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The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, And A Forgotten Genocide



THE BLOOD TELEGRAM

Nixon, Kissinger,
and a Forgotten Genocide

GARY J. BASS

"Devastating. . . . Shocking. . . . This is a dark and amazing tale, an essential reminder." —Dexter Filkins, *The New York Times Book Review*



Synopsis

A riveting history—the first full account—of the involvement of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in the 1971 atrocities in Bangladesh that led to war between India and Pakistan, shaped the fate of Asia, and left in their wake a host of major strategic consequences for the world today. Giving an astonishing inside view of how the White House really works in a crisis, *The Blood Telegram* is an unprecedented chronicle of a pivotal but little-known chapter of the Cold War. Gary J. Bass shows how Nixon and Kissinger supported Pakistan’s military dictatorship as it brutally quashed the results of a historic free election. The Pakistani army launched a crackdown on what was then East Pakistan (today an independent Bangladesh), killing hundreds of thousands of people and sending ten million refugees fleeing to India—one of the worst humanitarian crises of the twentieth century. Nixon and Kissinger, unswayed by detailed warnings of genocide from American diplomats witnessing the bloodshed, stood behind Pakistan’s military rulers. Driven not just by Cold War realpolitik but by a bitter personal dislike of India and its leader Indira Gandhi, Nixon and Kissinger actively helped the Pakistani government even as it careened toward a devastating war against India. They silenced American officials who dared to speak up, secretly encouraged China to mass troops on the Indian border, and illegally supplied weapons to the Pakistani military—an overlooked scandal that presages Watergate. Drawing on previously unheard White House tapes, recently declassified documents, and extensive interviews with White House staffers and Indian military leaders, *The Blood Telegram* tells this thrilling, shadowy story in full. Bringing us into the drama of a crisis exploding into war, Bass follows reporters, consuls, and guerrilla warriors on the ground—from the desperate refugee camps to the most secretive conversations in the Oval Office. Bass makes clear how the United States’ embrace of the military dictatorship in Islamabad would mold Asia’s destiny for decades, and confronts for the first time Nixon and Kissinger’s hidden role in a tragedy that was far bloodier than Bosnia. This is a revelatory, compulsively readable work of politics, personalities, military confrontation, and Cold War brinksmanship.Â

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Customer Reviews

I did not remember much about the 1971 attack by Pakistan on its eastern region (now known as Bengla Desh). It is a terrible story. The basics are that following a national election in which a Bengali from East Pakistan won, the central government dissolved parliament and attacked East Pakistan. It was not a war because the Bengalis were almost all unarmed civilians. It was a slaughter, of millions. The Blood Telegram tells how President Nixon and, even more, Henry Kissinger, gave the Pakistan government a green light to go in and massacre, but refused during the course of the slaughter to indicate, in any way, that the U.S. had a problem with killing innocent people using U.S. supplied arms. In short, the U.S. aided and abetted what amounted to genocide. It is a terrible story but uplifting too because of the resistance of State Department officials, led by the US Consul in East Pakistan (a heroic figure named Blood, of all things!) and the US Ambassador to India, Kenneth Keating. These two, and others, flatout told Nixon and Kissinger that they were supporting genocide, using that word. Neither cared. Both viscerally hated India (too democratic and racially offensive to them PLUS neutral vis a vis the US and USSR) and loved Pakistan (not democratic at all, with the military pretty much running everything). On top of that Pakistan was close to China and Nixon wanted to go to China so....a few million people dead was not a high price to pay. Great book. Every page is a revelation. And the best news: Kissinger is alive to see how history will remember him: as someone utterly indifferent to the slaughter of innocents in East Asia along with his crimes in Vietnam, Chile, etc etc.

This isn't only a tale of genocide or of the civil war that created Bangladesh from what had been East Pakistan but also of how deliberate actions and inaction on the part of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger facilitated the mass slaughter of Bengalis and the forced relocation of millions while the United States destroyed any chance of long term influence in South Asia. The narrative centers on Archer Blood, the last U.S. consul general in Dhaka when it was still the capital of East Pakistan, and the cable he sent through the official State Department ÅfÅ¢Ã ª ¬Ã ª“dissent channelÃfÅ¢Ã ª ¬Ã ª•, a telegram that described the actions of the Pakistani army as genocide against the Bengali people including targeting intellectuals, political leaders and students. Official Washington was able to ignore BloodÃfÅ¢Ã ª ¬Ã ª„cs message simply by declaring that a bloodbath carried out by an American ally using arms supplied from this country and with tacit encouragement by the Richard Nixon himself was an internal matter to be dealt with by Pakistan. The diplomats on the scene (28 State Department officers signed the telegram in addition to Archer Blood) reported that the systematic destruction of Bengali society fit the terms of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide all too well. Unfortunately for those in East Pakistan, Henry Kissinger was cultivating the military ruler of Pakistan, General Yahya Khan as a conduit to the rulers of the PeopleÃfÅ¢Ã ª ¬Ã ª„cs Republic of China so KhanÃfÅ¢Ã ª ¬Ã ª„cs forces were given a free pass to do their worstÃfÅ¢Ã ª ¬Ã ª•and they did. The United States had significant leverage with Khan and could have forced him to put an end to the atrocities committed by his army using U.S. weapons but chose to wash their hands of it. Gary J. Bass has a definite point of view; not to put too fine a point on things he has real contempt for both Nixon and Kissinger. But it is hard to fault his approachÃfÅ¢Ã ª ¬Ã ª•he knows the sources cold and makes excellent use of recently declassified documents, unused White House tapes and hours of interviews with U.S. officials in who had served in Dhaka and Washington as well as Indian Army officers. A former reporter for ÃfÅ¢Ã ª ¬Ã ª“The EconomistÃfÅ¢Ã ª ¬Ã ª•, now an academic historian, Bass knows how to frame a story that has been too little known in this country.

