

Henry Kissinger, Top US Diplomat Responsible for Millions of Deaths, Dies at 100

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Henry Kissinger, national security adviser and secretary of state under two presidents and longtime éminence grise of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, died on November 29 at his home in Connecticut. He was 100 years old.

Kissinger helped prolong the Vietnam War and expand that conflict into neutral Cambodia; facilitated genocides in Cambodia, East Timor, and Bangladesh; accelerated civil wars in southern Africa; and supported coups and death squads throughout Latin America. He had the blood of at least 3 million people on his hands, according to his biographer Greg Grandin.

There were “few people who have had a hand in as much death and destruction, as much human suffering, in so many places around the world as Henry Kissinger,” said veteran war crimes prosecutor Reed Brody.

A [2023 investigation](#) by The Intercept found that Kissinger — perhaps the [most powerful national security adviser](#) in American history and the chief architect of U.S. war policy in Southeast Asia from 1969 to 1975 — was responsible for more civilian deaths in Cambodia than was previously known, according to an exclusive archive of U.S. military documents and interviews with Cambodian survivors and American witnesses.

The Intercept [disclosed](#) previously unpublished, [unreported](#), and under-appreciated evidence of [hundreds of civilian casualties](#) that were kept secret during the war and remained [almost entirely unknown](#) to the American people. Kissinger [bore significant responsibility for attacks in Cambodia](#) that killed as many as 150,000 civilians — up to six times more noncombatants than the United States has killed in airstrikes since 9/11, according to experts.



A B-52D on a bombing mission over Southeast Asia (Licensed under the Public Domain)

Born Heinz Alfred Kissinger in Fürth, Germany, on May 27, 1923, he immigrated to the United States in 1938, among a wave of Jews fleeing Nazi oppression. Kissinger became a U.S. citizen in 1943 and served in the U.S. Army's Counter Intelligence Corps during World War II. After graduating summa cum laude from Harvard College in 1950, he earned an M.A. in 1952 and a Ph.D. two years later. He then joined the Harvard faculty, with appointments in the Department of Government and at the Center for International Affairs. While teaching at Harvard, he was a consultant for the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson before serving as national security adviser from 1969 to 1975 and secretary of state from 1973 to 1977 under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. A proponent of realpolitik, Kissinger greatly influenced U.S. foreign policy while serving in government and, in the decades that followed, counseled U.S. presidents and sat on numerous corporate and government advisory boards while authoring a small library of bestselling books on history and diplomacy.

Kissinger married Ann Fleischer in 1949; the two were divorced in 1964. In 1974, he married Nancy Maginnes. He is survived by his wife, two children from his first marriage, Elizabeth and [David](#), and [five grandchildren](#).

As national security adviser, Kissinger played a key role in [prolonging the U.S. wars in Southeast Asia](#), resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of American troops and [hundreds of thousands](#) of Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese. During his tenure, the United States dropped 9 billion pounds of munitions on Indochina.

In 1973, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Kissinger and his North Vietnamese counterpart Le Duc Tho "for jointly having negotiated a cease fire in Vietnam in 1973."

“There is no other comparable honor,” Kissinger would later write of the prize he received for an agreement to end a war he encouraged and extended, a pact that not only failed to stop that conflict but also was almost immediately violated by all parties. [Documents released in 2023](#) show that the prize — among the [most controversial](#) in the award’s history — was given despite the understanding that the war was unlikely to end due to the truce.



USAF UH-1Ps over Cambodia (Licensed under the Public Domain)

Tho refused the award. He said that the U.S. had breached the agreement and aided and encouraged its South Vietnamese allies to do the same, while also casting the deal as an American capitulation. “During the last 18 years, the United States undertook a war of aggression against Vietnam,” he wrote. “American imperialism has been defeated.”

North Vietnam and its revolutionary allies in South Vietnam would topple the U.S.-backed government in Saigon two years later, in 1975. That same year, due in large part to Nixon and Kissinger’s expansion of the war into the tiny, neutral nation of Cambodia, the American-backed military regime there fell to the genocidal Khmer Rouge, whose campaign of overwork, torture, and murder then killed 2 million people, roughly 20 percent of the population. Kissinger almost immediately sought to make common cause with the génocidaires. “You should also tell the Cambodians that we will be friends with them. They are murderous thugs, but we won’t let that stand in our way. We are prepared to improve relations with them,” he [told Thailand’s foreign minister](#).

As secretary of state and national security adviser, Kissinger spearheaded efforts to improve relations with the former Soviet Union and “opened” the People’s Republic of China to the West for the first time since Mao Zedong came to power in 1949. Kissinger also supported genocidal militaries in Pakistan and Indonesia. In the former, Nixon and his national security adviser backed a dictator who — according to CIA estimates — [slaughtered hundreds of thousands of civilians](#); in the latter, Ford and Kissinger gave President Suharto the go-ahead for an invasion of East Timor that resulted in about [200,000 deaths](#) — around [a quarter of the entire population](#).

