

BLOOD - BATH IN BENGAL

American Intervention in
East Pakistan, 1971

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At 11 o'clock on the night of August 14, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru delivered his first speech as India's first prime minister to the Constituent Assembly in New Delhi. "At the stroke of the midnight hour," he said, "India will awaken to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history ... when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance."¹ Nehru's eloquent optimism — and the broader historical import of India's independence — would soon be eclipsed by the cataclysmic violence of partition. In the months prior to independence, the British government had assigned barrister Sir Cyril Radcliffe the task of delineating two new countries on the subcontinent, India and Pakistan, which would serve as the homelands for Hindus and Muslims, respectively.² In just six weeks, from his palatial bungalow in New Delhi, Radcliffe redrew the boundaries of the Indian subcontinent, creating a Hindu-majority India flanked by Muslim-majority West Pakistan (modern-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh). During the ensuing partition, Hindus and Muslims slaughtered each other wholesale. Of the nine million people who crossed the newly drawn borders — one of the largest migrations in human history — one million died.³

It is against this backdrop of ethnoreligious hostility and historical antagonism that the broader story of American intervention in South Asia can be best understood. Since the gruesome upheaval of 1947, India and Pakistan have remained rivals, regularly engaging in full-scale wars, cross-border skirmishes, and diplomatic spats over Kashmir.⁴ But their enmity does not exist in a vacuum, limited to two peoples and two governments with two competing visions of territorial integrity. Though South Asia rarely registers as a national security priority for most Americans, the region became a tense Cold War battleground in the 1960s and 1970s, as both the United States and Soviet Union sought to advance their ideological and strategic interests there. In one of the lesser known but most sobering episodes of American intervention, the United States vigorously backed the Pakistani central government's brutal persecution of the people of East Pakistan.

This paper seeks to draw attention to that episode, underscore its implications, and shed light on the moral failings and human costs associated with American intervention. In 1971, the United States provided diplomatic support and arms to the Pakistani government as it repressed dissent in Bangladesh. Pakistan, in exchange, assisted Washington's anti-communist objectives and facilitated the normalization of American relations with Beijing. In the long run, this intervention on Pakistan's behalf proved to be lethally self-defeating: Bangladesh was left immiserated and unstable, and Pakistan, dependent on American aid, became a leading sponsor of the terror groups that nakedly undermine American interests in the twenty-first century.

Few Americans today are taught about the United States' role in the Bangladesh geno-

1 Quoted in Dilip Hiro, *The Longest August* (New York: Nation Books, 2005), 103.

2 Frank Jacobs, "Peacocks at Sunset," *The New York Times* (New York), July 3, 2012, Opinionator, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/03/peacocks-at-sunset/>.

3 Hiro, *The Longest August*, 102.

4 Hiro, *The Longest August*, xv.

cide. This historical amnesia poses a grave threat to future generations, who cannot devise a more prudent foreign policy without a comprehensive understanding of past errors. A moment of reckoning with American complicity in genocide — when, as Nehru might put it, the conscience of American foreign policy, long suppressed, can find utterance — is urgently overdue.

The Bloodbath in Bengal

The roots of the 1971 conflict lie in natural disaster. On November 13, 1970, a cyclone with 150 miles-per-hour winds steamrolled the densely populated territory of East Pakistan. It was the deadliest tropical cyclone ever recorded, killing between 230,000 and 500,000 Bengalis.⁵ While an international coalition worked to provide relief to East Pakistan, West Pakistan, largely spared from the chaos, responded lethargically and delivered little support.⁶ As the development officer in charge of American aid efforts in East Pakistan observed, “the West Pakistani government didn’t do anything, and other countries did a lot, led by our own.”⁷

Many Bengalis saw this lassitude as further proof of their oppression at the hands of elite, Urdu-speaking Punjabis in West Pakistan. Underrepresented in the country’s military and political institutions but responsible for the production of most of its exports, residents of East Pakistan — who spoke Bengali and had a distinct Bengali culture — resented their marginalization.⁸ When Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan, the third president of Pakistan, announced a new round of elections to be held on December 7, 1970, the first in Pakistan’s history, Bengalis seized the opportunity to express their grievances.⁹ Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman, a widely popular advocate of Bengali autonomy, enjoyed a decisive victory in the elections. Mujib-ur-Rahman’s party, the Awami League, captured 167 out of the 169 seats allocated to East Pakistan.¹⁰ Shocked by the results, and unwilling to yield any of his authority, Yahya Khan postponed the official start of the National Assembly, effectively cancelling the results of the election.¹¹ Three weeks later, on March 25, as the Bengali populace agitated in protest, Khan ordered what would be called Operation Searchlight, a military crackdown on dissent in East Pakistan.¹²

Pakistani armed forces commenced a violent campaign of repression, specifically targeting intellectuals, Hindus, and journalists.¹³ In the operation’s early stages, Pakistani soldiers shot professors at Dhaka University and shelled dormitories; 500 students were

5 Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 22.

