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Waging Endless War From Vietnam to Syria. Kissinger, the Bombardier, How Diplomacy by Air Power Became an All-American Tradition,

By Greg Grandin
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As October ended, White House spokesperson Josh Earnest announced that the U.S. would be sending "less than 50" boots-on-the-ground Special Operations forces into northern Syria in an "advise-and-assist" program for Kurdish rebels and their (essentially nonexistent) Arab allies. Only days before, in yet another example of twenty-first-century mission creep, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter had told Congress that the intensity of U.S. air attacks in Syria would rise "with additional U.S. and coalition aircraft and heavier airstrikes." For this, A-10 and F-15 aircraft were to be deployed to Incirlik Air Base in Turkey.

It was the sort of military promise from Washington — more of the same — that has grown increasingly familiar in these years and could be summed up by adapting that old DuPont ad line, "better living through chemistry": a better world through bombing. Unfortunately for such plans, the verdict has long been in: air power as a decisive factor in American war in this century has proven a dismal failure. Even in skies that, with the rarest of exceptions, offer no dangers whatsoever (other than mechanical failure) to fighter jets, bombers, and drones, even in situations in which munitions can be delivered to any chosen spot with alacrity and without opposition by aircraft freely patrolling the skies overhead, air power has proven a weapon from hell in every sense of the world. Complete "air superiority" has been a significant factor, as in Libya, in the creation of a string of failed states (and so breeding grounds for terror outfits) across the Greater Middle East. In its post-modern "manhunting" form, grimly named Predator and Reaper drones have managed to kill thousands of leaders, lieutenants, sub-lieutenants, and rank-and-file militants in various terrorist organizations, as well as significant numbers of civilians, including children. Recently leaked documents on Washington's drone assassination campaigns indicate that, in at least one period in Afghanistan, only 10% of those killed were actually targeted for death. And yet the president's drone assassination campaign in several countries (based in part on a White House "kill list" and "terror Tuesday" meetings to decide whom to target) seems only to have helped foster the exponential growth of terror outfits across the Greater Middle East and Africa.

In these years, air power has, in fact, been closely associated with one fiasco or policy disappointment after another. To take a single recent example: President Obama began his "no boots on the ground" air campaign against the Islamic State (IS) and its "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq in September 2014. Now, more than a year and thousands of air strikes later, though large numbers of IS militants and some of its leaders have died, the movement continues to more than hold its own in Iraq, while expanding into new areas of Syria. There

is no evidence that Washington's air war in support of well... it's a little unclear who — now being emulated by the Russians in support of Syria's brutal autocrat Bashar al-Assad — has met any of its goals.

And yet from all of this, the only conclusion repeatedly drawn in Washington is to do it again. That air power in its various forms has added up to both a war of terror (that is, on civilian populations below) and a war for terror, that it has become a recruitment poster for terror outfits evidently matters not at all. In Washington, no conclusions are seemingly drawn from the actual record of these last 14 years, nor from a far longer historical record of air power disappointments, of repeated times in which much was destroyed and countless people, especially civilians, killed to no decisive effect whatsoever. As Greg Grandin points out today, that phenomenon stretches back at least to Vietnam (if not Korea). In his second piece at TomDispatch on the eternal Henry Kissinger (92 and still writing op-eds for the Wall Street Journal), based on his remarkable new book, Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman, Grandin reminds us of what a pioneer in the horrors of modernity the good "doctor" really was. Tom

Kissinger, the Bombardier: How Diplomacy by Air Power Became an All-American Tradition,

By Greg Grandin

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.

President George H.W. Bush soon launched Operation Desert Shield, sending an enormous contingent of troops to Saudi Arabia. But once there, what exactly were they to do? Contain Iraq? Attack and liberate Kuwait? Drive on to Baghdad and depose Saddam? There was no clear consensus among foreign policy advisers or analysts. Prominent conservatives, who had made their names fighting the Cold War, offered conflicting advice. Former ambassador to the U.N. Jeane Kirkpatrick, for instance, opposed any action against Iraq. She didn't think that Washington had a "distinctive interest in the Gulf" now that the Soviet Union was gone. Other conservatives pointed out that, with the Cold War over, it mattered little whether Iraqi Baathists or local sheiks pumped Kuwait's oil as long as it made it out of the ground.

