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Cover image: Telegram #959 from Archer Blood, the U.S. consul general in Dacca, to the State Department, March 28, 1971. The National Archives at College Park, Maryland
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For K.G.B.
[T]he bloody massacre in Bangladesh caused Allende to be forgotten, the din of war in the Sinai Desert drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, . . . and so on, and on and on, until everyone has completely forgotten everything.
—MILAN KUNDERA, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting
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Preface
Archer Blood, the United States' consul general in Dacca, was a gentlemanly diplomat raised in Virginia, a World War II navy veteran in the upswing of a promising Foreign Service career after several tours overseas. He was earnest and precise, known to some of his more unruly subordinates at the U.S. consulate as a good, conventional man.
He had come to like his posting to this impoverished, green, and swampy land. But outside of the consulate's grimy offices, in the steamy heat, the city was dying. Night after night, Blood heard the gunshots. On the night of March 25, 1971, the Pakistan army had begun a relentless crackdown on Bengalis, all across what was then East Pakistan and is today an independent Bangladesh. Untold thousands of people were shot, bombed, or burned to death in Dacca alone. Blood had spent that grim night on the roof of his official residence, watching as tracer bullets lit up the sky, listening to clattering machine guns and thumping tank guns. There were fires across the ramshackle city. He knew the people in the deathly darkness below. He liked them. Many of the civilians facing the bullets were professional colleagues; some were his friends.
It was, Blood and his staffers thought, their job to relay as much of this as they possibly could back to Washington. Witnessing one of the worst atrocities of the Cold War, Blood's consulate documented in horrific detail the slaughter of Bengali civilians: an area the size of two dozen city blocks that had been razed by gunfire; two newspaper office buildings in ruins; thatch-roofed villages in flames; specific targeting of the Bengalis' Hindu minority.
The U.S. consulate gave detailed accounts of the killings at Dacca University, ordinarily a leafy, handsome enclave. At the wrecked
campus, professors had been hauled from their homes to be gunned down. The provost of the Hindu dormitory, a respected scholar of English, was dragged out of his residence and shot in the neck. Blood listed six other faculty members "reliably reported killed by troops," with several more possibly dead. One American who had visited the campus said that students had been "mowed down" in their rooms or as they fled, with a residence hall in flames and youths being machine-gunned.1
"At least two mass graves on campus," Blood cabled. "Stench terrible." There were 148 corpses in one of these mass graves, according to the workmen forced to dig them. An official in the Dacca consulate estimated that at least five hundred students had been killed in the first two days of the crackdown, almost none of them fighting back. Blood reckoned that the rumored toll of a thousand dead at the university was "exaggerated, although nothing these days is inconceivable." After the massacre, he reported that an American eyewitness had seen an empty army truck arriving to get rid of a "tightly packed pile of approximately twenty five corpses," the last of many such batches of human remains.2
This was, Blood knew, the last thing his superiors in Washington wanted to hear. Pakistan was an ally—a military dictatorship, but fiercely anticommunist. Blood detailed how Pakistan was using U.S. weapons—tanks, jet fighters, gigantic troop transport airplanes, jeeps, guns, ammunition—to crush the Bengalis. In one of the awkward alignments of the Cold War, President Richard Nixon had lined up the democratic United States with this authoritarian government, while the despots in the Soviet Union found themselves standing behind democratic India.
Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the brilliant White House national security advisor, were driven not just by such Cold War calculations, but a starkly personal and emotional dislike of India and Indians. Nixon enjoyed his friendship with Pakistan's military dictator, General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan, known as Yahya, who was helping to set up the top secret opening to China. The White House did not want to be seen as doing anything that might hint at the
breakup of Pakistan—no matter what was happening to civilians in the east wing of Pakistan.
The onslaught would continue for months. The Dacca consulate stubbornly kept up its reporting. But, Blood later recalled, his cables were met with "a deafening silence." He was not allowed to protest to the Pakistani authorities. He ratcheted up his dispatches, sending in a blistering cable tagged "Selective Genocide," urging his bosses to speak out against the atrocities being committed by the Pakistani military. The White House staff passed this up to Kissinger,

who paid no heed. Then on April 6, two weeks into the slaughter, Blood and almost his entire consulate sent in a telegram formally declaring their “strong dissent”—a total repudiation of the policy that they were there to carry out. That cable—perhaps the most radical rejection of U.S. policy ever sent by its diplomats—blasted the United States for silence in the face of atrocities, for not denouncing the quashing of democracy, for showing “moral bankruptcy” in the face of what they bluntly called genocide.3

This book is about how two of the world’s great democracies—the United States and India—faced up to one of the most terrible humanitarian crises of the twentieth century. The slaughter in what is now Bangladesh stands as one of the cardinal moral challenges of recent history, although today it is far more familiar to South Asians than to Americans. It had a monumental impact on India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—almost a sixth of humanity in 1971. In the dark annals of modern cruelty, it ranks as bloodier than Bosnia and by some accounts in the same rough league as Rwanda. It was a defining moment for both the United States and India, where their humane principles were put to the test.4

For the United States, as Archer Blood understood, a small number of atrocities are so awful that they stand outside of the normal day-to-day flow of diplomacy: the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda. When we think of U.S. leaders failing the test of decency in such moments, we usually think of uncaring disengagement: Franklin Roosevelt fighting World War II without taking serious steps to try to rescue Jews from the Nazi dragnet, or Bill Clinton standing idly by during the Rwandan genocide.5

But Pakistan’s slaughter of its Bengalis in 1971 is starkly different. Here the United States was allied with the killers. The White House was actively and knowingly supporting a murderous regime at many of the most crucial moments. There was no question about whether the United States should intervene; it was already intervening on behalf of a military dictatorship decimating its own people.

