Soviet Army moved into Czechoslovakia in August 1968 to crush its post-Stalinist reform attempt to create a socialist society with a “human face”. His decision was based on the futile hope that the Soviet leadership would respond by using its influence to bring about an agreement enabling the U.S. to make a face-saving exit out of Vietnam.

sufficiently, in my opinion, in his biography. But it is extremely important. An analysis of Kissinger's career shows clearly that his aim was always about serving as the sage counselor, who was ever ready to adapt his advice to the leaders he served. Interestingly, it was Kissinger who came to represent, in the public mind, the centrality of diplomacy in preserving, not changing, the international order⁸.

Brzezinski was of a different mindset. However, despite being essentially right on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and in his commitment to America's role in promoting democracy abroad (and perhaps because of the way he expressed himself in and out of government), he, as Vaisse notes, never achieved the standing as a foreign policy expert enjoyed by Kissinger. Indeed, he was continually beset by critics who never ceased making their complaints about his "hawkish" "anti communism" - even when he was proven right about the collapse of communist rule⁹.

Vaisse argues, and I think correctly, that Brzezinski, as National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, was the most significant foreign policy thinker and strategist in the four years of his administration. He also points out that Brzezinski was not only Carter's mentor on international issues in the years before he became a president, it was he who introduced Carter, a then obscure former one term governor from the mid-sized southern state of Georgia, to elite members of the American foreign policy establishment.

Here the question arises, one Vaisse does not deal with. Might Brzezinski have become secretary of state had Carter won reelection, or later? And if not, why not? In other words, why did he not follow Kissinger, who ascended to that office under two U.S. Presidents, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford?

There are two explanations for why this did not happen. One involves Carter himself, a moralist in foreign affairs and a novice in foreign policy. His indecisive-ness led to his "balancing" things between Brzezinski as national security advisor and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who classical representative of old school, diplomatic thinking. Thus, despite Brzezinski's many contributions to Carter's presidency and his foreign policy, he was unable to fully overshadow Vance in battles where his assertive way of expressing himself, in and outside the White House, also made him powerful enemies. Thus, even had Carter been reelected in 1980, his chances in becoming secretary of state would have met with great obstacles. In this respect Brzezinski faced very different challenges from Kissinger who, after all, served a president, Richard Nixon, who was experienced and confident in his own direction of U.S. foreign policy. In

⁸ It was Kissinger as Secretary of State who advised President Ford to refuse to meet with the great Soviet dissident author Alexander Solzhenitsyn at the White House. Later he took a different, tough line on the USSR when Ronald Reagan, Ford's conservative successor, came into office. It is ironic that Kissinger received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1973 for brokering an agreement between North and South Vietnam that soon collapsed when the North conquered the South. In one of his latest works, *World Order* (New York: Penguin, 2014), he continues to emphasize the supremacy of diplomacy in preserving the international system, and slavishly praises the presidential leadership of George W. Bush.

⁹ Indeed, Brzezinski's role in the amazing fall of communism and the end of the Cold War has received precious little recognition. Note, for example, the grudging piece by Strobe Talbot, a leading longtime critic, in "Vindication of a hardliner," in *Time Magazine* December 18, 1989. In mentioning his death, the same publication had this to say: "To understand Brzezinski, you first had to grasp his distrust of Moscow. The Polish-born Brzezinski worked for Democrats, although he was to the right of many Republicans when it came to the Soviet Union and communism." *Time Magazine*, June 10, 2017.

Kissinger Nixon found a talented and submissive advisor who posed no threat to him. In addition, Nixon simply ignored his own secretary of state¹⁰.

But there is a second explanation for Brzezinski's problem. It concerned a matter beyond his control and involved the fissures plaguing the Democratic party after Vietnam – a party deeply divided between “Cold Warriors” who remained focused on the Soviet threat, and their opponents, whose memories of Vietnam turned them inward and made them suspicious of any confrontation that might lead to another war. Here Brzezinski was typecast as the “Hawk” and Vance the “Dove”, with Carter, the moralistic, liberal/conservative, micro-manager somewhere in the middle.