6 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 23.

7 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 23.

8 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 21.

9 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 22.

10 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 25-26.

11 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 28.

12 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 50.

13 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, xi.

killed in two days.¹⁴ By May 1971, two million refugees had escaped to India, with 50,000 more arriving daily. Already responsible for a large and undernourished population, the Indian government could not allow the refugee crisis to continue and undertook retaliatory action.¹⁵ (To be sure, New Delhi's motives were not purely altruistic. The chaos in East Pakistan was also a convenient opportunity to undermine a longtime rival.) India trained over 50,000 Mukti Bahani, Bengali fighters who fought an effective guerrilla campaign against the Pakistani military in East Pakistan.¹⁶ When Pakistani warplanes preemptively bombed Indian air bases on December 3, India jumped on the chance to execute its own military campaign.¹⁷ In a matter of weeks, India asserted control over East Pakistan's airspace; combined Indian and Mukti Bahani ground forces swept through the country and routed Pakistan's army contingents, taking 90,000 prisoners of war.¹⁸ The Bengalis soon declared independence from Pakistan and created the new nation of Bangladesh.

The human cost of this freedom was staggering. Somewhere between 200,000 and 3 million Bengalis were killed.¹⁹ (The estimates vary considerably, depending on the political affiliation.) Roughly 400,000 women and girls were subjected to repeated rape and torture; the number of war-babies they birthed is unknown.²⁰ The memory of this genocidal violence lingers fresh in the consciousness and politics of contemporary Bangladesh, and has had a lasting effect on the country's development.

The American Rationale for Intervention

The United States had two clear strategic aims in assisting Pakistan, even as Yahya Khan's regime violently repressed Bengali dissent. First, the United States aimed to secure Pakistan as an anti-communist collaborator in its prosecution of the Cold War, and, correspondingly, wanted to stifle India, which had gravitated toward the Soviet orbit in the 1960s and early 1970s. Second, the White House desperately needed Pakistan to facilitate the commencement of diplomatic relations with China — a move that could dramatically weaken Moscow. None of these imperatives had much to do with Bangladesh, but both drove the White House to tolerate and finance the West Pakistani crackdown there.

American officials had long suspected India of communist sympathies and sought to empower Pakistan in the hopes that the nation would become a viable counterweight on the South Asian peninsula. A leader in the nonaligned movement in the mid-twentieth

14 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, xii.

15 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 120.

16 Hiro, *The Longest August*, 208.

17 Hiro, *The Longest August*, 209.

18 Hiro, *The Longest August*, 214–216.

19 Christopher Paul et al., "Bangladesh, 1971 Case Outcome: COIN Loss," in *Paths to Victory* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013), 342, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhjsk.40>.

20 Anushay Hossain, "Why is the mass sexualized violence of Bangladesh's Liberation War being ignored?," *The New York Times* (New York), March 25, 2016, Opinion, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/03/25/why-is-the-mass-sexualized-violence-of-bangladeshs-liberation-war-being-ignored/>.

century, India's leaders repeatedly spurned Washington's ideological priorities and flirted with socialism, embittering American officials. For example, India was the first noncommunist country to recognize the People's Republic of China's sovereignty over mainland China, and refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty.²¹ Indira Gandhi, the third prime minister of India, further agitated US leaders when she extended birthday wishes to Ho Chi Minh, leader of the North Vietnamese communists who were then fighting American forces.²² Though Indo-American relations were not always antagonistic — 14 million tons of American wheat saved India from famine in 1967 — the United States never assigned India much weight in its foreign policy.²³ As the war in Vietnam raged, India seemed like a peripheral country with too many collectivistic tendencies and too many poor people to matter.²⁴ The final straw came in August 1971, when India and the Soviet Union signed a strategic cooperation treaty. President Richard B. Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, privately denounced India as “a Soviet stooge, supported with Soviet arms.”²⁵