In Latin America, Nixon and Kissinger plotted to overturn the democratic election of Chile's socialist president Salvador Allende. This included Kissinger's supervision of covert operations — such as the botched kidnapping of Chilean Gen. René Schneider that [ended in Schneider's murder](#) — to destabilize Chile and prompt a military coup.

[“You did a great service to the West in overthrowing Allende,”](#) Kissinger later told Gen. Augusto Pinochet, the leader of the military junta that went on to [kill thousands of Chileans](#).

In Argentina, Kissinger gave another green light, this time to a terror campaign of torture, forced disappearances, and murder by a military junta that overthrew President Isabel Perón. During a June 1976 meeting, Kissinger told the junta's foreign minister, César Augusto Guzzetti:

[“If there are things that have to be done, you should do them quickly.”](#)

The so-called Dirty War that followed would claim the lives of an estimated 30,000 Argentine civilians.

Kissinger's diplomacy also stoked a war in Angola and [prolonged apartheid in South Africa](#). In the Middle East, he [sold out the Kurds in Iraq](#) and, wrote Grandin,

“left that region in chaos, setting the stage for crises that continue to afflict humanity.”

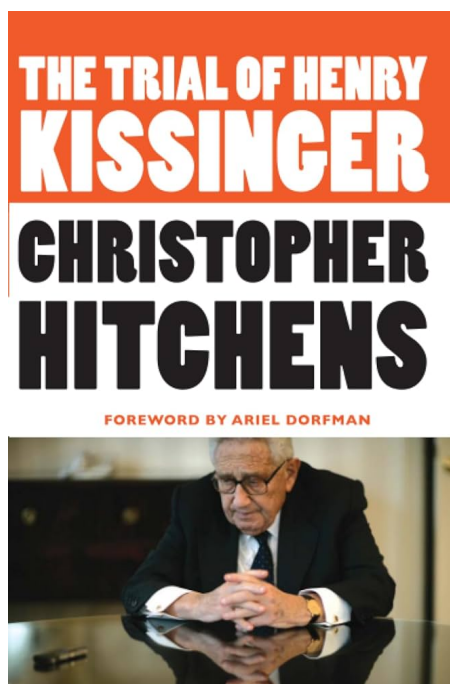
Through a combination of raw ambition, media manipulation, and an uncanny ability to obscure the truth and avoid scandal, Kissinger transformed himself from a college professor and bureaucrat into the most celebrated American diplomat of the 20th century and a bona fide celebrity. Hailed as the [“Playboy of the Western Wing”](#) and the [“sex symbol of the Nixon administration,”](#) he was photographed with starlets and became a fodder for the gossip columns. While dozens of his White House colleagues were laid low by myriad Watergate crimes, which cost Nixon his job in 1974, Kissinger [skirted the scandal](#) and emerged a media darling.

“We were half-convinced that nothing was beyond the capacity of this remarkable man,” ABC News's Ted Koppel said in a 1974 documentary, describing Kissinger as “the most admired man in America.” There was, however, another side to the public figure often praised for his wit and geniality, according to Carolyn Eisenberg, author of “Never Lose: Nixon, Kissinger and the Illusion of National Security,” who spent a decade reading Kissinger's White House telephone transcripts and listening to tapes of his unvarnished conversations. “He had a disturbed personality and was unbelievably adolescent. He admitted he was egotistical, but he was far beyond that,” she told The Intercept. “He was, in many respects, very much stuck at age 14. His opportunism was boundless. His need to be important, to be a celebrity, was gigantic.”

Kissinger was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom — America's highest civilian award — in 1977. In 1982, he founded Kissinger Associates, an international consulting group that became a revolving door refuge for [top national security officials](#) looking to cash in on their government service. The firm leveraged their and Kissinger's reputations and contacts to help huge [multinational corporations, banks, and financial institutions](#) — including American Express, Anheuser-Busch, Coca-Cola, Heinz, Fiat, Volvo, Ericsson, and Daewoo — broker deals with governments.

“A big part of Henry Kissinger’s legacy is the corruption of American foreign policymaking,” Matt Duss, a former adviser to Sen. Bernie Sanders, [told Vox](#) in 2023. “It is blurring the line, if not outright erasing the line, between the making of foreign policy and corporate interests.”

Kissinger counseled [every U.S. president](#) from Nixon through Donald Trump and served as a member of the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board from 1984 to 1990 and the Pentagon’s Defense Policy Board from 2001 to 2016. After being tapped to head the 9/11 Commission, [families of victims](#) raised questions about potential conflicts of interest due to Kissinger’s financial ties with governments that could be implicated in the commission’s work. Kissinger [quit](#) rather than hand over a list of his consultancy’s clients.



In his [2001 book-length indictment](#), “The Trial of Henry Kissinger,” Christopher Hitchens called for Kissinger’s prosecution “for war crimes, for crimes against humanity, and for offenses against common or customary or international law, including conspiracy to commit murder, kidnap, and torture” from Argentina, Bangladesh, Chile and East Timor to Cambodia, Laos, Uruguay, and Vietnam.