This stands as one of the worst moments of moral blindness in U.S. foreign policy. Pakistan’s crackdown on the Bengalis was not routine or small-scale killing, not something that could be dismissed as business as usual, but a colossal and systematic onslaught. Midway through the bloodshed, both the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department conservatively estimated that about two hundred thousand people had lost their lives. Many more would perish, cut down by Pakistani forces or dying in droves in miserable refugee camps. “The story of East Bengal will surely be written as one of the greatest nightmares of modern times,” declared Edward Kennedy, who led the outcry in the Senate. But in the depths of the Cold War, Nixon and Kissinger were unyielding in their support for Pakistan, making possible horrific crimes against humanity—plausibly even a genocide—in that country’s eastern wing.6

The ongoing Bengali slaughter led within a few months to a major war between Pakistan and India. In that time, the White House had every opportunity to grasp how bad these atrocities were. There were sober misgivings voiced in the White House, and thunderous protests from the State Department and its emissaries in Delhi and Dacca, with Archer Blood the loudest voice of all. But throughout it all, from the outbreak of civil war to the Bengali massacres to Pakistan’s crushing defeat by the Indian military, Nixon and Kissinger, unfazed by detailed knowledge of the massacres, stood stoutly behind Pakistan.

As its most important international backer, the United States had great influence over Pakistan. But at almost every turning point in the crisis, Nixon and Kissinger failed to use that leverage to avert disaster. Before the shooting started, they consciously decided not to warn Pakistan’s military chiefs against using violence on their own population. They did not urge caution or impose conditions that might have discouraged the Pakistani military government from butchering its own citizenry. They did not threaten the loss of U.S. support or even sanctions if Pakistan took the wrong course. They allowed the army to sweep aside the results of Pakistan’s first truly free and fair democratic election, without even suggesting that the military strongmen try to work out a power-sharing deal with the Bengali leadership that had won the vote. They did not ask that Pakistan refrain from using U.S. weaponry to slaughter civilians, even though that could have impeded the military’s rampage, and might have deterred the army. There was no public condemnation— nor even a private threat of it—from the president, the secretary

of state, or other senior officials. The administration almost entirely contented itself with making gentle, token suggestions behind closed doors that Pakistan might lessen its brutality—and even that only after, months into the violence, it became clear that India was on the brink of attacking Pakistan.

This might give the impression of passivity, of a foreign policy on autopilot. Not so. Nixon and Kissinger actually drove their South Asia policies with gusto and impressive creativity—but only when silencing dissenters in the ranks, like Blood, or pursuing their hostility toward India. They found no appeal in India, neither out of ideological admiration for India's flawed but functioning democracy, nor from a geopolitical appreciation of the sheer size and importance of the Indian colossus. Instead, they denounced Indians individually and collectively, with an astonishingly personal and crude stream of vitriol. Alone in the Oval Office, these famous practitioners of dispassionate realpolitik were all too often propelled by emotion.

The slaughter happened at the same time that Nixon and Kissinger were planning their opening to China—a famous historic achievement that has a forgotten cost. Everyone remembers Nixon and Kissinger's months of clandestine Chinese diplomacy, followed by the amazing spectacle of the presidential visit to Mao Zedong.

But what has been lost is the human toll exacted for it in Bangladesh and India. Nixon and Kissinger needed a secret channel to China, which they found in the good offices of Yahya—an impeccably discreet tyrant on warm terms with both the United States and China. While the Pakistani government was crushing the Bengalis, it was also carrying covert messages back and forth from Washington to Beijing. Archer Blood sent off his dissent telegram just three months before Kissinger took his first secret trip to Beijing, flying direct from Pakistan, which sped him on his way with hospitality, an airplane, and a cloak-and-dagger cover story. Nixon and Kissinger, always sympathetic to the Pakistani junta, were not about to condemn it while it was making itself so useful. So the Bengalis became collateral damage for realigning the global balance of power. In the bargain, Nixon and Kissinger also turned their backs on India: the strategic opening to one Asian titan meant a closing to another. Indeed, one of the very first things that the United States did with its new relationship with Mao's China was to secretly ask it to mobilize troops to threaten democratic India, in defense of Pakistan. It is absolutely right that the normalization of the American relationship with China stands as an epochal event, but those who justifiably want to celebrate it should not overlook what it meant for the Bengalis and Indians.

Kissinger and his defenders often try to shift the blame to Nixon. But the record here proves that Kissinger was almost as culpable as the president. When dealing with the White House and State Department staff, Kissinger would entertain a variety of viewpoints, showing his trademark subtlety, although pressing an anti-Indian line. But when it was just him and Nixon alone, he cannily stoked the president's fury. All the sophistication vanished, replaced with a relentless drumbeat against India. Although Kissinger billed himself around Washington as a vital restraint on Nixon's dangerous moods, here it was Kissinger who spun out of control. In the most heated moments of the crisis, when Nixon lost his nerve for a superpower confrontation with the Soviet Union that at worst could have led toward nuclear war, Kissinger goaded him on.

