

The Birth of Bangladesh: Nefarious Plots and Cold War Sideshows

By Roger Vogler

I. Tanks

“Has the United States Government lost all sense of direction in Asia?” asked former Ambassador to India Chester Bowles in March 1970. “Can it learn nothing from its past mistakes?” He was referring to President Richard Nixon’s impending approval of the shipment of one hundred US - built M-47 tanks from Turkey (to whom they had previously been given under a NATO agreement) to Pakistan. “American military assistance to Pakistan in the last fifteen years,” Bowles continued, “will, I believe, be listed by historians as among our most costly blunders.”¹

It was costly indeed, a year later, to a group of unsuspecting students at East Pakistan’s University of Dhaka. On the evening on March 25, 1971, four American-built M-47 tanks, followed by a platoon of West Pakistani soldiers, pulled up in front of its two dormitories: Iqbal Hall housing the Muslim students and Jagannath Hall housing the Hindus. Without warning, they commenced shelling both buildings at a range of fifty yards. Robert Payne describes the scene:

Many of the students were already in bed, others were working late, still others were discussing the political situation, which had grown increasingly tense during the last few days. But on that dark and sultry night, the last thing to occur to them was that they were in danger.

The shelling lasted five minutes, killing about thirty students Then the soldiers, shouting loudly, broke into the dormitories, shooting at random, and ordering the students to come out with their hands above their heads. Those who did not come out fast enough were shot or bayoneted. Once outside the building, the students were lined up against the walls and mown down with machine guns fired from the tanks, and from armored cars that had come up so that the Punjabi officers could observe the scene. Students who remained alive were bayoneted to death.

Within a quarter of an hour 109 students were dead. The bodies of the Muslim students were dragged up to the roof of Iqbal hall, where they

were left to the vultures. The bodies of the Hindu students were heaped together like faggots and later in the night, six students, who had been spared, were ordered to dig a grave for them. After they had dug the grave they were shot.²

Thus began the Civil War that culminated, nine months later, in the destruction of Pakistan as it had originally been constituted, twenty-four years before.

As a young American Architect living and working in North India at that time, I was well aware of this war's grim start. Although the western world had paid them scant attention, the natural and political events that precipitated it had been emblazoned for months on the front pages of every Indian newspaper. Many of my Indian friends had relatives who were directly affected by them. And as an American on the scene, I observed with helpless dismay the consequences of my own country's - Richard Nixon's and Henry Kissinger's - foreign policy with regard to these events: a policy blinded by a Cold War mentality that excluded all understanding of its tragic human impact.

II. Typhoon and Election

By late 1970, long-standing ethnic, political and economic differences between Pakistan's two "wings," the Punjabi-dominated West and the Bengali East, a thousand miles distant on the other side of India, had descended to its lowest point in the nation's history. Open demands for secession were increasingly heard on the streets of Dhaka. According to BBC correspondent Owen Bennett Jones, "the future of East Pakistan depended on a struggle among three men: West Pakistani General Agha Mohammed Yahya Khan, a habitual drunk; Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a professional agitator; and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a political operator par excellence. Relying respectively on military force, street power, and pure guile, this volatile trio pursued their incompatible objectives."³

General Yahya had been installed as Pakistan's Chief Martial Law Administrator a year before in an "invited" military coup, replacing a fellow general, Ayub, who had been strongly suspected of diverting substantial government funds into the pockets of his relatives. Under intense pressure from the East, Yahya had set a date in late November for Pakistan's first nationwide parliamentary election. However, two weeks before this was to take place, on the night of November 12, 1970, a tremendous typhoon swept up the Bay of Bengal, driving a thirty-foot tidal wave deep into East Pakistan's densely populated Ganges delta. According to some estimates a million people were left dead in its wake. It was perhaps the worst natural disaster the world had ever known.

A Dhaka correspondent reported after a visit to the area “One cannot walk without trampling on the dead.”⁴

Even from the aircraft it was possible to smell the odour of death, but the pilot said the situation had improved on that of two days ago when the smell almost made pilots vomit and then take sleeping pills after their flights over the area. For days, however, the planes flying over the area carried only journalists. By November 16,⁵ no relief had come. Pilots said the Government was “thinking about” their offer to run emergency food drop flights to survivors. In the meantime, at least seven American-provided Pakistan Air Force C130 cargo planes remained on the tarmac 1,000 miles away in Rawalpindi.⁶

An Indian offer to provide helicopters, riverboats, food and medical supplies was summarily rejected. An Air Force pilot complained to friends at a party in Dhaka that he was exhausted from his hours of flying. Delivering relief supplies? No, from practice bombing and strafing runs. “This disaster has made us terribly vulnerable,” he explained. “The Indians could walk right in and take over. We’ve got to stay alert!”⁷

After returning from a week in the devastated area, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (“Mujib”), a political firebrand in his student days and now the outspoken leader of East Pakistan’s major political party, the Awami League, addressed an assembly of more than two hundred journalists in Dhaka on November 26. Twenty-five percent of those who had survived the cyclone, he claimed, had died because relief had failed to reach them in time. He accused the Government of “deliberate, cold blooded murder”:

“While we have Army helicopters sitting in West Pakistan we had to wait for helicopters to come from the other end of the world. Is this why we have channeled 60 percent of our budget all these years for defense services? The people have had enough of the crimes committed in the name of national integration, and the urge of the people of Bangla Desh for autonomy cannot be denied.” Observers regarded the Sheikh’s speech as the most explosive threat of secession since the foundation of the State of Pakistan.⁸