Kissinger ducked questions about the bombing of Cambodia, muddied the truth in public comments, and spent half his life lying about his role in the killings there. In the early 2000s, Kissinger was sought for questioning in connection with [human rights abuses](#) by former South American military dictatorships, but he evaded investigators, once declining to appear before a court in France and bolting from Paris after receiving a summons. He was never charged or prosecuted for deaths for which he bore responsibility.

“Much of the world considered Kissinger to be a war criminal, but who would have dared put the handcuffs on an American secretary of state?” asked Brody, who brought historic legal cases against Pinochet, Chadian dictator Hissène Habré, and others. “Kissinger was not once even questioned by a court about any of his alleged crimes, much less prosecuted.”

Kissinger continued to [win coveted awards](#), and [hobnobbed with the rich and famous at black-tie White House dinners](#), Hamptons galas, and other invitation-only events. By the

2010s, the Republican diplomat had become a darling of mainstream Democrats and remained so until his death. Hillary Clinton [called](#) Kissinger “a friend” and said she “relied on his counsel” while serving as secretary of state under President Barack Obama. [Samantha Power](#), who built her reputation and career on human rights advocacy and went on to serve as the Obama administration’s ambassador to the U.N. and the Biden administration’s head of the U.S. Agency for International Development, [befriended Kissinger](#) before receiving the [American Academy of Berlin’s Henry A. Kissinger Prize](#) from Kissinger himself. Biden’s secretary of state, [Antony Blinken](#), also had a [long, cordial relationship](#) with [his distant predecessor](#).

The tables are set for a celebration of Henry Kissinger at 100, hosted by [@EconClubNY](#) at the Yale Club.

What would you ask Dr. Kissinger? pic.twitter.com/EtwfSS4Sx4

— Jonathan Guyer (@mideastXmidwest) [May 23, 2023](#)

Kissinger was [repeatedly feted for his 100th birthday](#) in May 2023. A black-tie gala at the New York Public Library was attended by [Blinken](#); Power; Biden’s CIA director, William J. Burns; [disgraced](#) former CIA director and four-star Gen. David Petraeus; fashion designer [Diane von Furstenberg](#); New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft; former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg; former Google CEO Eric Schmidt; and the Catholic Archbishop of New York Timothy M. Dolan, among other luminaries.

To mark Kissinger’s centenary, Koppel — who became Kissinger’s friend following the 1974 documentary — [conducted a sympathetic interview](#) for CBS News that nonetheless broached the charges that dogged Kissinger for decades.

“There are people at our broadcast who are questioning the legitimacy of even doing an interview with you. They feel that strongly about what they consider, I’ll put it in language they would use, your criminality,” said Koppel.

“That’s a reflection of their ignorance,” [Kissinger replied](#).

When Koppel brought up the bombing of Cambodia, Kissinger got angry.

“Come on. We have been bombing with drones and all kinds of weapons every guerilla unit that we were opposing,” he shot back. “It’s been the same in every administration that I’ve been part of.”

“The consequences in Cambodia were particularly —”

“Come on now.”

“No, no, no, were particularly —”

“This is a program you’re doing because I’m gonna be 100 years old,” Kissinger growled. “And you’re picking a topic of something that happened 60 years ago. You have to know that it was a necessary step. Now, the younger generation feels that if they can raise their emotions, they don’t have to think. If they think, they won’t ask that

question.”

When The Intercept [asked that question about Cambodia](#) — in a more pointed manner — 13 years earlier, Kissinger offered the same dismissive retorts and flashed the same fury. “Oh, come on!” he exclaimed. “What are you trying to prove?” Pressed on the mass deaths of Cambodians resulting from his policies, the senior statesman long praised for his charm, intellect, and erudition told this reporter to “play with it.”

Kissinger’s legacy extends beyond the corpses, trauma, and suffering of the victims he left behind. His policies, Grandin told The Intercept, set the stage for the civilian carnage of the U.S. war on terror from Afghanistan to Iraq, Syria to Somalia, and beyond.

“You can trace a line from the bombing of Cambodia to the present,” said Grandin, author of [“Kissinger’s Shadow.”](#) “The covert justifications for illegally bombing Cambodia became the framework for the justifications of drone strikes and forever war. It’s a perfect expression of American militarism’s unbroken circle.”

Brody, the war crimes prosecutor, says that even with Kissinger’s death, some measure of justice is still possible.

“It’s too late, of course, to put Kissinger in the dock now, but we can still have a reckoning [with] his role in atrocities abroad,” Brody told The Intercept. “Indeed, his death ought to trigger a full airing of U.S. support for abuses around the world during the Cold War and since, maybe even a truth commission, to establish an historical record, promote a measure of accountability, and if the United States were ready to apologize or acknowledge our misdeeds — as we have done in places like Guatemala and Iran — to foster a kind of reconciliation with the countries whose people suffered the abuses.”

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