

By Greg Grandin

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**Nixon introduced us to permanent, extrajudicial war in Southeast Asia, and it continues today in the Middle East**



In April 2014, ESPN [published](#) a photograph of an unlikely duo: Samantha Power, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and former national security adviser and secretary of state Henry Kissinger at the Yankees-Red Sox season opener. In fleece jackets on a crisp spring day, they were visibly enjoying each other's company, looking for all the world like a twenty-first-century geopolitical version of Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. The subtext of their banter, however, wasn't about sex, but death.

As a journalist, Power had made her name as a defender of human rights, winning a Pulitzer Prize for her book *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. Having served on the National Security Council before moving on to the U.N., she was considered an influential “[liberal hawk](#)

” of the Obama era. She was also a leading light among a set of policymakers and intellectuals who believe that American diplomacy should be driven not just by national security and economic concerns but by humanitarian ideals, especially the advancement of democracy and the defense of human rights.

The United States, Power long held, has a responsibility to protect the world's most vulnerable people. In 2011 she played a crucial role in convincing President Obama to send in American air power to prevent troops loyal to Libyan autocrat Muammar Gaddafi from massacring civilians. That campaign led to his death, the violent overthrow of his regime, and in the end, a failed state and growing stronghold for ISIS and other terror groups. In contrast, Kissinger is identified with a school of “political realism,” which holds that American power should service American interests, even if that means sacrificing the human rights of others.

According to ESPN, Power teasingly asked Kissinger if his allegiance to the Yankees was “in keeping with a realist's perspective on the world.” Power, an avid Red Sox fan, had only recently failed to convince the United Nations to endorse a U.S. bombing campaign in Syria, so Kissinger couldn't resist responding with a gibe of his own. “You might,” he said, “end up doing more realistic things.” It was his way of suggesting that she drop the Red Sox for the Yankees. “The human rights advocate,” Power retorted, referring to herself in the third person, “falls in love with the Red Sox, the downtrodden, the people who can't win the World Series.”

“Now,” replied Kissinger, “we are the downtrodden” — a reference to the Yankees' poor performance the previous season. During his time in office, Kissinger had been involved in three of the genocides Power mentions in her book: Pol Pot's “killing fields” in Cambodia, which would never have occurred had he not infamously ordered an illegal four-and-a-half-year bombing campaign in that country; Indonesia's massacre in [East Timor](#); and Pakistan's in [Bangladesh](#), both of which he expedited.

You might think that mutual knowledge of his policies under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford and the horrors that arose from them would have cast a pall over their conversation, but their banter was lively. “If a Yankee fan and a Red Sox fan can head into the

heart of darkness for the first game of the season,” Power commented, “all things are possible.”

All things except, it seems, extricating the country from its endless wars.

Only recently, Barack Obama [announced](#) that U.S. troops wouldn't be leaving Afghanistan any time soon and also [made](#) a deeper commitment to fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, including deploying the first U.S. ground personnel into that country. Indeed, a new book by *New York Times* reporter Charlie Savage, [Power Wars](#)

, suggests that there has been little substantive difference between George W. Bush's administration and Obama's when it comes to national security policies or the legal justifications used to pursue regime change in the Greater Middle East.

Henry Kissinger is, of course, not singularly responsible for the evolution of the U.S. national security state into a monstrosity. That state has had many administrators. But his example — especially his steadfast support for bombing as an instrument of “diplomacy” and his [militarization](#) of the Persian Gulf — has coursed through the decades, shedding a spectral light on the road that has brought us to a state of eternal war.

## From Cambodia...

Within days of Richard Nixon's inauguration in January 1969, national security adviser Kissinger asked the Pentagon to lay out his bombing options in Indochina. The previous president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, had suspended his own bombing campaign against North Vietnam in hopes of negotiating a broader ceasefire. Kissinger and Nixon were eager to re-launch it, a tough task given domestic political support for the bombing halt.

The next best option: begin bombing across the border in Cambodia to destroy enemy supply lines, depots, and bases supposedly located there. Nixon and Kissinger also believed that

such an onslaught might force Hanoi to make concessions at the negotiating table. On February 24th, Kissinger and his military aide, Colonel Alexander Haig, met with Air Force Colonel Ray Sitton, an expert on B-52 bombers, to begin the planning of Menu, the grim culinary codename for the bombing campaign to come.

Given that Nixon had been elected on a promise to end the war in Vietnam, Kissinger believed that it wasn't enough to place Menu in the category of "top secret." Absolute and total secrecy, especially from Congress, was a necessity. He had no doubt that Congress, crucial to the appropriation of funds needed to conduct specific military missions, would never approve a bombing campaign against a neutral country with which the United States wasn't at war.