Frustrated with the nonaligned and leftist leanings of the Indian government, the United States found a reliable anti-communist partner in Pakistan and furnished it generously with aid. In the early 1950s, Washington's diplomatic and defense establishment came to see Pakistan as a critical element of the American containment strategy.²⁶ A 1949 study conducted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff found that Pakistan's proximity to oil in the Middle East and the Soviet Union made it an ideal location for intelligence operations and military bases.²⁷

For the Pakistanis, though, the United States was not a providential friend, but rather a convenient source of cash. Just months after independence, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's first prime minister, requested \$2 billion in loans from the United States.²⁸ While the State Department denied that request, Islamabad's strategic potential and its willingness to service the United States' Cold War objectives impressed American officials. On a May 1953 trip to Pakistan, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles cabled, “Paki-

21 Hiro, *The Longest August*, 208; Dennis Kux, *Estranged Democracies*, 1994 ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1993), 263.

22 Kux, *Estranged Democracies*, 259.

23 Kux, *Estranged Democracies*, 258.

24 Kux, *Estranged Democracies*, 268.

25 Office of the Historian, U.S. State Department, “Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, December 8, 1971, 8:03-8:12 p.m.” *Foreign Relations, 1969-1976*, Volume E-7, Documents on South Asia, 1969-1972, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e7/483538.htm>.

26 Robert J. McMahon, “United States Cold War Strategy in South Asia: Making a Military Commitment to Pakistan, 1947-1954,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (December 1988): 818.

27 McMahon, “United States Cold War Strategy in South Asia: Making a Military Commitment to Pakistan, 1947-1954,” 818.

28 McMahon, “United States Cold War Strategy in South Asia: Making a Military Commitment to Pakistan, 1947-1954,” 818.

stan is one country that has moral courage to do its part in resisting communism.”²⁹

Pakistan proved to be an acquiescent ally to the United States, eagerly supporting American multilateral efforts to prevent the spread of international communism. In 1954, Pakistan became a founding member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization; in 1955, it joined Turkey and Iran to form the Central Treaty Organization.³⁰ In exchange, the United States dramatically overhauled the Pakistani armed forces. In 1954, the two countries signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, which quadrupled American military aid to Pakistan from \$266 million in 1955 to \$1.086 billion in 1956.³¹ Between 1954 and 1965, the United States delivered 640 tanks, infrastructure for modern air bases, and squadrons of fighter jets, B-57 bombers, and C-130 transport planes.³² By 1964, the United States was supplying enough aid to Pakistan to constitute 5% of its gross domestic product.³³ The Nixon administration zealously continued this tradition of American aid to Pakistan and delivered \$50 million of armored personnel carriers and aircraft to Pakistan in 1970 — just a year before the outbreak of civil conflict in Bangladesh — making an exception to its own 1967 policy of not selling lethal weapons to the Indian subcontinent.³⁴

Personality played a subtle, but notable role, in cementing cooperation between Washington and Islamabad. Nixon and Yahya Khan — the former a democratically elected leader, the latter an authoritarian strongman — enjoyed an unusual friendship. Nixon was an introverted, uncharismatic man with few real friends; Yahya Khan hated civilian politicians, relished his military credentials, and drank copiously.³⁵ The two men’s antisocial idiosyncrasies meshed well, and Nixon maintained a deep admiration for Yahya Khan. As the prospect of war between India and Pakistan loomed closer, Nixon asserted, “[Yahya] will fight. Just as Lincoln would have fought. To him, East Pakistan is part of Pakistan.”³⁶ After the war ended in total calamity for Yahya Khan’s administration and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Bengalis, Nixon maintained his support for the Pakistani cause. Writing in his memoirs in 1992, the former president reflected, “No other country has shown comparable courage in serving as a frontline state against Soviet aggression.”³⁷

The White House’s desire to forge a diplomatic relationship with China further

29 Kux, *Estranged Democracies*, 109; John Foster Dulles, “The Secretary of State to the Department of State,” (telegram, May 26, 1953), accessed December 7, 2017, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v09p1/d49>.

30 Hiro, *The Longest August*, 146.

31 Hiro, *The Longest August*, 144–146.

32 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 4.

33 S. Akbar Zaidi, “Who Benefits from US Aid to Pakistan?,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 32 (August 6, 2012): 104.