Nixon and Kissinger bear responsibility for a significant complicity in the slaughter of the Bengalis. This overlooked episode deserves to be a defining part of their historical reputations. But although Nixon and Kissinger have hardly been neglected by history, this major incident has largely been whitewashed out of their legacy—and not by accident. Kissinger began telling demonstrable falsehoods about the administration's record just two weeks into the crisis, and has not stopped distorting since. Nixon and Kissinger, in their vigorous efforts after Watergate to rehabilitate their own respectability as foreign policy wizards, have left us a farrago of distortions, half-truths, and outright lies about their policy toward the Bengali atrocities.7

To this day, four decades after the massacres, the dead hand of Nixonian cover-up still prevents Americans from knowing the full record. The White House staff routinely sanitized their records of conversations, sometimes at Kissinger's specific urging. Even now, mildewed and bogus claims of national security remain in place to bleep out particularly embarrassing portions of the White House

tapes. Kissinger struck a deal with the Library of Congress that, until five years after his death, blocks researchers from seeing his papers there unless they have his written permission. Even if you could get in, according to the Library of Congress, many of Kissinger's most important papers are still hidden from daylight by a thicket of high level classifications, security clearances, and need-to-know permissions. Kissinger did not reply to two polite requests for an interview, and then, four months later, refused outright. But against Nixon and Kissinger's own misrepresentations and immortal stonewalling, there is a different story to be found in thousands of pages of recently declassified U.S. papers, in dusty Indian archives, and on unheard hours of the White House tapes—offering a more accurate, documented account of Nixon and Kissinger's secret role in backing the perpetrators of one of the worst crimes of the twentieth century.8

It was left to India, which did not have the option of ignoring the slaughter of the Bengalis, to stop it. The gargantuan democracy was entwined with the tragedy next door in countless ways, from its own shocked Bengali population to its bitter confrontation with Pakistan. Indira Gandhi's government was motivated by a mix of lofty principle and brutal realpolitik: demanding an end to the slaughter of a civilian population and upholding the popular will of voters in a democratic election, but also seizing a prime opportunity to humiliate and rip apart India's hated enemy.

Indira Gandhi, India's prime minister and the great Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter, would later claim she acted "first of all, for purely humanitarian reasons." India's ambassador at the United Nations declared that his country had "absolutely nothing but the purest of motives and the purest of intentions: to rescue the people of East Bengal." But there was nothing pure about the protection of human rights. Some eminent political theorists and international lawyers have pointed to India's intervention as a singular and important case of an Asian postcolonial country launching a humanitarian intervention—a kind of war more commonly associated with Western military campaigns in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya. But there has been no proper chronicle of India's real motives.9

In fact, Indira Gandhi and her top advisers were coldly calculating strategists, even if their actions served a humane cause. India put itself in a position of breathtaking hypocrisy: demanding freedom for the Bengali people in East Pakistan, while conducting its own repression of restive populations under Indian control in Kashmir, as well as lesser-known groups like the Mizos and Nagas and—with painful irony—leftist Bengalis within India's own volatile state of West Bengal. While the Indian government emotionally spoke out on behalf of the millions of Bengalis who fled into India, its officials privately worried that these exiles might be radical subversives who would fuel more unrest and revolt in India's already shaky border states, especially West Bengal. India, in other words, was driven not just by sympathy for Bengalis, but also a certain amount of fear of revolutionary Bengalis.

While Indira Gandhi's government professed its unwavering desire for peace, she almost immediately turned to aggressive options. From the early days of the Pakistani crackdown, she had the Indian military covertly prepare for a full-scale regular war against Pakistan. India secretly had its army and security forces use bases on Indian soil to support Bengali guerrillas in their fight against the Pakistani state. India devoted enormous resources to covertly sponsoring the Bengali insurgency inside East Pakistan, providing the guerrillas with arms, training, camps, and safe passage back and forth across a porous border. Indian officials, from Gandhi on down, evaded or lied with verve, denying that they were maintaining the insurgency. But in fact, as India's own secret records prove, this massive clandestine enterprise was approved at the highest levels, involving India's intelligence services, border security forces, and army.

In the event, Pakistan rashly struck the first blow of a full-scale conventional war, with a surprise air attack in December 1971 that brought fierce combat in both West and East Pakistan. But while Indians today generally remember the war as outright Pakistani aggression, India's actual path to war shows a great degree of Indian responsibility as well. India knew it had a fearsome military advantage, and Gandhi's government used that ruthlessly. According to senior Indian generals, Gandhi wanted her forces to go to war not long after the start of Pakistan's crackdown, and had to be persuaded to wait for cooler fighting

weather and more time to train. While the Indian military waited for winter, the Indian-backed insurgency bled the Pakistan army, leaving it demoralized and stretched thin. India's support for the Bengali rebels led to border clashes with Pakistani troops, and, as winter approached, to several substantial Indian incursions onto Pakistani territory. It is a patriotic delusion to imagine, as some Indian nationalists do today, that Pakistan's airstrikes were unprovoked. Still, Pakistan's air attack was a final act of folly for the military dictatorship. The war, fought in just two weeks, ended with a resounding Indian victory, and created the fledgling state of Bangladesh.

The President and the Prime Minister, in Washington and Delhi, were united by their need to grapple with their own democratic societies. As much as Nixon and Gandhi loathed each other, they
shared a common exasperation at how their policies could be thwarted by their own people—a frustration that would in time lead both of them down their own different but alarmingly antidemocratic paths. In these two great democracies, it was not just governments but also peoples who had to confront one of the worst events of their century. Americans and Indians were challenged to make policy in a way that expressed their national sense of morality, not just their strategic interests.