Yahya postponed the election to December 7, but the political damage to his administration had been done. Bengalis responded passionately to Mujib’s call. On Election Day his Awami League won all but two of East Pakistan’s 162 seats in the

National Assembly. They won none in the West, but since seats had been allocated to districts on the basis of population, and the East Wing was then more populous, Mujib's 160 seats out of 300 nationwide constituted an absolute majority in the new Parliament. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won 81 seats in the West, but none in the East. The remaining seats (2 in the east and 57 in the west) went to minor parties and independents.⁹

The elected Assembly was required to draft a new national constitution within 120 days of its first sitting as a constituent body. Yahya and his West Pakistani advisors had been confident that the constitution-writing process would be one of extensive give-and-take. With the actual result, however, it appeared that the charismatic Mujib would be able to push through a new constitution to his own liking, and to become Pakistan's next Prime Minister as well.

Neither of these outcomes was acceptable to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. "He was a deeply ambitious man whose undoubted abilities were matched by his massive ego. (After a day of talks with President J. F. Kennedy in 1963, Kennedy looked at Bhutto and said 'If you were American you would be in my cabinet.' 'Be careful, Mr. President,' Bhutto replied. 'If I were American *you* would be in *my* cabinet.')¹⁰ Bhutto was also impatient. After the election, one senior minister told Yahya that if Bhutto did not become Prime Minister within a year he would literally go mad. In the light of Mujib's victory, however, it was clear that he had no chance to become Prime Minister of a united Pakistan.

Mujib urged Yahya to set an early date for the National Assembly to meet, to install himself as Prime Minister, and to begin writing his new constitution. Bhutto, realizing that Mujib had the votes to do just that once the Assembly went into session, urged Yahya to delay setting a date, so that concessions could be inveigled from Mujib before the Assembly met. Pressured from both sides, Yahya finally set March 3, 1971, as the date for the opening of the National Assembly. Bhutto's response, however, was the final blow to any prospect of reconciliation. After enlisting the backing of key Army leaders, by persuading them that they had as much to lose as he, Bhutto announced at a mass rally in Lahore that his PPP party would boycott the Assembly altogether - and that if any other West Pakistan party had the temerity to attend it, he would see to it that "their legs will be broken."¹¹ Civil war was thus assured - but so was Bhutto's position as leader of whatever remained of Pakistan at the end of it.

On March 1, Yahya, frustrated by his inability to bring the two sides together, impotent in the face of intense pressure both from his Army patrons and from Bhutto's PPP, and humiliated by his perception that the whole world was laughing at him,¹² canceled the March 3 Assembly opening. The result was immediate and disastrous. A massive strike in Dhaka shut down the city and much of its province

for a week. Bands of *Mukti Bahini* - militant young Awami League supporters - sought out and massacred thousands of West Pakistanis and other non-Bengali Muslims,¹³ collectively known as “Biharis” for the Indian state of Bihar from which many of them had come at the time of Partition.

Recognizing his mistake, Yahya announced a new date of March 25 for the Assembly to meet, but again the damage had been done. Sham negotiations continued with the Awami League, as Yahya instructed his generals to finalize operational orders for military action “to reinstate public order and central authority in East Pakistan,”¹⁴ and the Army rushed thousands of troops to the East wing.

For Yahya, an army officer whose highest calling, according to one colleague, “was generally felt to be a divisional commander,”¹⁵ this was the only course he could envision. The slippery, gutless Bengalis had always knuckled under before to a show of Punjabi force: it was time to give them a refresher course.

III. Genocide - and 9,889,305 Refugees¹⁶

Seven thousand people, including the unsuspecting students at its university, died in Dhaka that night. Another three thousand were arrested, Sheikh Mujib among them. Four days later he was flown to West Pakistan, where he spent the next nine months in prison, incommunicado. All foreign journalists were confined to their hotel, threatened with a bullet in the head if they so much as poked their noses outside the door. The next day “they were taken to the airport under armed guard, searched, stripped of their notebooks and film, and warned that it would be better for them if they wrote nothing about their last night in Dhaka. Most of them left in the early evening.”¹⁷

Tens of thousands of ordinary citizens, mostly Hindus, fled their homes in a frenzied dash to the country’s borders. The East Wing was almost entirely surrounded by India: its border with that country in fact exceeded thirteen hundred miles. To its west lay the Indian State of West Bengal; to the north Assam and Meghalaya; to the east, from north to south, Tripura and Mizoram. Tripura itself penetrated deep into the East Wing’s east side, extending to within 50 miles of Dhaka; thus it was to this State that many of the early refugees fled. By the end of May, nearly 900,000 had arrived in the border town of Sabrum, utterly demolishing the tenuous balance of Hindus and Tribals that had made up Tripura’s 1,500,000 indigenous residents. Most were herded into what became perhaps the largest refugee camp in the world. Its director, asked what he would describe as his greatest need, replied “a crematorium.”¹⁸

Nor was Tripura the refugees’ only destination. Dr. Mathis Bromberger, a German physician at a camp in Nadia district, West Bengal, reported:

