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The extraordinary lives and lasting influence of the Morgenthau

In his rich multigenerational biography, Andrew Meier calls the New York family an overlooked ‘American dynasty’



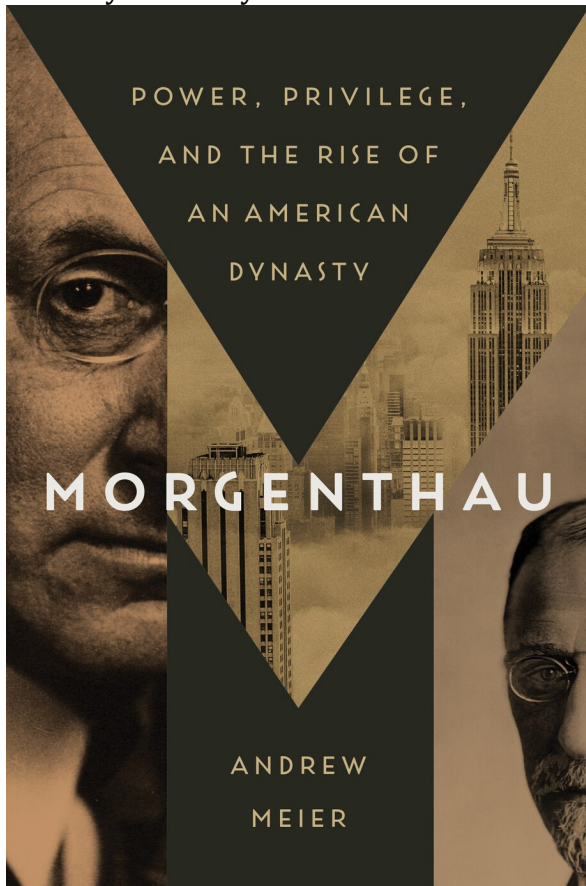
Review by [Andrew Kirtzman](#)
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Henry Morgenthau Jr., left, and his son Robert Morgenthau, second from right, meet with senators in Washington in 1955. Henry served as treasury secretary under Franklin Roosevelt, and Robert would become New York's long-serving district attorney. (Henry Griffin/AP)

Mayor Ed Koch once remarked that the Morgenthau family, a pillar of New York Jewish society dating back to the late 1800s, was “the closest we’ve got to royalty in New York City.” Its succession of patriarchs includes a trailblazing developer of Times Square, Franklin Roosevelt’s

treasury secretary and Manhattan's most revered district attorney.



Andrew Meier, a former Time magazine Moscow reporter whose previous books focused on Russia, has turned his sights closer to home in “Morgenthau: Power, Privilege, and the Rise of an American Dynasty,” a sweeping biography of the venerable family. He has given the Morgenthaus the magisterial book treatment; his work, a decade in the making, clocks in at nearly 1,000 pages of text. The result is a richly told story of a family he sees as an overlooked American dynasty. “The saga of the Morgenthau family has lain half-hidden in the American shadows for too long,” he writes.

The extravagant characterizations — “the Morgenthaus were called the Jewish Kennedys,” he writes — are a stretch. The subjects of his book played important, though not starring, roles in the events of their time. There were no presidents or senators in the Morgenthau line. The four men he profiles mostly worked in different professions.

But their lives were extraordinary. The book has a blizzard of detail — do we really need to know 10 of the 11 dishes served at Henry Morgenthau Sr.’s wedding? — but Meier can be a compelling storyteller, and many of his passages are riveting.

The generational march begins with Lazarus Morgenthau, an ambitious German entrepreneur whose fortunes careened from boom to bust with alarming frequency. An exporter of cigars, his company employed 1,000 workers until Abraham Lincoln, riding a protectionist wave during the Civil War, pushed Congress to raise tariffs on foreign goods. Shutting his four factories and voyaging to America in search of a fresh start, Lazarus launched a succession of increasingly

dubious businesses, peddling label machines and tongue scrapers. His last days were spent in an insane asylum.

The family disrepute ended there. Henry Sr., one of Lazarus's 14 children, was a lawyer with a nose for a good real estate deal, and he amassed a fortune buying Manhattan properties near the subway stops that were popping up with the advent of the underground system. Rising to the pinnacle of the city's real estate establishment, he helped develop Times Square at the turn of the 20th century virtually as a favor to his friend Adolph Ochs, publisher of the New York Times and a fellow member of the city's German Jewish elite (the Morgenthau's tight relationship with the paper is an intriguing recurring theme).

An active fundraiser for Woodrow Wilson, Henry Sr. was appointed ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in 1913, a consolation prize for losing out on the treasury secretary's job. Underwhelmed by the posting at first, he grew alarmed by reports that the government was slaughtering its Armenian population to prevent a feared insurrection. As the killings mounted, his increasingly frantic pleas to Washington to intervene fell on deaf ears. "I earnestly beg," he wrote to Secretary of State Robert Lansing. "If America could not stop the massacres, it could at least tend to the sick and starving." The secretary was "unmoved," Meier writes.

His son Henry Jr. found his calling as a farmer and purchased 1,700 acres of land in New York's Dutchess County, home to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. The two men grew so close that when FDR developed polio, Henry Jr. carried him up flights of stairs.

