

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Henry Kissinger, the Hypocrite

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By Ben Rhodes

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Henry Kissinger, who [died](#) on Wednesday, exemplified the gap between the story that America, the superpower, tells and the way that we can act in the world. At turns opportunistic and reactive, his was a foreign policy enamored with the exercise of power and drained of concern for the human beings left in its wake. Precisely because his America was not the airbrushed version of a city on a hill, he never felt irrelevant: Ideas go in and out of style, but power does not.

From 1969 to 1977, Mr. Kissinger established himself as one of the most powerful functionaries in history. For a portion of that time, he was the only person ever to serve concurrently as national security adviser and secretary of state, two very different jobs that simultaneously made him responsible for shaping and carrying out American foreign policy. If his German Jewish origins and accented English set him apart, the ease with which he wielded power made him a natural avatar for an American national security state that grew and gained momentum through the 20th century, like an organism that survives by enlarging itself.

Thirty years after Mr. Kissinger retired into the comforts of the private sector, I served in a bigger post-Cold War, post-Sept. 11 national security apparatus. As a deputy national security adviser with responsibilities that included speech writing and communications, I often focused more on the story America told than the actions we took.

In the White House, you're atop an establishment that includes the world's most powerful military and economy while holding the rights to a radical story: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." But I was constantly confronted by the contradictions embedded in American leadership, the knowledge that our government arms autocrats while its rhetoric appeals to the dissidents trying to overthrow them or that our nation enforces rules — for the conduct of war, the resolution of disputes and the flow of commerce — while insisting that America be excused from following them when they become inconvenient.

Mr. Kissinger was not uncomfortable with that dynamic. For him, credibility was rooted in what you did more than what you stood for, even when those actions rendered American concepts of human rights and international law void. He helped extend the war in Vietnam and expand it to Cambodia and Laos, where the United States rained down more bombs than it dropped on Germany and Japan in World War II. That bombing — often indiscriminately

massacring civilians — did nothing to improve the terms on which the Vietnam War ended; if anything, it just indicated the lengths to which the United States would go to express its displeasure at losing.

It is ironic that this brand of realism reached its apex at the height of the Cold War, a conflict that was ostensibly about ideology. From the side of the free world, Mr. Kissinger backed genocidal campaigns — by Pakistan against Bengalis and by Indonesia against the East Timorese. In Chile he has been accused of helping to lay the groundwork for a military coup that led to the death of Salvador Allende, the elected leftist president, while ushering in a terrible period of autocratic rule. The generous defense is that Mr. Kissinger represented an ethos that saw the ends (the defeat of the Soviet Union and revolutionary Communism) as justifying the means. But for huge swaths of the world, this mind-set carried a brutal message that America has often conveyed to its own marginalized populations: We care about democracy for us, not them. Shortly before Mr. Allende's victory, Mr. Kissinger said, "The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves."

Was it all worth it? Mr. Kissinger was fixated on credibility, the idea that America must impose a price on those who ignore our demands to shape the decisions of others in the future. It's hard to see how the bombing of Laos, the coup in Chile or the killings in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) contributed to the outcome of the Cold War. But Mr. Kissinger's unsentimental view of global affairs allowed him to achieve consequential breakthroughs with autocratic countries closer to America's weight class — a détente with the Soviet Union that reduced the escalatory momentum of the arms race and an opening to China that deepened the Sino-Soviet split, integrated the People's Republic of China into the global order and prefaced Chinese reforms that lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty.

The fact that those reforms were initiated by Deng Xiaoping, the same Chinese leader who ordered the crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen Square, speaks to the ambiguous nature of Mr. Kissinger's legacy. On the one hand, the U.S.-Chinese rapprochement contributed to the outcome of the Cold War and improved standards of living for the Chinese people. On the other hand, the Chinese Communist Party has emerged as the principal geopolitical adversary of the United States and the vanguard of the authoritarian trend in global politics, putting a million Uyghurs in concentration camps and threatening to invade Taiwan, whose status was left unresolved by Mr. Kissinger's diplomacy.