There were thousands of people standing out in the open here all night in the rain. Women were with babies in their arms. They could not lie down because the water came up to their knees in places. There was not enough shelter and in the morning there were always many sick and dying of pneumonia. We could not get out serious cholera cases to the hospital. And there was no one to take away the dead. They just lay around or in the water.¹⁹

At My Long Camp in Meghalaya, a 200-bed hospital was forced to accommodate 600 cholera victims. Patients were lying in the corridors, between the beds, in every available space. Peter Hazelhurst wrote:

They lay on the cold floor, a hundred men, women and children, retching and shaking, their terrified eyes fixed on the back entrance of the hospital where the corpses were piling up Cramped in the tiny village hospital, some only half alive, they are all victims of the cholera epidemic sweeping through the refugee camps A dying baby still clings to its dead mother's body. An old man coughs and dies a foot away from my feet.²⁰

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of villages, most chosen simply because they were predominantly Hindu, were sacked and burned to the ground by Yahya's troops. Demra, nine miles from Dhaka, was typical: every woman between the ages of twelve and forty was raped, every man between twelve and forty was shot. Every village along a main road, Hindu or Muslim, was razed simply to allow army units to move safely from place to place in less than battalion strength. "Biharis" cooperated with the army by pointing out Hindus and intellectuals in the street, who were shot on the spot, no questions asked. Those unfortunate enough to be arrested were trucked to remarkably efficient death camps such as Hariharpura, near Dhaka, a warehouse beside the Buriganga River, where the prisoners were roped together in groups of six or eight, marched into the river, and machine gunned. The bodies were disposed of by the simple expedient of allowing them to float downstream.²¹

As the flood of refugees across India's borders swelled exponentially, the logistical burden she faced to accommodate them rose to monumental proportions. "These problems that confront us," Prime Minister Indira Gandhi told her Parliament on May 24,

are not confined to Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and West Bengal. They are national problems. Indeed the basic problem is an international one.

We have sought to awaken the conscience of the world through our representations to the United Nations, and, at long last, the true dimensions

of the problem seem to be making themselves felt in the sensitive chanceries of the world. However, I must share with the House our disappointment at the unconscionably long time which the world is taking to react to this stark tragedy

Condition must be created to stop any further influx of refugees and to ensure their early return under credible guarantees for their safety and well-being. I say with all sense of responsibility that unless this happens, there can be no stability or peace on this subcontinent. If the world does not take heed, we shall be constrained to take all measures as may be necessary to ensure our own security and the preservation and development of the structure of our social and economic life.

IV. “Massive Inaction”

But the world, or at least the United States, did not take heed. Instead, it responded to these events with a policy aptly described by the diplomats ordered to implement it as “Massive Inaction.” The American Government, according to its April 8, 1971 press report, “viewed the struggle between the Pakistan central government and the dissident East Pakistanis as essentially an internal matter, and that American pronouncements on the situation would therefore be unjustified.”²² The Administration’s ostensible rationale for this stance only came to light three months later, when it was revealed that Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon’s Assistant to the President, had secretly flown from Islamabad to Beijing in July, under arrangements negotiated by Pakistan, to lay the groundwork for Nixon’s historic trip to China in February 1972. Nixon’s and Kissinger’s overarching fear was that these arrangements, hitherto known about in the US only by the two men themselves, would collapse if leaked beforehand, and with them their grand design for Triangular (US-China-USSR) Diplomacy.

Rapprochement with China was not the only factor underlying American foreign policy, however. Another was the irrational antipathy that Richard Nixon harbored toward women in power - and toward Indira Gandhi in particular. CBS State Department correspondent Marvin Kalb remarked in an interview that Nixon “had a psychological thing about female leaders. He just didn’t like Mrs. Gandhi. I remember Nixon referring to her as ‘that bitch’ ten or twelve times.” Kissinger himself, in his 1,500 page memoir *The White House Years* [page 848] wrote that “Nixon’s comments after meetings with her were not always printable” and that he found the “bluff, direct chiefs of Pakistan” more congenial to deal with than “the complex and apparently haughty Brahmin leaders of India.”

Nixon and Kissinger were the only two men responsible for the formulation of American policy over the course of the Bangladesh conflict. Neither man, however, ever really understood, or made any effort to understand, the practical regional issues that India faced: its history as a nation, its political realities, or the cultural values of its tremendously diverse society. In particular, they never grasped the deep emotional attachment to the territory of Kashmir that resides within the hearts of the great majority of Indians - not as a stepping stone to hegemony over all South Asia, but as an inalienable part of their own country. To the contrary, both men, self-inculcated as they were in a global, geopolitical view of the world that saw every event as an integral element of the Cold War, peremptorily dismissed the advice of anyone who did understand. Nixon, in response to an extensive briefing by Kissinger, initiated the "Massive Inaction" policy with a blunt handwritten order: "To all hands: Don't [underlined three times] squeeze Yahya at this time,"²³ as the General relentlessly pursued his campaign of genocide. Nixon complained that every ambassador we sent to India became an "India lover"; Kissinger railed at a State Department "heavily influenced by a traditional Indian bias." When American Consul Archer Blood and nineteen members of his staff in Dhaka sent a telegram to Washington registering "strong dissent" with its failure to condemn the slaughter, Kissinger accused them of employing "a favorite device of subordinates seeking to foreclose their superiors' options" by deliberately giving the cables low classification and hence "wide circulation." (In fact, they were sent through the State Department's "Dissent Channel,"²⁴ specifically set up for just such purposes. Blood was fired for his effort.