34 Kux, *Estranged Democracies*, 284.

35 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 7–8.

36 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 209.

37 Richard M. Nixon, *Seize the Moment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 206.

deterred the United States from restraining the Pakistani regime's crackdown in Bangladesh. Yahya Khan served as the critical broker between Washington and Beijing. The Nixon administration calculated that a conciliated China could advance American foreign policy goals: North Korea could be cut off from one of its primary suppliers, and Beijing could be extricated from Moscow's sphere of influence, creating friction in the socialist bloc and counterbalancing Soviet power.³⁸ In addition, the reinvigoration of relations with China could influence politics at home, and secure for Nixon the support of American liberals in his reelection campaign.³⁹

Perhaps the most pressing imperative, though, was the White House's hunt for a sweeping legacy in foreign affairs. As the limits of American power became increasingly apparent in the 1960s, Nixon and Kissinger hungered for a momentous achievement that would defy premonitions of American decline and immortalize them as heroes of American foreign policy.⁴⁰ Bringing China into the family of nations, and, in the process, stabilizing the international system, soon became their priority. "We moved toward China not to expiate liberal guilt over our China policy of the late 1940s," Kissinger later wrote, "but to shape a global equilibrium."⁴¹ After a series of top-secret meetings and sensitive back-channels, Nixon visited China in 1972, bringing about one of most unexpected rapprochements of modern diplomatic history.⁴²

Yahya Khan proved indispensable to American efforts. He intermediated discreetly and dependably between the White House and Chinese leaders.⁴³ And, because Yahya Khan wielded total control of the Pakistani government as a dictator, Nixon could effectively limit the number of bureaucrats and foreign agents who knew about his plan.⁴⁴ As a prelude to Nixon's 1972 trip, Yahya Khan arranged an elaborate plan for Kissinger to visit China: In 1971, Kissinger traveled to Pakistan, feigned illness and retreated to a hill station, whereupon he covertly flew off to Beijing for meetings.⁴⁵ Both Nixon and Kissinger saw these secretive diplomatic maneuvers in glorious terms. Kissinger claimed that, while in China, he had "the most searching, sweeping and significant discussions I have ever had in government," and that he "laid the groundwork for [Nixon] and Mao to turn a page in history."⁴⁶ Nixon, encouraged by Beijing's positive reception, believed he was "sitting at a great watershed in history, clearly the greatest since WWII."⁴⁷

38 Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 350; Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 355.

39 Hersh, *The Price of Power*, 350.

40 Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 110.

41 Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 192.

42 Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World*, 108.

43 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 145.

44 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 147.

45 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 158.

46 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 172.

47 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 159.

Nixon and Kissinger understood that sustaining their historic mission and Yahya Khan's cooperation would require overlooking the less salubrious facets of Khan's violent regime, such as its penchant for violence. As Kissinger wrote in 1972 about the genocide in Bangladesh, "We had few means to affect the situation. We had, moreover, every incentive to maintain Pakistan's goodwill. It was our crucial link to Peking; and Pakistan was one of China's closest allies."⁴⁸ For the White House, the calculation was simple: the humanitarian toll of Yahya Khan's violent response in East Pakistan was worth his regime's utility as an anti-communist bulwark in South Asia and the potential rewards of a blank slate with China.

Washington's Approach to Bangladesh

The American intervention in Bangladesh was not archetypal. The United States did not itself conduct air strikes, deploy soldiers, or recruit any proxy combatants. Yet, despite the mass atrocities committed by West Pakistan's armed forces, the American government continued to deliver economic and military aid to Islamabad, engage in gunboat diplomacy to intimidate Pakistan's enemies, and refrain from using any of its political leverage to stop the crackdown. In this way, the White House's subtle support of Pakistan — a clear, knowing policy of support for an indispensable Cold War ally's heavy-handedness — constituted an intervention. The silence of American officials during the mass murder of Bengalis proved to be just as deafening as the carpet bombing of Vietnam.