The United States and India are radically different societies, in everything from wealth to ethnic composition to sheer size of population; but they do share some basic similarities in their systems of democratic governance. In both, democratic leaders were goaded and prodded by rambunctious elements at home: a free press with an ingrained habit of seeking out inconvenient or embarrassing stories; opposition politicians and partisans waiting to pounce should a president or prime minister stumble; and a public whose moral sensibilities often did not align with the dictates of the state's cold calculus of strategic interest. In both of these enormous democracies, the people were more moralistic than their governments.10

Americans reacted with disquiet or horror. The country's far reaching newspapers and broadcast networks reported in shocking detail about these distant atrocities; ordinary Americans recoiled at what they learned on the news; and politicians in Congress, led by Edward Kennedy, seized the opportunity to politick against the White House. Thus even this White House found itself unable to continue its unstinting support of Pakistan through arms sales, which Kissinger would have liked to escalate, because of pressure from Congress and bureaucratic maneuvering by the State Department. Nixon and Kissinger found themselves boxed in by their country's liberal and democratic system; they had to moderate their policies, much against their will. As Kissinger complained to the president, "We are the ones who have been operating against our public opinion, against our bureaucracy, at the very edge of legality."11

A little further than that, actually. Nixon and Kissinger responded to these legal and democratic constraints on their authority in the classic Nixonian way: by breaking the law. Knowing full well that they were acting illegally, they provided U.S. weapons to Pakistan, which was under a U.S. arms embargo—an unknown scandal that is of a piece with the overall pattern of lawlessness that culminated with Watergate. As recently declassified documents and transcripts prove, Nixon and Kissinger approved a covert supply of sophisticated U.S. fighter airplanes via Jordan and Iran—despite explicit and emphatic warnings from both the State Department and the Defense Department that such arms transfers to Pakistan were illegal under U.S. law. (John Mitchell, the attorney general, was in the room as Nixon and Kissinger decided on this unlawful operation, but made no objections.) Kissinger, not wanting to get caught, made it clear to the president that they were both breaking the law. Nixon went ahead anyway.

Americans' sense of outrage circulated within the administration itself. The most vociferous dissenter was Archer Blood, but he had no shortage of company. The ambassador to India, a distinguished former Republican senator named Kenneth Keating, took his opposition all the way to the Oval Office, where he confronted Nixon and Kissinger to their faces over what he called genocide. The middle ranks of the State Department, stationed in Washington, Dacca, Delhi, and even parts of West Pakistan, rose up in open defiance of the policies of the president of the United States. There were even rumblings of discontent within the National Security Council at the White House itself.

Although Nixon and Kissinger frequently sparred with the State Department over all sorts of issues, here the clash was out in the open, with an unsurpassed gulf in views of policy and morality. The State Department outfoxed Nixon and Kissinger, quietly using its bureaucratic power to jam the shipment of U.S. weaponry to Pakistan. In response, Nixon and Kissinger raged against the bureaucracy and tried to fire or demote some of the most influential dissenters, foremost among them Blood and Keating. The president and his national security advisor plowed ahead with their support of
Pakistan as best they could, but were impeded by the consciences and the best advice of a surprisingly large chunk of their own administration.

There was no real question of the United States going to war to stop the slaughter. In 1971, there was no American equivalent of today's debates about humanitarian intervention in places like Bosnia and Darfur. After all, the country was already fighting a major war, trapped in the quagmire of Vietnam; there was no American appetite for another Asian conflict. Thus the leading critics of the Nixon administration, like Kennedy, linked Vietnam with Pakistan: two places where the United States was standing behind illegitimate governments, at a terrible cost to those peoples, and to the good name of the United States. American dissenters like Blood and Keating, as well as outraged political rivals like Kennedy, only wanted to see American influence repurposed to support democracy and human rights. Of course, they expected that a war would put an end to the slaughter—but that would be waged by India.

In the United States today, particularly after the disasters of the Iraq war, there are many thoughtful and serious people who criticize the promotion of human rights as arrogance, neoimperialism, and worse. No doubt, there are potent reasons for caution about trying to translate human rights ideals into statecraft. But this largely forgotten crisis, unfolding far from Washington, exemplifies an alternative way of making U.S. foreign policy, one that makes no allowance for human rights. This kind of policy has shown itself in the U.S. war against terror and may well reappear in future diplomacy. For all the very real flaws of human rights politics, Nixon and Kissinger's support of a military dictatorship engaged in mass murder is a reminder of what the world can easily look like without any concern for the pain of distant strangers.12

The stakes were high for India's democracy. Sunil Khilnani, a farsighted India expert, argues powerfully that India is the most important experiment in democracy since the American and French revolutions: "its outcome may well turn out to be the most
significant of them all, partly because of its sheer human scale, and partly because of its location, a substantial bridgehead of effervescent liberty on the Asian continent." Nobody would idealize India's flawed democracy, least of all Indians themselves: this was and is a land of heartbreaking poverty, endemic corruption, collapsing infrastructure, enduring caste fissures, arrogant bureaucratic inefficiency, and shocking social inequality. Some 350 million Indians—roughly a third of the country's population—today live below the poverty line. But this is also a country of stupendous pluralism and vitality that, against all odds, maintains a democratic system and culture, offering a way for a fractious public to make its multitudinous voices heard and a chance for the government to correct itself.13

Indians were overwhelmingly outraged by the atrocities in East Pakistan. In a factionalized country where popular harmony is a surpassingly rare thing, there was a remarkable consensus: Pakistan was behaving horrifically; the Bengalis were in the right; India had to act in defense of democracy and innocent lives. Almost the entire Indian political spectrum, from Hindu nationalists on the right to socialists and communists on the left, lined up behind the Bengalis. These persecuted foreigners were not Indian citizens, but they were not altogether foreign; Bengalis were a familiar part of the Indian national scene, and India's own Bengali population rallied to their brethren. Across the country, newspapers ran furious editorials condemning Pakistan and urging the Indian government to recognize Bangladesh's independence.