In Nixon's and Kissinger's Cold War mentality, India's refusal to align itself with the United States could only mean that it was a satellite of the USSR. Non-alignment, to them, was not a viable option. Their critics within the diplomatic service understood India's disappointment when the young nation, justifiably proud of her accomplishment in bringing together a group of races and cultures as diverse as all of Europe into the world's largest democracy, was summarily rejected as a partner by the United States in favor of a blatant military dictatorship. They understood the inherent tolerance and respect for all life shared by the great majority of Indians and their deeply ingrained tradition of coming to the aid of one another in times of crisis. But Nixon's and Kissinger's polarized conception of the world was too deeply embedded in their minds for them to perceive in Mrs. Gandhi's words a plea for help. Rather, they saw in them only a threat to go to war.

By July, India had set up 650 refugee camps, containing a total of "about seven million human flotsam waiting hopelessly for a meal. Outside the camps, squatting on hilltops, on river banks, and along roadsides was the remainder of an estimated one and a half million displaced persons, who had been forced to flee

to India because of killing, looting, mistrust, and fear of lives.”²⁵ As the price of available foodstuffs went up it was not only the refugees who suffered but the indigenous villagers living near the camps as well. The financial burden on India, one of the world’s poorest countries, was intolerable, and the situation became increasingly desperate as a million new refugees poured into the country every month.

Henry Kissinger repeatedly refers in *The White House Years* to American financial aid to alleviate the crisis, but his remarks, written years after the events, bear more resemblance to a verbal shell game than to a dispassionate presentation of fact. On page 856 he claims the US “had agreed to assume the major cost of refugee relief,” and, on the next, states “[our] original authorization of \$2.5 million in the spring of 1971 was eventually multiplied a hundredfold to \$250 million.” But there is no further reference to \$250 million in his account. On page 861 he asserts that the American contribution by July “had reached nearly \$100 million” and complains [page 867] that a September letter from Prime Minister Gandhi took no notice of our “substantial” economic assistance for the refugees. In that same month, however, the World Bank reported that a total of just \$200 million in relief funds had been pledged by 66 nations for the fiscal year ending in December, by which time, the Bank predicted, the camp population would rise to nine million, and the refugee cost for the fiscal year would be \$700 million. Even if the entire \$200 million was delivered by the end of 1971, India’s burden would be \$500 million - the net total of all her foreign aid for that year. The report concluded that the world community should not expect India to bear the bulk of the costs. But, Sydney Schanberg reported from New Delhi, “Diplomatic observers here are doubtful that there will be an increase in foreign aid of the necessary magnitude. Some, in fact, think that foreign interest in the refugee problem will wane as the months go by and the situation remains unchanged.”²⁶

Kissinger understood India’s emotional response even less than its financial plight. Or perhaps, as some recent critics have suggested, he simply chose to disregard it. His memoir is peppered with assertions that the United States was aware from early on in the crisis that Bangladeshi independence was inevitable (e.g. “An independent Bengali state was certain to emerge, even without Indian intervention” [page 853] but “our policy was to give the facts time to assert themselves” [page 858]). In a brilliant stroke of American diplomacy, he and Nixon assured Mrs. Gandhi, Yahya had been persuaded to proclaim amnesty for all of the refugees, to promise a civilian government in Islamabad, and to grant Bangladesh independence soon thereafter. India should back off, send the refugees home at once, and await the conclusion of this inevitable evolutionary process, which, in Kissinger’s words, was a “near certainty” to occur by the following March. Yet an unreasonable and obstructive India, he claimed, refused to encourage the refugees’ return even

after Yahya's promise of amnesty. Mrs. Gandhi was determined to go to war "not because she was convinced of our failure, but because she feared our success." She was determined, in Kissinger's view, to seize the opportunity the Bangladesh crisis had presented to crush all of Pakistan - East and West - by force of arms, reducing it to a "vassal state."²⁷

This evaluation was a megalomaniacal caricature of reality.²⁸ No one, the least knowledgeable of the country or its people, would conceivably have expected India to send these millions of human beings, related as they were to their own citizens by race and religion, back to a country where thousands of their fellows were being slaughtered every day by the very man promising the amnesty. Even if Yahya had been sincere in his offer, which was doubtful at best, there could be no assurance that his troops in the field would observe it, international oversight or no. And there was in any event no conceivable way in which such a mass return could have been implemented from a logistical standpoint, amid the carnage that went on unabated on the ground. Even if Kissinger's "near certainty" of a political solution came to pass by the following March, which he himself soon acknowledged was highly unlikely,²⁹ hundreds of thousands more would have died by then in the continuing genocide. Indian values would not have tolerated these additional months of slaughter. Nor, it is to be hoped, would those of the American people – even if their leaders did not share them.