Kissinger took the point position in countering those he called America's "new isolationists." What Bush did next in Kuwait, he announced in the first sentence of a widely published syndicated column, would make or break his administration. Anything short of the liberation of Kuwait would turn Bush's "show of force" in Saudi Arabia into a "debacle."

Baiting fellow conservatives reluctant to launch a crusade in the Gulf, he insisted, in Cold War-ish terms that couldn't fail to bite, that their advice was nothing short of "abdication." There were, he insisted, "consequences" to one's "failure to resist." He may, in fact, have been the first person to compare Saddam Hussein to Hitler. In opinion pieces, TV appearances, and testimony before Congress, Kissinger forcefully argued for intervention, including the "surgical and progressive destruction of Iraq's military assets" and the removal of the Iraqi leader from power. "America," he insisted, "has crossed its Rubicon" and there was no turning back.

He was once again a man of the moment. But how expectations had shifted since 1970!

When President Bush launched his bombers on January 17, 1991, it was in the full glare of the public eye, recorded for all to see. There was no veil of secrecy and no secret furnaces, burned documents, or counterfeited flight reports. After a four-month-long on-air debate among politicians and pundits, “smart bombs” lit up the sky over Baghdad and Kuwait City as the TV cameras rolled. Featured were new night-vision equipment, real-time satellite communications, and former U.S. commanders ready to narrate the war in the style of football announcers right down to instant replays. “In sports-page language,” said CBS News anchor Dan Rather on the first night of the attack, “this… it’s not a sport. It’s war. But so far, it’s a blowout.”

And Kissinger himself was everywhere — ABC, NBC, CBS, PBS, on the radio, in the papers — offering his opinion. “I think it’s gone well,” he said to Dan Rather that very night.

It would be a techno-display of such apparent omnipotence that President Bush got the kind of mass approval Kissinger and Nixon never dreamed possible. With instant replay came instant gratification, confirmation that the president had the public’s backing. On January 18th, only a day into the assault, CBS announced that a new poll “indicates extremely strong support for Mr. Bush’s Gulf offensive.”

“By God,” Bush said in triumph, “we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”

Saddam Hussein’s troops were easily driven out of Kuwait and, momentarily, it looked like the outcome would vindicate the logic behind Kissinger’s and Nixon’s covert Cambodian air campaign: that the US should be free to use whatever military force it needed to compel the political outcome it sought. It seemed as if the world Kissinger had long believed he ought to live in was finally coming into being.

…toward 9/11

Saddam Hussein, however, remained in power in Baghdad, creating a problem of enormous proportions for Bush’s successor, Bill Clinton. Increasingly onerous sanctions, punctuated by occasional cruise missile attacks on Baghdad, only added to the crisis. Children were starving; civilians were being killed by U.S. missiles; and the Baathist regime refused to budge.

Kissinger watched all of this with a kind of detached amusement. In a way, Clinton was following his lead: he was bombing a country with which we weren’t at war and without congressional approval in part to placate the militarist right. In 1998, at a conference commemorating the 25th anniversary of the accords that ended the Vietnam War, Kissinger expressed his opinion on Iraq. The real “problem,” he said, is will. You need to be willing to “break the back” of somebody you refuse to negotiate with, just as he and Nixon had done in Southeast Asia. “Whether we got it right or not,” Kissinger added, “is really secondary.”

That should count as a remarkable statement in the annals of “political realism.”

Not surprisingly then, in the wake of 9/11, Kissinger was an early supporter of a bold military response. On August 9, 2002, for instance, he endorsed a policy of regime change in Iraq in his syndicated column, acknowledging it as “revolutionary.” “The notion of justified pre-emption,” he wrote, “runs counter to modern international law,” but was nonetheless necessary because of the novelty of the “terrorist threat,” which “transcends the nation-state.”

There was, however, “another, generally unstated, reason for bringing matters to a head with Iraq”: to “demonstrate that a terrorist challenge or a systemic attack on the international order also produces catastrophic consequences for the perpetrators, as well as their supporters.” To be — in true Kissingerian fashion — in the good graces of the most militaristic members of an American administration, the ultimate political “realist” was, in other words, perfectly willing to ignore that the secular Baathists of Baghdad were the enemies of Islamic jihadists, and that Iraq had neither perpetrated 9/11 nor supported the perpetrators of 9/11. After all, being “right or not is really secondary” to the main issue: being willing to do something decisive, especially use air power to “break the back” of… well, whomever.