Mr. Kissinger lived half of his life after he left government. He blazed what has become a bipartisan trail of ex-officials building lucrative consulting businesses while trading on global contacts. For decades, he was a coveted guest at gatherings of statesmen and tycoons, perhaps because he could always provide an intellectual framework for why some people are powerful and justified in wielding power. He wrote a shelf of books, many of which polished his own reputation as an oracle of global affairs; after all, history is written by men like Henry Kissinger, not by the victims of superpower bombing campaigns, including children in Laos, who continue to be killed by the unexploded bombs that litter their country.

You can choose to see those unexploded bombs as the inevitable tragedy of the conduct of global affairs. From a strategic standpoint, Mr. Kissinger surely knew, being a superpower carried with it a cavernous margin of error that can be forgiven by history. Just a few decades after the end of the Vietnam War, the same countries we'd bombed were seeking expanded trade with the United States. Bangladesh and East Timor are now independent nations that receive American assistance. Chile is governed by a millennial socialist whose minister of defense is Mr. Allende's granddaughter. Superpowers do what they must. The wheel of history turns. When and where you live determines whether you get crushed or lifted by it.

But that worldview mistakes cynicism — or realism — with wisdom. The story, what it's all about, matters. Ultimately, the Berlin Wall came down not because of chess moves made on the board of a great game but rather because people in the East wanted to live like the people in the West. Economics, popular culture and social movements mattered. Despite all our flaws, we had a better system and story.

Ironically, part of Mr. Kissinger's allure stemmed from the fact that his story was uniquely American. His family narrowly escaped the wheel of history, fleeing Nazi Germany just as Hitler was putting his diabolical design into effect. Mr. Kissinger returned to Germany in the U.S. Army and liberated a concentration camp. The experience imbued him with a wariness of messianic ideology wedded to state power. But it didn't leave him with much sympathy for the underdog. Nor did it motivate him to bind the postwar American superpower within the very web of norms, laws and fidelity to certain values that was written into the American-led postwar order to prevent another world war.

Credibility, after all, is not just about whether you punish an adversary to send a message to another; it's also about whether you are what you say you are. No one can expect perfection in the affairs of state any more than in relations among human beings. But the United States has paid a price for its hypocrisy, though it's harder to measure than the outcome of a war or negotiation. Over the decades, our story about democracy has come to ring hollow to a growing number of people who can point to the places where our actions drained our words of meaning and "democracy" just sounded like an extension of American interests. Similarly, our insistence on a rules-based international order has been ignored by strongmen who point to America's sins to justify their own.

Now history has come full circle. Around the world, we see a resurgence of autocracy and ethnonationalism, most acutely in Russia's war against Ukraine. In Gaza the United States has supported an Israeli military operation that has killed civilians at a pace that has once again suggested to much of the world that we are selective in our embrace of international laws and norms. Meanwhile, at home, we see how democracy has become subordinate to the pursuit of power within a chunk of the Republican Party. This is where cynicism can lead. Because when there is no higher aspiration, no story to give meaning to our actions, politics and geopolitics become merely a zero-sum game. In that kind of world, might makes right.

All of this cannot be laid on Henry Kissinger's shoulders. In many ways, he was as much a creation of the American national security state as its author. But his is also a cautionary tale. As imperfect as we are, the United States needs our story to survive. It's what holds together a multiracial democracy at home and differentiates us from Russia and China abroad.

That story insists that a child in Laos is equal in dignity and worth to our children and that the people of Chile have the same right of self-determination as we do. For the United States, that must be a part of national security. We forget that at our peril.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/opinion/henry-kissinger-the-hypocrite.html>

Henry Kissinger, too, had the narcissistic megalomaniacal "l'etat c'est moi" mentality, with the difference that his delight was in shaping the world to match his designs. His further delight was in moulding his success to charm and maneuver other gameplayers into submitting to his designs. Every achievement in this arena kept his vanity, ego, and self-assurance fed. TJB