V. Nefarious Plots

There was general and justified outrage as during April [1971] reports began to come in of Pakistani atrocities in Bengal But we faced a dilemma. The United States could not condone a brutal military repression in which thousands of civilians were killed and from which millions fled to India for safety. There was no doubt about the strong-arm tactics of the Pakistan military. But Pakistan was our sole channel to China to make arrangements for Nixon's secret visit to Beijing in February [1972]; once it was closed off it would take months to make alternative arrangements.³⁰

So wrote Kissinger in 1979. To "condone a brutal military repression" was of course precisely what the United States effectively did. The following year, however, Christopher van Hollen, then a Senior Associate of the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, but who had been Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs from 1969 to 1972, flatly contradicted Kissinger's "sole channel" claim and many of his other after-the-fact assertions. Van Hollen's article "The Tilt Policy Revisited: Nixon-Kissinger Geopolitics and

South Asia,” published in the respected journal *Asian Survey*, was in fact a point-by-point rebuttal of virtually all of Kissinger’s words and actions throughout the India-Pakistani conflict of 1971 and 1972. Kissinger’s references to “justified outrage” and “Pakistani atrocities,” he wrote,

are the words of the elder statesman-author, viewing events retrospectively. They were not the words of the Assistant to the President in March-April 1971. At no time during that period is Kissinger on record as voicing outrage or humanitarian concern as the Pakistani armed forces obeyed Yahya’s orders with a vengeance.³¹

Pakistan was not our only channel to China, van Hollen said. At the time fighting broke out on March 25 there were two open channels to Beijing, one through the Pakistanis and one through the Romanians. Moreover, he added, “it is most unlikely that a statement of disapprobation would have caused Yahya to back out of his intermediary role. He was honored to have been tapped by Nixon as a communications link with China, and desperately wanted to retain the goodwill of both Washington and Beijing.”³²

“To some of our critics,” Kissinger lamented, “our silence over Pakistan - the reason for which we could not explain - became another symptom of the general moral insensitivity of their government. They could not accept that it might have been torn between conflicting imperatives.” But the “imperatives” existed only in the astigmatic imaginations of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. One has to wonder how different America’s relations with South Asia might have been if they had simply extended a hand of friendship to India in its time of need.

“Throughout April [of 1971]” Kissinger wrote [page 855]:

signs began to appear that India’s proposed solution to the undoubted burden of millions of Bengali refugees was not so much to enable them to return as to accelerate the disintegration of Pakistan On March 31 the Indian Parliament unanimously expressed its whole-hearted “sympathy and support” for the Bengalis. As early as April 11, I reported to the President that the Indians seem to be embarking on a course of public diplomatic and covert actions that will increase the already high level of tension in the subcontinent and run the risk of touching off a broader and more serious international crisis. On April 14 a Bangladesh government in exile was established in Calcutta. By the middle of April we received reports that India was training Bengali refugees to become guerilla fighters in East Pakistan

..... By the end of April we learned that India was about to infiltrate the first 2,000 of these guerillas into East Pakistan.

And on page 856 he added:

As the weeks passed, we began increasingly to suspect that Mrs. Gandhi perceived a larger opportunity. As Pakistan grew more and more isolated internationally, she appeared to seek above all Pakistan's humiliation, perhaps trying to spread the centrifugal tendencies from East to West Pakistan. When the United States agreed to assume the major cost of refugee relief [it never did, as we have seen] India switched to insisting that the refugee problem was insoluble without a political settlement. But India's terms for settlement escalated by the week. When the United States offered to alleviate the famine in East Pakistan, India demanded that the relief program be run by an international agency. The reason was ostensibly to ensure its fair distribution, but it would also prevent the Pakistani government from gaining credit with its own population.

The specific events cited by Kissinger in the first of these two excerpts did in fact occur in India. Apart from the burden they faced caring for the refugees, Indians everywhere were deeply shocked and dismayed by the events taking place just beyond their borders - indeed within what had been their own borders just a quarter century before. Yet Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon in faraway Washington, wrapped up in a geopolitical view of the world that scorned every regional consideration and summarily dismissed any alternative viewpoint, could only see in these events the beginning of a nefarious plot. It was a plot that quickly grew, in their minds, into the *idée fixe* of a Grand Design by India, in which its every action was a calculated step toward complete hegemony over all of South Asia.

Kissinger offered not a shred of evidence that India intended to "accelerate disintegration" or seek "humiliation" of, or spread "centrifugal tendencies" with respect to Pakistan. The refugee problem, as India maintained, was clearly insoluble without a political settlement, unless - as Kissinger's "solution" evidently contemplated - India was somehow to force nearly ten million refugees back across her border on the strength of Yahya's promise of "amnesty." And the likelihood of equitable distribution of food by Yahya's troops to their own victims was remote to the point of absurdity.

Kissinger's entire argument disingenuously ignored the conditions at the scene of the action. Yahya's troops in Bangladesh, numbering 40,000 in April, had been augmented to 70,000 [Kissinger's figure, p. 863] by July, and to 93,000 at the

time of their surrender in December. These troops were there to rape and raze villages, like Demra, and to operate death camps, like Hariharpura. They were not there to dispense food packets to smiling children - amnesty or no amnesty.