Dismissing the niceties of national sovereignty in the cause of saving human beings and of respecting the popular will of the Bengalis, Indians demanded a swift recognition of an independent state of Bangladesh. Of course, since the bloody days of Partition, a great many Indians hated and feared Pakistan; plenty took a kind of angry satisfaction in lambasting Pakistani leaders like Yahya and

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto for confirming all the worst things that Indians had ever said about Pakistan. But there was a moral sensibility driving Indian politics that even the gimlet-eyed officials around Indira Gandhi, and the unsentimental Gandhi herself, could not ignore. She abandoned her father Nehru's traditional anticolonial pronouncements about the sanctity of national sovereignty. Instead, the beleaguered prime minister began to compare the bloodshed in East Pakistan to the Holocaust.

Perhaps the most striking Indian policy was something that it did not do. India did not stop masses of Bengali refugees from flooding into India. Unimaginably huge numbers of Bengalis escaped into safety on Indian soil, eventually totaling as many as ten million— five times the number of people displaced in Bosnia in the 1990s. The needs of this new, desperate population were far beyond the capacities of the feeble governments of India's border states, and Indira Gandhi's government at the center. But at that overcharged moment, the Indian public would have found it hard to accept the sight of its own soldiers and border troops opening fire to keep out these desperate and terrified people. Here, at least, was something like real humanitarianism. As payment for this kindness, India found itself crushed under the unsustainable burden of one of the biggest refugee flows in world history—which galvanized the public and the government to new heights of self-righteous fury against Pakistan.

India was left alone. Despite pleas to the rest of the world, India was given only a tiny amount of money to cope with the refugees. China was bitterly hostile; the United States only somewhat less so; the Non-Aligned Movement was, in the clutch, of no help; Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the other Arab states were fiercely pro-Pakistan; even the United Nations seemed tilted toward Pakistan. India was forced into a tighter alignment with the Soviet Union, to the delight of leftists around Gandhi, but to the dismay of other Indians. Having been shoved aside by the democratic superpower, India cozied up to the other one.

As India grows into a world power, the story of the birth of Bangladesh has never been more important. It stands as an awful but crucial case for better understanding the politics of human rights, in a world where the duty of defending the vulnerable is not something that the West arrogates for itself alone. Today, at the advent of an Asian era in world politics, the future of human rights will increasingly depend on the ideologies, institutions, and cultures of ascendant Asian great powers like China and India. Thus India's democratic response to the plight of the Bengalis marks not just a pivotal moment for the history of the subcontinent, but for how the world's biggest democracy makes its foreign policy—and what weight it gives to human rights.

For Pakistan, the crisis of 1971 is mourned as a supreme national trauma: not just the loss of one of the country's two wings and the majority of its population, but a heightening of a truncated state's dread of the much larger and stronger Indian enemy. And the bloodletting of 1971 marks an important chapter of a U.S. embrace of military dictators at their worst. Although American popular memory about Pakistan tends to start in September 2001, it was Nixon's embrace of Yahya that helped to define a U.S. relationship with Pakistan based overwhelmingly on the military, even in its most repugnant hour. Nixon and Kissinger set the stage for an ongoing decimation of Pakistan's democratic opposition, giving time and space to Islamicize the country more and more. This pattern of U.S. antidemocratic engagement—with origins going back far beyond Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's most recent U.S.-backed military dictator—has helped convince so many Pakistanis that the United States coldly pursues its own realpolitik interests and cares nothing for them.

Bangladeshis still mourn their losses from not so long ago. This book is not—and does not purport to be—anything like a comprehensive account of these crimes against humanity. It mostly documents the American eyewitness perspective on them, which is obviously only a part of the complete record of horrors. Still, this is an important portion, because it is the true local viewpoint of the Pakistani government's superpower ally. After all, Archer Blood and the other U.S. officials reporting back to the Nixon administration knew they had every career incentive to downplay the enormity of what they saw; their stark reporting thus stands as a crucial and credible part of that wider story.

Today we still face the legacy of Nixon and Kissinger's actions. Bangladesh, traumatized by its founding ordeal, now has the eighth largest population on

earth, bigger than Russia or Japan. With India creakily becoming a great power, and with ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and Kashmir that directly affects the United States in its war against Islamist terror, it's widely understood that South Asia has never been more important to Americans. But there is a gulf between what Americans remember of the Cold War and what its victims remember of it. Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis have not forgotten 1971—although they may be surprised by the newly declassified scope of the United States' dark record.14

Nixon and Kissinger have put extraordinary effort into magnifying their foreign policy achievements, so that the horrors of Watergate would appear as a smallish blot on their overall record. Today, Nixon and Kissinger's biggest success in promoting themselves as foreign policy heroes has been the historical oblivion that surrounds the killing campaign in Bangladesh. It is high time for Americans to confront what Nixon and Kissinger did in those terrible days.15