Brzezinski's political leanings had indeed been shaped by his early embrace of the post World War II Democratic party. It was the party of President Truman and his secretaries of state, General George Marshall and Dean Acheson - the party of the Cold war anti-communist liberals. But thanks to the crisis afflicting the party over Vietnam, the Democrats were never the same after 1968. Brzezinski's career had to be adversely affected by this reality, since he had also supported the War. To many Democrats he was thus unacceptable.

Interestingly, Brzezinski refused to break with the Democrats - even after 1980, when Ronald Reagan, whose views on the Soviet Union and communism were very close to his own, became President. Only later, in the 1988 presidential election did Brzezinski endorse Reagan's candidate, vice president George H.W. Bush over Michael Dukakis. But this decision brought him no benefits. In the high politics of the United States, one's party loyalty – in good times and bad – is a prerequisite if one hopes to be appointed to office. Indeed, such loyalty did bring rewards to Brzezinski's protégé, Madeline Albright who, after years in the political wilderness, rose to be secretary of state.

On Brzezinski's Polishness, Vaisse, unfortunately covers this interesting subject only tangentially. He does point out that Brzezinski always identified with his heritage and the cause of a free Poland and notes that he rejected out of hand any “Americanizing” of his very Polish first and last name. But things then become more complicated. On the one hand, Brzezinski's patriotic feelings for his adopted country led him to become a U.S. citizen before he was thirty years old. And as an academic he avoided being “pigeonholed” as an *emigre* scholar. Rather, he always sought a larger stage – as a specialist in international affairs and Soviet foreign policy.

But to his critics, his Soviet views could never be disentangled from his Polish origin, this despite the fact that the aristocratic Brzezinski did not identify with the large, highly organized Polish community in the United States or its main political advocacy

¹⁰ Vaisse notes Brzezinski's many run-ins with others in his book. Early on, he was denied tenure at Harvard when Friedrich, his co-author on the Totalitarianism book, was one of those who withheld his support. Hodding Carter was one who publicly called him a “second rate intellectual.” His enemies in the Carter administration were legion, as Vaisse acknowledges in noting the cold reception his memoir of his years as National Security Advisor received on its publication. Later he took on new critics, e.g., when he supported John Meerscheimer and Stephen Waltz in their right to publish their controversial book, *The Israel Lobby and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 2007). Here, see his comments in the exchange in the journal, *Foreign Policy* in 2007 and in the “Israel Lobby” entry in Wikipedia. In his last years, Brzezinski became a frequent guest on the daily morning cable TV politics show, *Morning Joe*, hosted by former U.S. Congressman Joe Scarborough along with Mika Brzezinski, his daughter. In one session Scarborough went on and on to express his opinion on a current issue dealing with Israel. After he finished, Brzezinski, to his daughter's shock, declared, “you don't know what you are talking about.”

organization, the Polish American Congress. Indeed, he remained forever closer to post World War II Polish intellectuals in the U.S., many of whom belonged to the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America.

Brzezinski's distance from the Polish American Congress was unfortunate. Indeed, he might have benefited a bit by associating himself with that organization, which was led in the 1970s and 1980s by a number of well respected individuals, most notably Aloysius Mazewski, Andrzej Ehrenkreutz, Kazimierz Lukomski, and Jan Nowak-Jezioranski. Indeed they and Brzezinski held practically identical views on Poland, Eastern Europe, communism, and the Soviet Union¹¹.

With respect to the freedom and security of Poland itself, Brzezinski made at least two key and specific contributions. As National Security Advisor, he urged President Carter to support Solidarity in the Fall and early winter of 1980, a time when the new movement's very existence was threatened by Soviet military intervention. His effort came at a critical time, after Carter's demoralizing reelection defeat in November 1980. Indeed, the President's strong warnings to the USSR against intervening in Poland may have prevented a catastrophe. How different history might have been had the Soviets intervened, with a passive "lame duck" president in office, and no Brzezinski to advise him!