Paralleling the refugee crisis, public relations between India and the US plummeted over the summer months. In late April, American Ambassador to India Kenneth Keating, in a statement specifically authorized by the State Department, assured journalists in New Delhi that arms shipments to Pakistan had been completely stopped as of March 25. Two months later, India's Foreign Minister Swaran Singh was given the same assurance in Washington by a high State Department official. Arriving the next day at Delhi's Palam Airport, however, Singh was informed by journalists that two freighters were already en route from New York to Pakistan, loaded with armaments. Two days later the State Department acknowledged that a third freighter had left New York with a cargo of munitions on April 2. On July 9, Henry Kissinger, after a brief stopover in New Delhi on a world "fact-finding" tour, was reported to have been taken ill in Islamabad with a stomach ailment. In fact, he had traveled to Beijing in elaborate secrecy³³ on a Pakistan International Airlines flight, where he had laid the groundwork for President Nixon's famous February 1972 meeting with Chinese Premier Chou En-lai and Mao Tse-tung. Sydney Schanberg summarized India's reaction to these events on July 27:

[Since Swaran Singh's return to Delhi] scarcely a day has gone by when the United States has not been vilified in Parliament and in the press. [The news] has stung Indians as a personal betrayal [and] amounts to condonation of genocide Indian officials have drawn a pointed contrast between the United States' policy and that of the Soviet Union. Moscow has stated that no Soviet arms have gone to Pakistan since April of last year Henry A. Kissinger's secret flight from Pakistan to Peking after a two-day visit in New Delhi has only exacerbated Indian-American relations; [his visit] is seen as merely a "stage prop" for his visit to Peking

To the Indians, it has become a moral question of good versus evil - a Bengali people seeking freedom and a military regime suppressing them with bullets. The Americans, in the Indian mind, have lined up with evil.³⁴

As an American living in India at that time, waiting in vain for my country to do something I could be proud of, I can well attest to the accuracy of Schanberg's assessment.

On August 9, India, abandoning its long-standing position of Cold War neutrality, signed a 20-year "Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation" with the

Soviet Union. The Soviets proceeded to build a major naval base on India's east coast, providing themselves with direct sea access to the entire Indian Ocean and all of Southeast Asia. USIS offices and American private sector aid organizations such as the Ford Foundation were shut down throughout the country. Intellectual contacts between India and the United States were virtually eliminated.

This "bombshell," as Kissinger described the treaty [page 866] was for him the final proof of India's - and the Soviet Union's - duplicity. Moscow had "thrown a lighted match into the powder keg." By refusing to align herself with the United States in the Cold War, India had clearly demonstrated that she was a Soviet "client," acting as the USSR's proxy at every point. By supporting India's position regarding the refugees, and later by promising to veto any attempt to "try" India as an aggressor in the UN's Security Council, the Soviet Union had "played a highly inflammatory role" in the conflict. The treaty signing proved without a doubt that Kissinger had been right all along.

But what he had believed all along was a self-fulfilling prophecy. It was his and Richard Nixon's own ignorance of and insensitivity to Indian values and national priorities, their irrational personal antagonisms, and an overriding geopolitical mindset in which they saw every world occurrence through a prism of the Cold War that ultimately drove India into the Soviet camp. It mattered not at all to Kissinger and Nixon that a policy allowing genocide in Bangladesh to continue for an extra six months or so would result in hundreds of thousands of additional deaths. But it mattered to India.

VI. Invasion

On December 6, 1971, following several days of skirmishes with Pakistani forces along its western border, India responded with an all-out invasion of East Pakistan. Alarmed by India's rapid advance toward Dhaka, and convinced by his own mindset that this was the first step in Indira Gandhi's Grand Design to subjugate all of West Pakistan as well, Nixon - in a power play bitterly resented by India - ordered Naval Task Force 74, which included the nuclear aircraft carrier *Enterprise*, to the Bay of Bengal.³⁵

It soon became clear that Nixon's and Kissinger's fears of a Grand Design were unfounded. On December 17, Dhaka fell to Indian troops with the unconditional surrender of all West Pakistani forces. By February virtually all of the refugees had returned to their now independent homeland, and India, after turning its administration over to Mujib's Awami League, had withdrawn its forces to behind its own borders. In the west, the brief military skirmishes between India and Pakistan quickly fizzled out. Mrs. Gandhi, in a public statement December 12,

denied that India had any territorial ambitions in West Pakistan. Nevertheless, as van Hollen noted,

The White House persisted in its conviction that India sought the destruction of West Pakistan Kissinger emphasized that Indian officials would not deny India had aspirations in Kashmir. But the reasons should have been obvious. Because India had always claimed all of Kashmir as Indian territory, just as Pakistan had made the reverse claim, no Indian official would be likely to give such assurances - nor would any Pakistani.³⁶

Nixon and Kissinger never comprehended the passionate intensity of the feelings of both nations over Kashmir. Pakistan and India had fought two wars along their western border: the only conceivable reason, in Kissinger's perception, was that India in her Grand Design for the subcontinent sought to dominate all of Pakistan. But for India, the issue was always just Kashmir. A takeover of West Pakistan, with its powder keg of warring ethnicities, would have presented, as the young India well understood, a potentially catastrophic threat to its own integrity. There never was any "Grand Design."

VII. Cold War Sideshows

"On the eve of the American invasion into Cambodia in 1970," wrote Lawrence Lifschultz in 1979, "Kissinger remarked to his colleagues at the National Security Council,"

'We're not interested in Cambodia. We're only interested in it not being used as a base.' Cambodia was a sideshow. In this exercise on the strategic periphery, nearly 500,000 Khmers were killed or wounded in American bombing, and an estimated two and a half million peasants escaped the air war only by fleeing as refugees. Kissinger's attitude toward Bangladesh a year later was little different. There was small interest in Bangladesh itself or in the issues of democracy and self-determination being confronted within its society. These small nations were simply not interesting for global thinkers, except in terms of manipulation and maneuver within the context of the larger strategic arena.