Chapter 1
The Tilt

On a hushed Saturday over the Thanksgiving weekend in November 1970, Richard Nixon was alone in the wooded seclusion of Camp David. Restless and keen for the new year, the president drew up a list of his aspirations, entitled "Goals for '71–'72." His list began: "1. President as moral leader—conscience of the nation."1

This high-minded vision did not extend as far as India. Nixon had never liked the country. "My God, South Asia is just unbelievable," he once said. "You go down there and you see it in the poverty, the hopelessness." He first visited the subcontinent in December 1953, on an Asian tour as vice president under Dwight Eisenhower. It was, by his own account, a foundational experience.2

Nixon was appalled by India's policy of nonalignment in the Cold War, an ostensible neutrality that seemed to him to really mean siding with the Soviet Union. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's founding prime minister, railed "obsessively and interminably" against Pakistan, to Nixon's horror: "I was convinced that his objection owed much to his personal thirst for influence, if not control, over South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa." On top of that, he and Nehru immediately disliked each other. Nixon, not much more partial to actual Brahmins than to Boston Brahmins, seemed nettled by Nehru's "softly modulated British English." He later called him "arrogant, abrasive, and suffocatingly self-righteous."3

Nixon's next stop was Pakistan. That went delightfully. "Pakistan is a country I would like to do everything for," he enthused when he got back to Washington. He found the Pakistanis to be staunchly anticommunist and pro-American. "The people have less complexes than the Indians," he said. "The Pakistanis are completely frank,
even when it hurts." He was attracted less to the chaotic city streets than to the army's pristine cantonments. There he was impressed by the blunt generals, particularly General Muhammad Ayub Khan, who would a few years afterward stage a coup and become the first of Pakistan's military dictators. Nixon later wrote that he was haunted for the rest of his life by Ayub's lament about U.S. fickleness: "it is dangerous to be a friend of the United States."4

He returned to Washington as a staunch advocate of aid for Pakistan. With his support, the Eisenhower administration championed a muscular Cold War alliance with the country. The United States was seeking anti-Soviet allies across the Middle East and Asia, and newborn Pakistan intrepidly signed up as a double treaty ally of the United States, joining both the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Pakistan helpfully provided a base in Peshawar from which the Americans launched U-2 spy planes over the Soviet Union —one of which was famously shot down by the Soviets in 1960.5

Most important, after Nixon's visit, Eisenhower went ahead with a deal to start providing Pakistan with military aid. In 1954, the United States began supplying weapons to Pakistan, which was always seeking advantage against its Indian foe. Despite Eisenhower's reassurances that these arms were meant to ward off communists, India saw itself as the inevitable target.6

The Pakistan army grew strong with U.S. help. Over eleven years, by India's

conservative estimate, the United States supplied Pakistan with between $1.5 billion and $2 billion worth of military equipment. India bitterly catalogued Pakistan's windfall: receiving 640 tanks, complete with modern artillery; modernizing the equipment for five army divisions; establishing three modern air bases, a naval dockyard at Karachi, and a Chittagong base. Pakistan got a submarine, a fleet tanker, and other ships. And the United States provided Pakistan with a good chunk of an air force: two squadrons of B-57 bombers, nine squadrons of F-86 Sabre jet fighters, a squadron of fighter-interceptors, thirty armed helicopters, and—crucial for a country that had to shuttle its soldiers from West
Pakistan to East Pakistan—a squadron of colossal C-130 troop transport planes.7
Indians, still aggrieved by the fresh horrors of Partition, were infuriated. Nehru fumed, "Pakistan becomes practically a colony of the United States." To offset not just Pakistan but also the menace of China, India bought large quantities of Soviet weaponry. The United States and India sparred with each other, as insult followed insult on both sides. It only somewhat lessened the blow when Eisenhower, fearing that poverty bred radicalism, started providing substantial economic aid to India.8
John Kennedy, as president, did what he could to mend fences. Viewing India as an exemplar of noncommunist democracy and development, he boosted economic aid. When China went to war against India in 1962, with the Indian armed forces faltering, Nehru directly asked Kennedy for military help on a massive scale. Kennedy did not give Nehru everything he wanted, but he provided automatic weapons and ammunition and sent C-130s to move Indian troops. The military assistance continued after India's humiliating defeat in the China war, reinforcing India's mountain divisions with mortars, guns, and grenades to ward off Chinese troops in the Himalayas. This too was welcome, although India's defense ministry called it "very limited aid"—still much less than what Pakistan had gotten.9
When Pakistan attacked India in 1965, in an explosion of the Kashmir dispute, the United States was in the awkward position of providing arms to both sides. Lyndon Johnson's administration pressed to bring a U.S. arms embargo crashing down on India and Pakistan, which would still formally be in place at the time of the 1971 crisis. Although the cutoff was aimed at both antagonists, it hurt Pakistan much more and left that government feeling betrayed. Nor were the Indians happy. To them, it was intolerable that the United States did not condemn Pakistan for aggression.10
After the war, India slowly bought small amounts of U.S. arms. But all told, at best, India had received less than a quarter of what Pakistan was getting. India also won new agricultural aid from the United States, which came with unwelcome policy demands. When
the Indian government sharpened its criticism of the Vietnam War, Johnson, offended, put that aid on a short leash. Once again, the governments snarled at each other. By the time Richard Nixon became president, there was much to be done to reestablish friendship between the two great democracies.11
NIXON AND INDIA
"I don't like the Indians," Nixon snapped at the height of the Bengali crisis. Beyond his prejudices, he had reason piled upon reason for this distaste for India and Indians. The most basic was the Cold War: presidents of the United States since Harry Truman had been frustrated by India's policy of nonalignment, which Nixon, much like his predecessors, viewed as Nehruvian posturing. India was on suspiciously good terms with the Soviet Union. Since the days of Kennedy and Johnson, India had been pillorying the United States for the Vietnam War, and Nixon got an ample share.12
Then there was realpolitik. Some Americans romanticized India's democracy, but not Nixon. He was unimpressed with the world's largest republic, believing to the end of his days that the United States should base its foreign policy on what a country did outside its borders, not on whether it treated its people decently at home. So India's domestic system made little impact on the president.13
Nixon was baffled and annoyed by Americans' popular sympathies for India, which he repeatedly described as a psychological disorder. He scorned a "phobia" among some Americans that "everything that India does is good, and everything Pakistan does is bad," and once told the military leader of Pakistan, "There is a