Instead, Kissinger, Haig, and Sitton came up with an ingenious deception. Based on recommendations from General Creighton Abrams, commander of military operations in Vietnam, Sitton would lay out the Cambodian targets to be struck, then run them by Kissinger and Haig for approval. Next, he would backchannel their coordinates to Saigon and a courier would deliver them to radar stations where the officer in charge would, at the last minute, switch B-52 bombing runs over South Vietnam to the agreed-upon Cambodian targets.

Later, that officer would burn any relevant maps, computer printouts, radar reports, or messages that might reveal the actual target. "A whole special furnace" was set up to dispose of the records, Abrams would later testify before Congress. "We burned probably [12 hours a day](#)." False "post-strike" paperwork would then be written up indicating that the sorties had been flown over South Vietnam as planned.

Kissinger was very hands-on. "Strike here in this area," Sitton recalled Kissinger telling him, "or strike here in that area." The bombing galvanized the national security adviser. The first raid occurred on March 18, 1969. "K really excited," Bob Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff, wrote in his diary. "He came beaming in [to the Oval Office] with the report."

In fact, he would supervise every aspect of the bombing. As journalist Seymour Hersh later [wrote](#), "When the military men presented a proposed bombing list, Kissinger would redesign the missions, shifting a dozen planes, perhaps, from one area to another, and altering the timing of the bombing runs... [He] seemed to enjoy playing the bombardier." (That joy wouldn't be limited to Cambodia.

[According](#)

to  
*Washington Post*  
reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, when the bombing of North Vietnam finally started up again, Kissinger “expressed enthusiasm at the size of the bomb craters.”) A Pentagon  
[report](#)  
released in 1973 stated that “Henry A. Kissinger approved each of the 3,875 Cambodia bombing raids in 1969 and 1970” — the most secretive phase of the bombing — “as well as the methods for keeping them out of the newspapers.”

All told, between 1969 and 1973, the U.S. [dropped](#) half-a-million tons of bombs on Cambodia alone, killing at least 100,000 civilians. And don't forget

[Laos](#)

and both North and South Vietnam. “It's wave after wave of planes. You see, they can't see the B-52 and they dropped a million pounds of bombs,” Kissinger

[told](#)

Nixon after the April 1972 bombing of North Vietnam's port city of Haiphong, as he tried to reassure the president that the strategy was working: “I bet you we will have had more planes over there in one day than Johnson had in a month... Each plane can carry about 10 times the load [a] World War II plane could carry.”

As the months passed, however, the bombing did nothing to force Hanoi to the bargaining table. It did, on the other hand, help Kissinger in his interoffice rivalries. His sole source of power was Nixon, who was a bombing advocate. So Kissinger embraced his role as First Bombardier to show the tough-guy militarists the president had surrounded himself with that he was the “hawk of hawks.” And yet, in the end, even Nixon came to see that the bombing campaigns were a dead end. “K. We have had 10 years of total control of the air in Laos and V.Nam,” Nixon [wrote](#) him over a top-secret report on the efficacy of bombing, “The result = Zilch.” (This was in January 1972, three months before Kissinger assured Nixon that “wave after wave” of bombers would do the trick).

During those four-and-a-half years when the U.S. military dropped more than 6,000,000 tons of bombs on Southeast Asia, Kissinger revealed himself to be not a supreme political realist, but the planet's supreme idealist. He refused to quit when it came to a policy meant to bring about a world he believed he *ought* to live in, one where he could, by the force of the material power of the U.S. military, bend poor peasant countries like Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam to his will — as opposed to the one he *did* live in, where bomb as he might he couldn't force Hanoi to submit. As he

[put it](#)

at the time, "I refuse to believe that a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam does not have a breaking point."

In fact, that bombing campaign did have one striking effect: it destabilized Cambodia, provoking a 1970 coup that, in turn, provoked a 1970 American invasion, which only broadened the social base of the insurgency growing in the countryside, leading to escalating U.S. bombing runs that spread to nearly the whole country, devastating it and creating the conditions for the rise to power of the genocidal Khmer Rouge.

### **...to the First Gulf War**

Having either condoned, authorized, or planned so many invasions — Indonesia's in East Timor, Pakistan's in Bangladesh, the U.S.'s in Cambodia, South Vietnam's in Laos, and South Africa's in Angola — Henry Kissinger took the only logical stance in early August 1990, when Saddam Hussein sent the Iraqi military into Kuwait: he condemned the act. In office, he had worked to pump up Baghdad's regional ambitions. As a private consultant and pundit, he had promoted the idea that Saddam's Iraq could serve as a disposable counterweight to revolutionary Iran. Now, he knew just what needed to be done: the annexation of Kuwait had to be reversed.