Less than three weeks later, Vice President Dick Cheney, laying out his case for an invasion of Iraq before the national convention of Veterans of Foreign Wars, quoted directly from Kissinger’s column. “As former Secretary of State Kissinger recently stated,” said Cheney, there is “an imperative for pre-emptive action.”

In 2005, after the revelations about the cooking of intelligence and the manipulation of the press to neutralize opposition to the invasion of Iraq, after Fallujah and Abu Ghraib, after it became clear that the real beneficiary of the occupation would be revolutionary Iran, Michael Gerson, George W. Bush’s speechwriter, paid a visit to Kissinger in New York. Public support for the war was by then plummeting and Bush’s justifications for waging it expanding. America’s “responsibility,” he had announced earlier that year in his second inaugural address, was to “rid the world of evil.”

Gerson, who had helped write that speech, asked Kissinger what he thought of it. “At first I was appalled,” Kissinger said, but then he came to appreciate it for instrumental reasons. “On reflection,” as Bob Woodward recounted in his book *State of Denial*, he “now believed the speech served a purpose and was a very smart move, setting the war on terror and overall U.S. foreign policy in the context of American values. That would help sustain a long campaign.”

At that meeting, Kissinger gave Gerson a copy of an infamous memo he had written Nixon in 1969 and asked him to pass it along to Bush. “Withdrawal of U.S. troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public,” he had warned, “the more U.S. troops come home, the more will be demanded.” Don’t get caught in that trap, Kissinger told Gerson, for once withdrawals start, it will become “harder and harder to maintain the morale of those who remain, not to speak of their mothers.”

Kissinger then reminisced about Vietnam, reminding Gerson that incentives offered through negotiations must be backed up by credible threats of an unrestrained nature. As an example, he brought up one of the many “major” ultimatums he had given the North Vietnamese, warning of “dire consequences” if they didn’t offer the concessions needed for the U.S. to withdraw from Vietnam “with honor.” They didn’t.

“I didn’t have enough power,” was how Kissinger summarized his experience more than three decades later.

Will the Circle Be Unbroken?

When it comes to American militarism, conventional wisdom puts the idealist Samantha Power and the realist Kissinger at opposite ends of a spectrum. Conventional wisdom is

wrong, as Kissinger himself has pointed out. Last year, while promoting his book *World Order,* he responded to questions about his controversial policies by pointing to Obama. There was, he said, no difference between what he did with B-52s in Cambodia and what the president was doing with drones in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. When asked about his role in overthrowing Salvador Allende, the democratically elected president of Chile in 1973, he insisted that his actions had been retrospectively justified by what Obama and Power did in Libya and wanted to do in Syria.

Kissinger's defense was, of course, partly fatuous, especially his absurd assertion that fewer civilians had died from the half-million tons of bombs he had dropped on Cambodia than from the Hellfire missiles of Obama's drones. (Credible estimates put civilian fatalities in Cambodia at more than 100,000; drones are blamed for about 1,000 civilian deaths.) He was right, however, in his assertion that many of the political arguments he made in the late 1960s to justify his illegal and covert wars in Cambodia and Laos, considered at the time way beyond mainstream thinking, are now an unquestioned, very public part of American policymaking. This was especially true of the idea that the U.S. has the right to violate the sovereignty of a neutral country to destroy enemy "sanctuaries." "If you threaten America, you will find no safe haven," Barack Obama has said, offering Kissinger his retroactive absolution.

Here, then, is a perfect expression of American militarism's unbroken circle. Kissinger invokes today's endless, open-ended wars to justify his diplomacy by air power in Cambodia and elsewhere nearly half a century ago. But what he did then created the conditions for today's endless wars, both those started by Bush's neocons and those waged by Obama's war-fighting liberals like Samantha Power. So it goes in Washington.

Greg Grandin, a TomDispatch regular, teaches history at New York University. He is the author of Fordlandia, The Empire of Necessity, which won the Bancroft Prize in American history, and, most recently, Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman.