The Blood Telegram is the kind of superbly researched and written history that appears once in a decade. It is based on massive archival research and on Nixon's White House tapes, as well as interviews with a large cast of persons directly involved. The author documents the flow of events faithfully and accurately. His special focus is on Nixon and Kissinger, the American leaders who shaped and guided the United States' response to the unfolding political, humanitarian and finally military crisis in East Pakistan during 1971. How could the United States enable a genocide and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis? Why did Nixon and Kissinger disregard and punish U.S.

Foreign Service Officers who reported the facts about the Pakistan army's slaughter of Bengali academics, university students and ultimately hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children? Why did Nixon like and admire the Pakistani military dictator, Yahya Khan, and despise Indira Gandhi, the elected leader of the world's largest democracy? Why did Nixon and Kissinger, however briefly, exercise brinkmanship that could have led to a major US-Soviet confrontation, even a wider war? I believe the answers to these questions reside in Nixon and Kissinger as leaders who responded almost entirely in terms of the geopolitical paradigm of the Cold War. Throughout, Nixon saw Pakistan as an ally that could not be undercut, or even influenced, for such steps would show weakness in the hoped-for opening to China, and confer advantage to the Soviet Union. The genocide was categorized as an 'internal affair' of Pakistan--even though there had been ample opportunity to use U.S. pressure to alleviate and possibly even prevent it. I personally experienced the events of the Blood Telegram as a member of the U.S. Agency for International Development mission, stationed at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi 1970-1972. As the crisis grew, I read the classified cable message traffic every morning, closely read all available U.S. and Indian press coverage, and discussed the situation with Embassy and USAID colleagues, many of whom were managing refugee relief programs. From that experience, I can add to the book's narrative about the U.S. Consulate General's reporting from Dacca, East Pakistan's capital. After Archer Blood was fired at Nixon's direction, his successor as Consul General was Herbert Spivack, expected to be a 'team player' in downplaying the extent of the on-going Pak army crackdown. Spivack came through New Delhi on his way to Dacca, to be briefed on how the rising tide of refugees was impacting eastern India and on U.S. food assistance to the camps. It was clear from his comments to the Delhi Americans that he understood his intended role. But, to his great credit as a Foreign Service professional, Herb Spivack's reporting from Dacca shortly after his arrival became substantively the same as that of Arch Blood's. But Kissinger couldn't very well fire him too! As seems apparent from his contemptuous and hateful comments ("What India needs is a good famine") recorded from the Oval Office, Nixon had no conception of India as a sovereign nation responding to a unique set of regional circumstances. Throughout, India's role was seen only as an extension of the Cold War chess game, as if India were merely a pawn of the Soviets. Nixon and Kissinger's cynical dismissal of the plight of the refugees--a human tide of ten million people that would have overwhelmed the capacity of even a rich nation to feed and care for--was simply sickening to 'hear' from the mouths of supposedly decent men. In fact, the emergence of Bangladesh had deep roots in regional history that had nothing to do with the Cold War. The salient aspects were the 1947 partition of British India, and the critical role played by east Bengal's mainly Muslim population in securing the very

existence of Pakistan; the effort by the western part to suppress the Bengali language (spoken by a majority of the citizens of the country) in favor of Urdu; the decades-long transfer of resources from the east to finance the industrialization of the western province; and finally, the racial and religious prejudice of the western province's Punjabis and Pathans against 'the Bingos.' (Earnest prayers were offered in Karachi mosques that the Bengalis should become good Muslims!). Autonomy for East Pakistan within a federal framework, or even independence as Bangladesh, could hardly change the power calculus of the Cold War. And from their recorded comments, it appears that both Nixon and Kissinger, on some level, understood this. The real U.S. interest was in West Pakistan, holder of the nation's key asset--control of the Khyber Pass and access to Afghanistan. But this did not stop Kissinger from pulling his last petulant prank--sending the U.S.S. Enterprise, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, into the Bay of Bengal to threaten and harrass the Indians into a premature cease-fire. This move accomplished nothing except to poison U.S.-India relations for a decade.

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