psychosis in this country about India." The Americans who most liked India tended to be the ones that Nixon could not stand. India was widely seen as a State Department favorite, irritating the president. He recoiled from the country's mystical fascination to the hippie counterculture, which he despised. Henry Kissinger thought that Nixon saw Democratic "obsequiousness toward India as a prime example of liberal softheadedness."14

Nixon's anti-Indian leanings had been reinforced when John Kennedy took a warmly pro-India line. India seemed a cause for the Democrats. This point was once driven home by George H. W. Bush, Nixon's ambassador at the United Nations, who knew how to play up to his boss. Bush said that a friend of Kennedy's had explained that "Kennedy spent more time on India, and the mystique, I know they didn't like us, but it was a kind of a liberal mystique." That, Bush and Nixon agreed, was what they were up against.15

On top of that, there was a mutual loathing between Nixon and Indira Gandhi. He had not cared for Nehru, her father, either, but she had an extraordinary ability to get under his skin. Back in 1967, while Nixon was out of power and planning his way back, he had met again with Gandhi on a visit to Delhi. But when he called on the new prime minister at her house, she had seemed conspicuously bored, despite the short duration of their talk. After about twenty minutes of strained chat, she asked one of her aides, in Hindi, how much longer this was going to take. Nixon had not gotten the precise meaning, but he sure caught the tone. As president, Nixon kept up his personalized approach to foreign policy, trusting his own impressions of world leaders, visiting thirty-one countries, and holding White House summits with most of the key chiefs. For all his talk of realpolitik, he could be surprisingly individualized in his foreign policy judgments. He once said that "her father was just as bad as she is." His first visit to India as president was chilly and strained.16

Finally, there was friendship. Richard Nixon liked very few people, but he did like General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan. Over and over, he privately spoke of Yahya with an uncharacteristic blend of admiration and affection.17

Despite all his global face time, Nixon was a solitary, awkward, reclusive man. (Kissinger, who could not bring himself to say that he was fond of the president, once famously asked, "Can you imagine what this man would have been had somebody loved him?") His only true friend was Bebe Rebozo, a Florida banker. He said that "it doesn't come natural to me to be a buddy-buddy boy." Even H. R. Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, worried that the boss was too much in his own head, once tried to find the president a friend, tracking down an oilman whom Nixon had reportedly liked in his Los Angeles days and installing him in a bogus White House job. (It didn't take.)18

Kissinger said that Nixon had been treated very well by Pakistan even when he was out of office, and remembered that gratefully. Nixon, who had long had a soft spot for Pakistani military officers, particularly took to Yahya. The dictator was a beefy man, with amazing spiky black eyebrows and slicked-back gray hair cut with a white streak. "I'm a soldier," he liked to say, with no patience for the wiles of politicians. Yahya had become president of Pakistan in March 1969 by pushing aside another general and imposing martial law. Kissinger once wrote, "Yahya is tough, direct, and with a good sense of humor. He talks in a very clipped way, is a splendid product of Sandhurst and affects a sort of social naivete but is probably much more complicated than this."19

Maybe not. Despite Nixon's affection for Yahya, the strongman had none of the U.S. president's complexity and keen intelligence, let alone his focus. Yahya drank early and often. "He starts with cognac for breakfast and continues drinking throughout the day; night often finding him in a sodden state," sniffed the rival West Pakistani politician Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. Archer Blood disliked Yahya's "brusque, strutting way," was unmoved by his British affectations and swagger stick, and leery of the general's contempt for civilian politicians. Kissinger, who did not suffer even clever people gladly, eventually concluded that Yahya was a moron. But the general was certainly bright enough to realize the strategic advantages of nurturing his friendship with the president of the United States.20

Henry Kissinger's office at the White House was a thrilling place to work. "The power was there, he was gathering it up," says Samuel Hoskinson, who served there as Kissinger's junior official for South Asia. "You felt like you were at the political center of the universe. He and the president, that was where the