In the years leading up to the 1971 conflict, the United States and Pakistan had enjoyed an extensive military partnership. When the Pakistani armed forces began Operation Searchlight in 1971, the Nixon administration accelerated its provision of support, going so far as to break federal law. For example, the White House approved arms transfers to Pakistan by way of Jordan and Iran, which was illegal under the arms embargo set up after the 1965 war between India and Pakistan.⁴⁹ These American-made arms made their way into the hands of Pakistani soldiers, who then used them to carry out the carnage. West Pakistani forces flew in on C-130 transport planes, advanced through the city of Dhaka with the cover of M24 Chaffee tanks, and launched airstrikes against the civilian population using F-86 Sabre fighter jets.⁵⁰ The White House was aware that American-made weapons were enabling the slaughter of innocent Bengalis.⁵¹ And Nixon, it seems, knew that an American-supplied arsenal could be adapted for the purposes of domestic repression. He had once told Hajj Suharto, the strongman who served as Indonesia's second president for 31 years, that, "sufficient military strength is essential also for internal security."⁵²

48 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 853.

49 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, xv.

50 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 50, 68.

51 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 67.

52 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 68.

The United States also made a muscular show of force in December 1971 to discourage the Indian military, which was advancing rapidly toward Dhaka, from turning its guns toward West Pakistan. Nixon ordered a carrier group, headed by the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, into the Bay of Bengal, supposedly to evacuate American citizens.⁵³ However, such a facade for the deployment was betrayed by the imposing array of warships included in the group: the USS Tripoli, a helicopter carrier, seven destroyers, and an oil refueling ship.⁵⁴ Provocatively, the fleet set sail from the Gulf of Tonkin, the site of an alleged attack on American vessels that was used to justify the escalation of the American military presence in Vietnam.⁵⁵ Kissinger wanted the carrier group to dampen Indian aspirations of territorial conquest on the western front, and to "give emphasis to our warnings about West Pakistan."⁵⁶

Finally, the White House's silence served as a potent instrument of American intervention in Bengal. At a meeting in the Situation Room in 1971, Kissinger told American officials that, "[Nixon] doesn't want to do anything. He doesn't want to be in a position where he can be accused of having encouraged the split-up of Pakistan... This probably means that we would not undertake to warn Yahya against a civil war."⁵⁷ American diplomats, witnessing the massacre unfolding in East Pakistan, vehemently protested this inaction. On March 28, 1971, Archer Blood, the American Consul General to Dhaka, sent Washington a telegram entitled "Selective Genocide," writing, "Here in Dacca we are mute and horrified witnesses to a reign of terror by the Pak military..."⁵⁸ A little over a week later, on April 6, Blood again cabled Washington, writing one of the first and likely the most forceful expressions of dissent in the history of the American foreign service. Co-signed with 20 other diplomatic staff, the telegram, known now as the infamous "Blood Telegram," reads:

Our government has failed to denounce the suppression of democracy. Our government has failed to denounce atrocities. Our government has failed to take forceful measures to protect its citizens while at the same time bending over backwards to placate the West Pak dominated government and to lessen likely and deservedly negative international public relations impact against them. Our government has evidenced what many will consider moral bankruptcy.⁵⁹

53 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 311.

54 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 311.

55 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 311.

56 Kux, *Estranged Democracies*, 305.

57 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 56.

58 Archer K. Blood, "Selective Genocide," (telegram, May 28, 1971), accessed December 7, 2017, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve07/d125>.

59 Archer K. Blood, "Dissent From U.S. Policy Toward East Pakistan," (telegram, April 6, 1971), accessed December 7, 2017, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v11/d19>.

Blood's moral alarm, and his repeated exhortations that "the overworked term genocide is applicable" to the violence in Bangladesh, did not move Nixon. Despite the fact that American government had substantial leverage over Pakistan and that calls to moderate relations with Yahya Khan were growing at home, the White House refused to make any statements denouncing the campaign in East Pakistan. "I wouldn't put out a statement praising it," Nixon said, "but we're not going to condemn it either."⁶⁰ Instead of revulsion, Nixon and Kissinger felt a deep sense of sympathy for Yahya Khan. In one conversation in the Oval Office, Kissinger thought the strongman's iron-fisted effort to reassert control over East Pakistan "The use of power against seeming odds pays off," he said. Apparently convinced, Nixon replied, "Hell, when you look over the history of nations 30,000 well-disciplined people can take 75 million any time."⁶¹

The White House's reticence in the face of preventable horror reflected just how myopically obsessed American officials had become with the project of anti-communism. The human cost of backing Pakistan — just because it could serve as an ally and diplomatic intermediary against the Soviet Union — did not seem to factor even marginally into the judgement of Nixon and Kissinger, who were both too consumed with the potential momentousness of their own legacies to care about the plight of real people. Further, their silence revealed a fundamental truth about interventions more generally: inaction on the world stage can be just as gory, debilitating, and devoid of moral direction as deliberate action.