If Cambodia was a sideshow for Kissinger, one can be sure that Bangladesh did not even make the back lot. Nevertheless, the consequences of Kissinger's pro-Pakistan "tilt" went way beyond Cambodia's casualty and refugee statistics.³⁷

Far from forcing the USSR into a corner through an alliance with China, Nixon and Kissinger, through their machinations in this Cold War sideshow, threw all of South Asia into the Soviets' lap. Far from building a constructive relationship with the world's largest democracy, they dissipated all moral authority by abandoning the democratic and humanitarian principles on which America was founded. Far from rescuing the people of Bangladesh from a bloody conflict, they provided the tools with which they were slaughtered.

In the early days of 1946, George Kennan, then an attaché at the United States Embassy in Moscow and regarded as America's leading expert on the Soviet Union, was asked by his superiors to prepare a background memorandum, suggesting how the US might best conduct diplomatic relations with that nation in the increasingly challenging years following World War II. In response, Kennan dispatched his famous "Long Telegram" to Foggy Bottom on February 22, laying out a policy of "containment" (although the word itself never appeared in the telegram) that was to guide United States policy vis-à-vis the USSR for the next four and a half decades. The telegram firmly established Kennan's reputation as America's "high priest of realism" in foreign relations - a reputation that was further consolidated the following year when, now back in Washington as Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, he published an expanded version of his telegram in the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947) under the pseudonym "X."³⁸ In it, Kennan advised "a long term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points." Later in the article he reiterated that United States policy should be one of "firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world."

Walter Lippmann, America's preeminent journalist and "one-man think tank," immediately responded, condemning Kennan's proposal as

a strategic monstrosity, doomed to fail, that could be attempted only by recruiting, subsidizing, and supporting a heterogeneous array of satellites, clients, dependents and puppets. Propping up anticommunist regimes around the periphery of the Soviet Union would require unending American intervention. Because many of these regimes were dictatorial, they would be prey to insurrection, which they would beseech the United States to quell in the name of anti-communism. Confronted with such demands the United States would either have to disown our puppets, which would be tantamount to appeasement and defeat and the loss of face, or else sup-

port them at an incalculable cost on an unintended, unforeseen and perhaps undesirable issue.³⁹

Every one of these prophesies came to fulfillment in a parade of Cold War side-shows - not least, as we have seen, in Bangladesh.

Was Kennan wrong, then?

At first, Kennan accepted President Truman's military reorganization that took effect under the National Security Act of 1947, establishing as it did the CIA as the US's first peacetime intelligence agency, and giving the Executive Branch a virtual blank check for the covert operations that characterized much of the ensuing Cold War. By 1949, however, he had come to regret some of his verbiage in the "X" article, as implying use of military force to an extent he had never envisioned. Indeed, his views regarding Containment became almost identical to Lippmann's. In April 1949, The State Department Planning Staff, responding in large measure to the USSR's announcement the previous July of their successful test of an atomic bomb, formulated a secret plan - NSC-68 - for a massive military response that would immerse the two nations for more than four decades in a mad, blind race for nuclear supremacy. Kennan's vehement opposition to it cost him his job: Secretary of State Dean Acheson fired him as the Staff's Director, installing the hawkish Paul Nitze in his place several months before NSC-68 went into effect.

Kennan's use of the terms "firm containment" and "unalterable counterforce" may indeed have been detrimentally provocative. But to seize on these two phrases as the US did as a nation, and to read into them justification for the greatest military buildup the world has ever seen, was to blind itself to the true spirit, and to the wisdom of Kennan's article as a whole. He spoke over and over again, as "X," of the need for "persistent patience" in dealing with the Soviets, they were "under no ideological compulsion to accomplish their purposes in a hurry." In dealing with them we should remain at all times "cool and collected" and "focused on the long term. They can afford to wait," and, Kennan compellingly argued, "so could we The future of Soviet power may not be by any means as secure as Russian capacity for self-delusion would make it appear to the men in the Kremlin, The possibility remains (and in the opinion of this writer it is a strong one) that Soviet power bears within it the seeds of its own decay, and the sprouting of these seeds is well advanced."

This prophecy, too, came to pass, just as Lippmann's did - but not before millions of people in every corner of the globe died as innocent victims of our frantic race for military supremacy. Americans, as Henry Kissinger has observed, are not a patient people.

In the final analysis it is the concluding paragraphs of Kennan's article that reach out most powerfully to the truth - and which have fallen most abjectly by the wayside of political discourse:

The issue of Soviet-American relations is in essence a test of the over-all worth of the United States as a nation among nations. To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.

Surely there was never a fairer test of national quality than this The thoughtful observer will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin's challenge to American society. He will rather experience a certain gratitude to Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.

Blinded by the mass hysteria of the Cold War, America's leaders – and I fear its people as well – ultimately lost sight of these moral and political responsibilities: in Chile, in Nicaragua, in Indonesia, in Vietnam and Cambodia-and in Bangladesh. Can we regain them? The issue is surely in doubt. But America *must* regain them, I believe, if it is indeed to prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.

VIII. Epilogue

Shortly after Pakistan's surrender, Yahya resigned in disgrace as its Chief Martial Law Administrator. Mujib and Bhutto, however, were not so fortunate.