After winning the White House in 1932, FDR named Henry Jr. governor of the Federal Farm Board and then treasury secretary. Their bond remained so close that the two had a standing weekly lunch at the White House, incensing fellow Cabinet members. Henry Jr. was widely disparaged as a lightweight, though, more of a sidekick than a policymaker, "incapable of continuity of thought or effort," in the words of Felix Frankfurter. Glowering and colorless, he was nicknamed "Henry the Morgue" by FDR.

One of the stark realities of the Morgenthau story is how virulent antisemitism at all levels of government conspired against Henry Sr. and his son. Meier's superlatives about the family notwithstanding, there was a reason there was no Jewish equivalent of the Kennedys.

The ambassador's job that Henry Sr. was awarded was known as the "Jewish seat" (the logic being that a Jew could umpire between the region's Christians and Muslims). Henry Jr.'s wife, Elinor, wrote FDR's mother, Sara, was "very Jewish, but appeared very well." Even Eleanor Roosevelt complained to Sara that a "Jew party" she attended was "appalling."

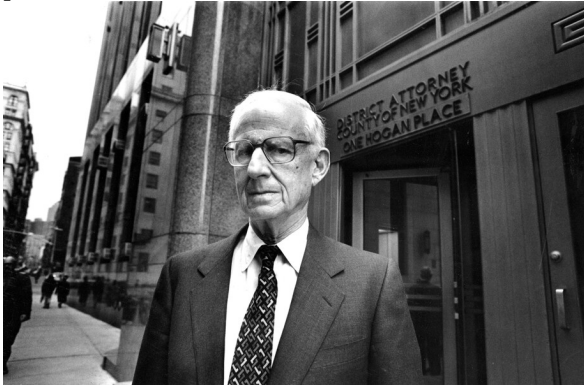
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Henry Jr. was the only Jewish person in Roosevelt's Cabinet, and he faced relentless opposition from the State Department to his efforts to aid Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler's Germany. As reports of concentration camp atrocities mounted, he waged a valiant, drawn-out war with antisemites in the State Department, who fought him at every turn. A full 18 months after Washington learned of Hitler's plans, he traveled to the White House and persuaded FDR to take action by forming the War Refugee Board, which was credited with saving the lives of 200,000 Jews.

FDR's death put an end to Henry Jr.'s status as favored son; he squabbled incessantly with Harry Truman, who eventually fired him. "The Jews, I find, are very, very selfish," the president fumed in his diary.

Meier's affection for the Morgenthau seems to grow with each successive generation, and it comes to full bloom with his section about Henry Jr.'s son Robert Morgenthau, who became a towering figure in New York's legal establishment. The section about the prosecutor, who became

a U.S. attorney in 1962 and Manhattan district attorney in 1975, is the book's longest and most problematic.



District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau outside his office in New York in 1993. (Helayne Seidman for The Washington Post)

Morgenthau, eyeing his legacy, sat down with Meier for “hundreds of hours” of interviews and gave him the keys to the kingdom: a trove of family diaries, correspondences, photographs, home movies and even Rolodexes. A bevy of friends, family members and former employees spoke to the author on the record. While Morgenthau never sought to read the manuscript, he was doubtless aware that providing the journalist with an avalanche of material and access could shape his biography.

The district attorney was the picture of a gray-haired eminence, a figure of rectitude in a circus of a city. He conducted his indictment press conferences — an evening news staple — sitting down, grim as an undertaker, at the center of a long boardroom table. Unlike Rudy Giuliani, his *bête noire* at the U.S. attorney’s office, he never raised his voice, cracked a smile or indulged in theatrics. “He had never been a talker, and the deep gravel of his voice, and his manner of speaking, mouth half-open, often lent his spare instructions a biblical gravity,” Meier writes.

The author portrays Robert Morgenthau as a civic saint, his descriptions often Pollyanna-ish. “Morgenthau knew the job would not be easy,” he writes. “Yet he had abundant faith in his own abilities and never doubted he could attract the men and women needed to seal his success.” He lauds him for his triumphs, including his groundbreaking efforts to prosecute white-collar crime; his missteps, by contrast, are often laid at the doorstep of his underlings.

The district attorney’s biggest debacle was the botched investigation and wrongful imprisonment of five Black and Latino men in the infamous 1989 Central Park jogger case, in which a White woman was beaten, raped and left to die in a wooded area of the park. Meier paints a harsh picture of incompetence within the D.A.’s sex crime unit and the New York City Police Department, but as for Morgenthau, his major mistake, in the author’s telling, was trusting them. Meier goes on to award him abundant points for later admitting the miscarriage of justice.

The prosecutor, like his father and grandfather, wasn’t perfect. But the Morgenthau patriarchs were earnest men deeply committed to public service. Henry Sr. and Jr. accomplished great things in the face of widespread bigotry. It may or may not add up to a dynasty, but the city and the country were better off for the family’s efforts. That’s as noble a legacy as it gets.

Andrew Kirtzman is the author of several books, including [“Giuliani: The Rise and Tragic Fall of America’s Mayor.”](#)