Henry Kissinger’s Bloody Legacy

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The dark side of Kissinger’s tradecraft left a deep stain on vast quarters of the globe—and on America’s own reputation.

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In the fall of 2010, when the columnist Christopher Hitchens was dying of cancer and publicly chronicling the process, he said he wished that he could stick around long enough to write Henry Kissinger’s obituary, telling NPR, “It does gash me to think that people like that would outlive me, I have to say.”

Hitchens died a mere one year later at the age of 62. A dozen years hence, Kissinger—whom he had denounced as a war criminal—still breathes, turning 100 on May 27, to the encomia and well wishes of many in the foreign policy establishment.

To mark the occasion, the National Security Archive—an invaluable private organization devoted to getting secret documents declassified, often through onerous and expensive lawsuits—has reissued 38 documents, and links to dozens more, from Kissinger's time as national security adviser and secretary of state to Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. They clearly display the traits and actions that Hitchens found so odious.

Kissinger had his moments of triumph in his years of power, from 1969–76: U.S.–Soviet détente, the opening of China, and his shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East (though it was President Jimmy Carter who, a few years later, forged an *enduring* peace between Israel and Egypt).

Still, the dark side of Kissinger's tradecraft left a deeper stain on vast quarters of the globe—and on America's own reputation.

Chile is the darkest blotch on Kissinger's legacy. He was the chief architect of the U.S. policy to destabilize the regime of Chile's democratically elected socialist president, Salvador Allende. And he gave full support to Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean general who mounted the coup overthrowing Allende in September 1973—even turning a blind eye to Pinochet's murderous repression of Allende supporters, including the car-bombing of a prominent critic-in-exile, Orlando Letelier, which also killed a young American colleague, Ronni Moffitt, on the streets of Washington, D.C.

This was not a case of Kissinger merely doing Nixon's dirty work. In fact, Nixon was considering a proposal by a senior State Department official—one of Kissinger's aides—to reach a modus vivendi with Allende. Kissinger postponed a White House meeting with the aide and convinced Nixon to crush the new government instead. Kissinger was then put in charge of a secret committee to "make the economy scream," as Nixon put it, ordering the CIA to subsidize striking truck workers and provide support to the coup-plotters in the military. Once the coup succeeded and the suppression and torture began, State Department officials urged their boss to call out Pinochet for his human rights abuses. Kissinger brushed aside these pleas. He even told Pinochet in a private meeting, "We want to help, not undermine you." The State Department's top deputy on Latin Americacomplained that Kissinger's permissiveness was "patently a violation of our principles and policy tenets." Kissinger ignored the warning.

He did the same thing three years later, after the Argentine coup, whose military leaders were even more brutal and murderous. In fact, he berated an aide who suggested issuing a démarche to the Buenos Aires government. Instead, Kissinger turned a blind eye to Operation Condor, an assassination operation against left-wingers throughout much of Latin America. In that context, he told Argentina's foreign minister, "Look, our basic attitude is that we would like you to succeed." And he urged him to succeed—that is, to put down dissidents

and critics—as quickly as possible. State Department officials and ambassadors started issuing protests to the dictators in charge of Condor. Kissinger put the kibosh on their efforts, demanding that “no further actions be taken on the matter.”

Kissinger also gave a green light to Indonesia’s 1975 invasion of East Timor, which resulted in the killing of more than 100,000 civilians. He told Gen. Suharto, Indonesia’s leader, that his use of U.S. weapons “could create problems”—that is, legal problems for Nixon and Kissinger—but added, “It depends on how we construe it: whether it is in self-defense or is a foreign operation.” An East Timor Truth Commission later concluded that U.S. political and military support for Suharto was “fundamental to the Indonesian invasion and occupation.”

This was all of a piece with Kissinger’s actions, back in the spring of 1971, after the East Pakistan coup led by Gen. Agha Muhammad Yahya, which led to the deaths of millions of civilians. “To all hands,” Kissinger supported the coup, writing in a cable to diplomatic personnel, “don’t squeeze Yahya at this time.”

And, of course, dominating Kissinger’s entire time in power, there were the massive bombings of North Vietnam, which did nothing to turn or stop the war, and the secret bombings of Cambodia. The latter—a ferocious stream of aerial attacks that began in March 1969 and roared on for more than a year under the code names “Breakfast Plan” and “Operation Menu”—killed as many as 150,000 civilians. It also so destabilized the entire country of Cambodia that the Khmer Rouge moved into the vacuum and murdered at least 2 million more, roughly a quarter of the country’s population.

To the extent Kissinger acknowledged these acts (some, he tried to hide or deny for as long as possible), he justified them on the basis of national security interests. Even in his academic days, as a Harvard grad student and professor, he presented himself as a master of “Realpolitik,” which sometimes requires doing unpleasant things with unpleasant people. (We can all picture Kissinger saying something like this in his grumbly German accent, his forehead solemnly creased, his shoulders helplessly shrugging.)

Yet Kissinger’s spin on this school of thought, as a practitioner, seriously *damaged* U.S. interests. It so brusquely violated American values; it hoisted such a dreadful image of America in the world, an image that our Cold War rivals and critics could exploit so easily. American diplomats have always grappled with the tension between the country’s interests and values, but the better, more thoughtful diplomats have recognized that the two poles are not so far apart and certainly not mutually exclusive. They have seen that the pursuit of interests has to be in some way grounded in values. For instance, during World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt allied with Josef Stalin’s Soviet Union in order to defeat and destroy Nazi Germany. The alliance was a necessary compromise to save Western civilization; it wasn’t some chessboard calculation to tip the global balance of power.

Kissinger’s Realpolitik had no moral center. For years afterward, the United States was twisted and damaged by this vacuum. So was, to this day, the whole philosophy of Realpolitik.