Second came Brzezinski's strenuous support of Poland's effort to enter NATO in the early 1990s. His speeches, op-ed essays, and TV appearances in support of NATO expansion figured favorably in influencing President Clinton's decision to support the expansion the Alliance¹².

In conclusion, Dr Vaisse is correct in discussing Zbigniew Brzezinski's inestimable contribution to U.S. foreign policy – as scholar, government official, and public intellectual. His role as a National Security Advisor does need to be remembered. But in looking at his entire career, Brzezinski's four tumultuous years under President Carter pale in comparison to his lifetime of career achievements as a remarkably visible, influential, vigorous, and prescient foreign policy thinker and advocate.

¹¹ The Polish American Congress' President, the Chicago-born Aloysius Mazewski (1916-1988), its Vice President, Kazimierz Lukomski (1919-1991), Andrzej Ehrenkreutz (1921-2008), and Jan Nowak (1914-2005) – the latter three emigres from post World War II Poland - were all well informed and respected figures. Their biographies, and Brzezinski's are in Pula, The Polish American Encyclopedia. The distance between Brzezinski and the Congress was symbolized, perhaps, in January 1978 when Brzezinski took the lead in inviting a number of PIASA members to the White House following President Carter's visit to Poland. At that reception several PAC leaders, including President Mazewski, were present. But they received no recognition from the President. Ironically, just two and a half years later – in September 1980 – Carter, in the midst of his tough reelection campaign against Ronald Reagan, was more than happy to speak in Chicago to more than 3,000 community activists at the banquet celebrating the centennial anniversary of the giant Polish National Alliance fraternal, which Mazewski also led. Indeed, his speech's contents were clearly shaped by Brzezinski. For the text, see Donald Pienkos (1984).

¹² Brzezinski receives only one brief mention in the impressive publication compiled by the PAC's Executive Director, Leszek Kuczynski (1999), *Expansion of NATO: Role of the Polish American Congress*, Chicago: Alliance Communications, another sign of the impact of this needless distance.

REFERENCES

- Borhi, L. (1999). Rollback, Liberation, Containment or Inaction? U.S. Policy and Eastern Europe in the 1950s, in *The Journal of Cold War Studies*, 3, pp. 67-110.
- Brzezinski, Z.K. & Griffith, W. (1961). Peaceful Engagement in Eastern Europe, in *Foreign Affairs magazine*, July, pp. 642-654.
- Brzezinski, Z.K. (1960). *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press.
- Brzezinski, Z.K. (1965). *Alternative to Partition: For Broader Conception of America's Role in Europe*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Brzezinski, Z.K. (1989). *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Scribners.
- Burrowes, R. (1969). Totalitarianism: The Revised Standard Version, in *World Politics*, 21(2), 272-294.
- Fleron, F. (ed.). (1969). *Communist Studies and the Social Sciences: Essays on Methodology and Political Theory*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Friedrich, C.J., & Brzezinski, Z.K. (1956). *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press.
- Gati, Ch. (ed.). (2013). *Zbig: The Strategy and Statecraft of Zbigniew Brzezinski*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press.
- Kissinger, H. (2014). *World Order*. New York: Penguin.
- Kuczynski, L. (1999). *Expansion of NATO: Role of the Polish American Congress*, Chicago: Alliance Communications.
- Meerscheimer, J., & Waltz S. (2007). *The Israel Lobby and United States Foreign Policy*. New York: Farrar, Straus.
- Mizwa, S.P. (ed.). (1943) *Great Men and Women of Poland*. New York: MacMillan.
- Norman, D. (1996). *Europe. A History*. London: Oxford U. Press.
- Pienkos, D. (1984). *PNA: A Centennial History of the Polish National Alliance*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pienkos, D. (1991). *For Your Freedom Through Ours: Polish American Efforts on Poland's Behalf, 1863-1991*. New York: Columbia U. Press.
- Pula, J.S. (ed.). (2011). *The Polish American Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.
- Vaisse, J. (2018). *Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press.
- Vaughan, P. (2010). *Zbigniew Brzezinski*. Warsaw: Swiat Ksiazki.