The Consequences of Genocide

The long-term consequences of American intervention in East Pakistan and its continued support for a genocidal Pakistani regime were staggering. It is difficult to overstate the extent of the psychological, social, and economic trauma levied by the genocide. Since its independence, Bangladesh has endured spells of political instability and struggled to grow its economy. The violence of 1971 — and the destruction it wrought — dramatically undermined the trajectory of Bangladeshi development.

Even the United States, a superpower thousands of miles away from the Indian subcontinent, suffered as a result of the intervention. Throughout the twentieth century, Washington fell into the habit of bankrolling Islamabad, so long as it also toed the anti-communist line. But unconditional American funding, in exchange for nominal ideological compliance, has produced a perverse incentive for Pakistan in the long-run. In the twenty-first century, the United States funds Pakistan's military to fight terror groups. But, without terrorists, Pakistan loses its funding. As a result, the Pakistani government actually has an interest in promoting the terror groups that kill American citizens and soldiers, not eliminating them.⁶² More terrorists mean more U.S. dollars. Even Pres-

60 Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, 64.

61 Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and His Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," *Foreign Relations of the United States*, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v11/d14>.

62 Navin A. Bapat, "Transnational terrorism, US military aid, and the incentive to misrepresent," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 3 (May 2011): 303, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23035429>.

ident Donald Trump, not necessarily known for his shrewd grasp of international relations, has recognized this sordid state of affairs. In a June 1, 2018 tweet, Trump wrote, “The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!”⁶³

Though Bangladesh has made significant strides in recent years, many of its current challenges — economic growth and environmental degradation — can be traced to the upheaval of 1971. A 1972 World Bank report assessed that the 1971 war reduced the Bangladeshi economy to shambles: refugees had to be resettled and cared for; the proliferation of weapons made restoring law and order difficult; and a national government had to be restored.⁶⁴ The United Nations found that the war caused \$938 million worth of damage, and that reconstruction would require annual investments amounting to 15% of Bangladesh’s GDP for at least three years.⁶⁵ According to some estimates, the indirect costs of the conflict may exceed \$14 billion.⁶⁶

Governance in Bangladesh has remained volatile since 1971. In its short, 45-year existence, Bangladesh has had a Westminster-style parliamentary government, one-party military rule, and a multi-party presidential system. Today, Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with 163 million people.⁶⁷ Three in 10 Bangladeshis live in poverty; three-quarters live on less than \$1.90 a day.⁶⁸ The growing burdens of overpopulation and poverty only exacerbate the effects of climate change, a fight in which Bangladesh is losing badly.⁶⁹ Riverbank erosion displaces up to 200,000 people annually, and one-quarter of the country is flooded every year. By 2100, 50 million Bangladeshis could be displaced.⁷⁰ Of course, the 1971 war did not directly cause climate change or coastal flooding, but it did create a political climate that makes addressing systemic challenges as enormous as climate-induced flooding more difficult.

63 Donald J. Trump, “The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!,” Twitter, June 1, 2018, 4:12 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/947802588174577664?lang=en>.

64 Ali Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 39.

65 Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence*, 42.

66 Soud Choudhry and Syed Basher, “The Enduring Significance of Bangladesh’s War of Independence: An Analysis of Economic Costs and Consequences” [*The Journal of Developing Areas*], *The Journal of Developing Areas* 36, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 50, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4192901>.

67 World Bank, “Bangladesh,” *World Bank Data Catalog*, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/bangladesh>.

68 “Poverty in Bangladesh,” *Asian Development Bank*, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://www.adb.org/countries/bangladesh/poverty>.

69 Robert Glennon, “The Unfolding Tragedy of Climate Change in Bangladesh,” *Scientific American*, April 21, 2017, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/the-unfolding-tragedy-of-climate-change-in-bangladesh/>.

