

OPINION

Henry Kissinger leaves behind a poisonous legacy of callous geopolitical calculus

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Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger addresses a conference in Istanbul, on May 31, 2007. OSMAN ORSAL/REUTERS

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Elizabeth Becker is the author of five books, including *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*.

The 1969 illegal bombing of neutral Cambodia was one of Henry Kissinger's first major policy recommendations as national security adviser to U.S. president Richard M. Nixon. It was also his most catastrophic, having led to the expansion of the American war into Cambodia and opened the door to the Cambodian communists known as the Khmer Rouge.

I witnessed the results firsthand. In 1973, I was a reporter living in Cambodia, and I witnessed the end of the years-long U.S. bombing campaign, which wrought blunt, needless destruction and heartbreaking devastation on the stunning country. I later returned to the country when the Khmer Rouge was in power, interviewed prime minister Pol Pot and his lieutenants, who prided themselves for surviving the bombing, and then spent years writing a history of the ensuing war and genocide – a tragedy in which Dr. Kissinger had a leading role.

For the rest of his life, Dr. Kissinger – [who died on Wednesday at the age of 100](#) – denied any responsibility for that genocide. But the criminal stain of Cambodia became emblematic of his cold disregard for the immense suffering he caused in countries he considered mere stepping stones to his grand geopolitical strategies, enacted in the name of so-called American democratic values. Those included Chile, where he supported a coup d'état and dictatorship; Pakistan, whose army was provided with U.S. weapons in its genocidal war against what became Bangladesh; and Indonesia, where the U.S. greenlit the government's murderous invasion of East Timor.

Until Dr. Kissinger's bombing, Cambodia had been pulling off the impossible, remaining neutral for 14 years while America's Vietnam War raged in neighbouring Laos and Vietnam. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's democratically elected leader, had kept his country out of the war by making concessions to both communists and non-communists. But by 1969, he had been more generous to the communists, since it became clear to him which side was winning; in return, China and the Soviet Union supported Sihanouk, preventing the Khmer Rouge from growing into a serious military threat.

Dr. Kissinger, the self-professed gifted scholar of geopolitics, smashed that delicate equilibrium. Instead of using his considerable talents to continue negotiations for a peaceful solution to the Vietnam War, as Mr. Nixon promised voters in 1968, Dr. Kissinger turned to military subterfuge. He sacrificed Cambodia's neutrality to try and force North Vietnam to accept his terms for an "honourable" peace by bombing Cambodia's border region, which North Vietnamese troops were using to attack the U.S.-backed South Vietnam. That didn't work.

Then, the U.S. signalled to Sihanouk's rivals that it would underwrite Cambodia's entry into the Vietnam War, which helped in prompting the overthrow of Sihanouk in March, 1970, and setting up Lon Nol as head of state, who ordered Vietnamese communists to leave the country. The U.S. immediately poured millions of dollars in aid and weapons into Cambodia.

This plan dramatically backfired, too. Instead of retreating, North Vietnamese troops spread across Cambodia, capturing territory from the poorly trained Cambodian army. The U.S. responded by invading Cambodia mere months later.

Americans were shocked and furious. They had expected war to end, not escalate. Millions of students protested; several were killed by National Guard soldiers at Kent State in Ohio and Jackson State in Mississippi. Congress effectively prohibited American troops from fighting in Cambodia, allowing only U.S. air support.

Cambodia was becoming a nightmare. But no matter how dire the situation, Dr. Kissinger encouraged Cambodia to keep fighting the North Vietnamese. Behind the front lines, the Vietnamese communists were preparing to hand over the battle in the country to the growing Khmer Rouge army, supported by China and Sihanouk.

Dragging Cambodia into the war ultimately had relatively little effect on the 1973 peace accords between the U.S. and North Vietnam. Hanoi's biggest concession from earlier drafts was giving up the idea of an interim coalition government in Saigon. Otherwise, North Vietnam won its core demands for the unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. troops without the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from the South, essentially ensuring their victory.

The Khmer Rouge, however, refused to be part of that peace deal. They were winning against the forces of Lon Nol's thoroughly corrupt and inept Cambodian government. To stave off defeat, Dr. Kissinger and Mr. Nixon ordered the 1973 saturation bombing campaign. I interviewed countless survivors fleeing what they called "fire from the sky" that destroyed their fields and livelihoods, forcing them to join the sad exodus to crowded camps around Phnom Penh.

Appalled, Congress forced the end of the bombing in August. Lon Nol's regime proved hopelessly dependent on the American military. The stage was set for victory by the Khmer Rouge in 1975.

From his first day in power, Pol Pot orchestrated a radical and diabolically inhumane revolution. With their unexpected triumph and no experience governing, the Cambodian communists callously ordered the complete evacuation of towns and cities, emptying hospitals, schools, and institutions and sending people into the countryside to crude labour camps. The Khmer Rouge hunted down and killed the leaders of the old society – teachers, soldiers, doctors, artists, bankers, politicians – to create a new classless order. Dissenters were killed.

With little food, poor housing or health care, hundreds of thousands of civilians died in that first year alone. By decapitating society, the Khmer Rouge ensured its revolution would fail, and filled torture centres and killing fields with the corpses of people its leaders blamed for the failures. In three years, nearly two million Cambodians died under the Khmer Rouge.

And in the end, in a striking show of the bankruptcy of Dr. Kissinger's grand strategy, it was communist Vietnam that ultimately invaded and overthrew the communist Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, ending the genocide. To this day, Hanoi has never invaded Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia, the non-communist "dominoes" the U.S. feared would fall – a fear that formed the foundation of U.S. policy.

While the history is complicated, Dr. Kissinger's legacy in Cambodia is not. He cleared the path to Pol Pot.

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