Welcomed home as Bangladesh's savior and installed as its first Prime Minister, Mujib proved himself utterly inept as an administrator, allowing his Awami League to descend into abject inefficiency and corruption. On August 14, 1975, in a bloody military coup, he was assassinated in his Dhaka home, together with nine members of his family and staff.

Yahya was immediately replaced in office by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who thus finally realized his burning ambition to become Pakistan's head of state. Setting up a personal army for himself, he settled in for what he doubtless hoped would be a lifetime job. It nearly was - though not, perhaps, for the lifetime he had looked forward to. Becoming increasingly corrupt, he was deposed after winning a rigged election in 1977, charged with attempted murder, found guilty, and hanged on April 4, 1979.

Henry Kissinger, in yet another statement about which one does not know whether to laugh or cry, had this to say about Bhutto's fate:

I found Bhutto brilliant, charming, of global stature in his perceptions No doubt he was later carried away by excessive self-confidence in his manipulative skills. But in the days of his country's tragedy he held the remnant of his country together and restored its self-confidence. In its hour of greatest need, he saved his country from complete destruction. He later brought himself down by excessive pride. But his courage and vision in 1971 should have earned him a better fate than the tragic end his passionate countrymen meted out to him and that blighted their reputation for mercy.

This is the only heartfelt expression of human sympathy I have been able to discern anywhere in Dr. Kissinger's memoirs.

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- Chaudhury, Elora. Personal interview, 4/26/2005. Dr. Chaudhury, Professor of Women's Studies at UMass Boston, was herself a Bangladeshi refugee in March of 1971 - albeit an as yet unborn one - as her pregnant mother and her father fled by bullock cart from Rajshahi, where he was a Professor of Chemistry. He later (1975-83) served as Vice Chancellor of the University of Dhaka.
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Notes:

1. Bowles, *New York Times*, 3/21/70
2. Payne, p. 17
3. Bennett Jones, p. 147
4. UPI dispatch from Calcutta to *The Times* (London) ,11/18/70
5. Zeitlin, *The Times* (London), 11/17/70
6. UPI dispatch from Calcutta to *The Times* (London), 11/18/70
7. Schanberg, *New York Times*, 12/30/70
8. Agence France-Presse, *The Times* (London), 11/27/70
9. Sisson & Rose, Table 2, p. 32
10. Bennett Jones, p. 227

11. Bennett Jones, p. 165
12. Sisson & Rose, p. 130
13. Aziz, p. 170. Qutubuddin Aziz's *Blood and Tears* presented 170 "eyewitness accounts" of these atrocities allegedly perpetrated during March and April against West Pakistanis and Biharis. During the ensuing Civil War the Pakistani Government issued a "white paper" citing these events as justification for their military action against the Bengali populace.
14. Sisson & Rose, p. 132
15. Bennett Jones, p. 272
16. The final refugee total as of 12/15/71 was set by the Indian government at 9,889,305 (Bangladesh Documents Volumes 81 & 82)
17. Payne, pp. 28-9
18. Chaudhuri, p. 87
19. Chaudhuri, p. 86
20. Chaudhuri, p. 91, quoting an article by Peter Hazelhurst in *The Times* (London), 6/3/71
21. Payne, p. 55
22. Benamin Welles, *New York Times*, 4/8/71
23. Kissinger, p. 848
24. Ali Riaz, 2/13/07
25. Chaudhuri, pp. 78-9, quoting data from the Indian government's *Statistical Information on Influx of Refugees*, published 12/3/71
26. Schanberg, *New York Times*, 9/16/71
27. van Hollen, pp. 348-9
28. Or perhaps not. Preservation of the territorial integrity of Pakistan remained a key goal of US policy to the bitter end. Ali Riaz, Bangladesh-born Associate Professor and History Department Chairman at Illinois State University, claimed in a 2007 article that recently declassified documents suggested the Administration undertook at least three initiatives during the fighting aimed at dissipating the Bangladesh movement, in order to preserve the existing status of Pakistan. Riaz states that "US clandestine efforts, although described as a 'political settlement,' contributed to the bloodshed instead of bringing it to an end."
29. "The US recognized," Kissinger said in a prepared statement to the press in December 1971, "that the time required to bring about a solution might be longer than the Indian capacity to withstand the pressures generated by the refugees." *Congressional Record*, 11/20/71
30. Kissinger, pp. 853-4
31. van Hollen, p. 342

32. van Hollen, p. 343. He quotes B.W.Choudhury, a former member of Yahya's Cabinet, writing in *Pacific Community* 7.22, January 1976: "Pakistan was delighted to have this opportunity..... it was almost a God-sent gift for Paikistan."
33. A "double" closely resembling Kissinger was employed to remain in Islamabad during his visit to Beijing.
34. Schanberg, New York Times, 7/27/71
35. Kissinger maintained to the end (at least of his memoir) that it was his and Nixon's decision to order the Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal that caused Indira Gandhi to back away from her "Grand Design" to subjugate Pakistan. van Hollen reports, however (p. 352) that the Brookings Institution, in a careful 1978 examination, concluded flatly that deployment of the ship had no impact whatever on India's policies or actions with respect to Pakistan.
36. van Hollen, p. 352
37. Lifschultz, p. 252
38. Kennan was soon identified as the article's actual author, but its attribution to "X" prevented it from being construed as an official statement of Government policy.
39. Steel, pp. 443--4