70 Glennon, “The Unfolding Tragedy of Climate Change in Bangladesh.”

The United States did not immediately bear the human cost of the intervention, but its support for Operation Searchlight forced the country into a profoundly counterproductive partnership with Pakistan. In the decades after 1971, Islamabad grew heavily dependent on the unfettered flow of American aid and invested in sustaining the very problems that attract that aid, like terrorism. Today, Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's chief spy agency, provides funding and logistical support to terrorist groups all over South Asia — including in Afghanistan, where these groups regularly assault American and coalition forces.⁷¹ Among the many terrorist outfits on ISI's roster are the Afghan Taliban, its chapter in Pakistan, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, which killed six Americans in the 2008 attacks in Mumbai.⁷² In perhaps the most egregious instance of subterfuge at American expense, Pakistan provided support and protection to Osama bin Laden, the founder of Al Qaeda. In a 2011 raid, Navy Seals found bin Laden hiding in a compound in Abbottabad, just a few hundred yards away from Pakistan's top military academy.⁷³ That same year, the United States handed Islamabad \$3.5 billion in aid.⁷⁴

In light of Pakistan's skullduggery, a comprehensive reassessment of the United States' approach to Pakistan has become a higher priority for American officials. Still, a meaningful reorientation of the seven-decade-long relationship in the near future seems unlikely. "I can see how this gets worse," Bruce O. Riedel, a career CIA officer and chair of the White House's 2009 policy review of Afghanistan and Pakistan, told the *New York Times* in 2011. "And I can see how this gets catastrophically worse... I don't see how it gets a whole lot better."⁷⁵

As the long list of challenges plaguing Bangladesh and Pakistan's duplicitous sponsorship of terror illustrate, the American intervention in East Pakistan was short-sighted. Motivated by broader aims of anti-communism and rapprochement with China, it ravaged Bangladesh and condemned it to decades of unstable governance and economic underdevelopment. (It is also worth noting here that average Pakistani people — whose government is only nominally under civilian control and whose national resources are monopolized by the military establishment, at the expense of investments in education and public health — are among the most long-suffering victims of American intervention

71 Carlotta Gall, "What Pakistan Knew About Bin Laden," *The New York Times* (New York), March 19, 2014, accessed December 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/magazine/what-pakistan-knew-about-bin-laden.html?_r=0.

72 Bruce Riedel, "How to Repair the U.S.-Pakistan Relationship," *The Brookings Institution*, last modified June 4, 2012, accessed December 3, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/how-to-repair-the-u-s-pakistan-relationship/>.

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75 Bill Keller, "The Pakistanis Have a Point," *The New York Times* (New York), December 14, 2011, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/magazine/bill-keller-pakistan.html>.

in South Asia.) By tolerating Yahya Khan's brazen heavy-handedness in 1971, the United States inadvertently set the stage for a close, but profoundly destabilizing, relationship with Islamabad — one that would come to haunt Americans a few decades later.

Looking Ahead

Most Americans do not know about the horror that unfolded in Bangladesh in 1971, and the American role in enabling and inflaming it. Most Bangladeshis are likely not aware that American officials, at the highest levels of government, disregarded the warnings of their own diplomatic colleagues and knowingly supported the Pakistani regime. But the United States' responsibility for abetting genocide, evidenced by troves of declassified documents and recordings, is incontrovertible. As the United States grapples with the question of how to engage with the world in the twenty-first century, it is time to extricate this episode from the margins of memory and allow it to inform our contemporary approach to foreign policy.

The fundamental conundrum Americans must wrestle with is how far they are willing to permit their government to go in pursuit of ideological and strategic interests. It is true that cooperation with Pakistan advanced Washington's Cold War aims, and that reopening relations with Beijing, as Nixon and Kissinger foresaw, became a defining moment of American diplomacy. But the pursuit of these objectives inflicted a horrific cost onto the peoples of East and West Pakistan. The United States' intervention — which included the transportation of arms and aid to Yahya Khan's regime, the deployment of warships to intimidate Pakistan's opponents, and concerted silence about the genocide — contributed vastly to deprivation in Bangladesh and actively encouraged Islamabad's support for terrorism. In the long term, these outcomes did little to advance American interests or political and economic development in South Asia, and, in fact, undermine them today.

Thankfully, short-sighted interventions, like many of those executed in the twentieth-century, do not have to be fixed pillars of Americans foreign policy. The blowback incurred while carrying them out does not need to remain a self-inflicted reality of American foreign relations. And American exceptionalism does not need to manifest itself through war and violence. Though hubris may never disappear from Washington's policy establishment, it can be moderated — especially by remembering stories of American negligence, like this one, and promulgating them vigorously. By squarely confronting these darker moments of American history, Americans can begin to take stock of their country's purpose in the world, reflect on the moral principles they would like their policymakers to heed, and reconsider the wisdom of regular interventions.

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