decisions were made.”
Kissinger, just forty-eight years old in 1971, was relatively new to the world spotlight then, and growing into the role. To Nixon, his audience of one, the White House national security advisor was unctuous and ingratiating, matching presidential moods and tempers. But to his White House staff and the rest of the foreign policy machine, he was all rough edges, jealous of any rivals. “He was not the kindly gentleman that he is today,” remembers Hoskinson.
The real decisions were taken in private by Nixon and Kissinger. Throughout the crisis, Kissinger would hold countless meetings in the White House Situation Room with senior government officials, but these had the feeling of theater. Kissinger was often more accommodating in group discussions, toying with ideas, yielding some ground to the collective skepticism around the Situation Room table; but when he was with Nixon alone, something much closer to his real, unvarnished views could resurface. In the Oval Office or the president’s hideaway office in the Executive Office Building, Kissinger played to the only person who mattered. He would encourage or awkwardly join in Nixon’s profane denunciations of the Indians. When Nixon swore, Kissinger swore too, detonating the occasional curse to keep up with the president. (Kissinger, whose own taste in profanity ran more to “balderdash” and “poppycock” than Nixon’s really foul stuff, rather touchingly tended to say “goddamned,” getting the grammar right.) Again and again, Kissinger would stoke Nixon’s anger against the Indians, to the president’s satisfaction. “Henry is my least pathological pro-India lover around here,” Nixon once said proudly.21
Kissinger came to the White House with a brilliant mind, a profound knowledge of world history, and a firm, principled commitment to realpolitik. From his earliest writings, he had argued that foreign policy ought not to be driven by the demands of justice. That, he thought, was the road to total war. Instead, Kissinger believed that a society’s principles, no matter how deep-rooted or heartfelt, had to be compromised in the name of international stability. His focus, like that of his heroes Metternich and Castlereagh, was on the great powers. Both for him and Nixon,
everything—from the Middle East to Latin America to the Indian subcontinent, and even the crucial challenge of getting the United States out of Vietnam—relied on the core realpolitik task of building a Cold War balance of power.22
He became the essential man in the making of American foreign policy, second only to the president. “Nixon wanted to control foreign policy,” says Hoskinson, “and he had his wizard from Harvard to help him.” In these early days, Nixon was dazzled by Kissinger’s ability to put foreign policy in “the framework of philosophy. You’ve got to talk philosophy, you’ve got to be a great mosaic and you put in the pieces. State is not thinking in mosaic terms. The communists do. The Chinese do. The Russians do. We must.”23
As the White House national security advisor, Kissinger was locked in nonstop bureaucratic combat with the ineffectual secretary of state, William Rogers. But it was never a halfway equal contest. Kissinger was vastly more important to the president, seen as something close to acceptably loyal, although a prima donna. Haldeman, who had to keep the staff functioning, exasperatedly wrote that “the two of them just stay on a collision course.” The president had to conduct an epic smoothing of ruffled feathers, which took its toll on him. Nixon and Haldeman agonized over the “whole Rogers-K problem,” with Nixon repeatedly telling Haldeman that “the price that he [Nixon] has to pay to K in terms of emotional drain on himself is very great.” Again and again, Kissinger threatened to resign, reassured every time of his indispensability. In time, all the grandstanding and bigthinking wore Nixon out. The president once wearily told Haldeman, “Henry talks an awful lot.”24
Kissinger concentrated power in the White House, sidelining the rest of the government. He had long held a profound disdain for the bureaucracy, going well beyond the standard Washington complaints about sclerotic inefficiency. The parochial experts could not see the big picture as great statesmen did. He skirmished daily with the State Department. Zhou Enlai once told him, “You don’t like bureaucracy.” Kissinger retorted, “Yes, and it’s mutual; the bureaucracy doesn’t like me.”25
In this antipathy, he matched up neatly with the president. To Nixon, the lower echelons of government seemed stacked with northeastern elites who had never accepted him. He once told his cabinet, “Down in the government are a bunch of

sons of bitches.… We've checked and found that 96 percent of the bureaucracy are against us; they're bastards who are here to screw us." The president's suspicion included Kissinger's own team at the White House, which had no shortage of northeasterners with fancy degrees. Soon before the Bangladesh crisis broke, he instructed Haldeman and Kissinger's own deputy national security advisor, Alexander Haig Jr., to "make sure that Henry examines his staff very closely and is really set to kick out any potential traitors and not let any others in."26

Kissinger's singular grip on White House power was the stuff of legend among the diplomatic corps posted to Washington. The Indians were well aware of Kissinger's outsized influence in the making of foreign policy—not least because he worked hard to let them know it. India's ambassador in Washington explained to his foreign ministry all about Kissinger's dominance in making foreign policy, while wryly warning that Kissinger's self-promotion was so pervasive that it rendered his words untrustworthy. The Indian ambassador reported cattily, "Kissinger, on his part, never misses an opportunity to emphasize and underscore his own importance." Once, after a Washington dinner, "while we were talking, he was called to the telephone five times and while others were only surmising that the calls were from the President, he himself made remarks which were intended to confirm that suspicion."27

Kissinger, for all his brilliance, knew a lot more about Metternich's Austria than he did about modern South Asia. (He once said, "I would not recognize Pushtoon agitation if it hit me in the face.") His preoccupations at this time were the Vietnam War and the opening to China, not India and Pakistan. He relied on his own small, skillful staff at the White House's National Security Council.28

The White House's real expert on South Asia was Samuel Hoskinson, a burly, forceful man from Chicago, with a blunt way of speaking and a ready, gap-toothed smile. He had been working as a CIA analyst on the subcontinent, until a drinking buddy of his, Alexander Haig, became Kissinger's deputy and offered him a South Asia job. Hoskinson, in his late thirties, snapped up the precious opportunity to work at the White House. It was by far the most important post of his life. "Henry is in the genius category, as a diplomatist, as a historian," he says with undiluted admiration.

Kissinger hired his own staff with an eye for the very best talent, not for right-wing ideology. At the same time, he was an impossible person to work for. "I keep them in a state of exhaustion," he once joked. Hoskinson says, "He could be totally unreasonable." He would berate the staff, sometimes yelling at them. "He traumatized you sometimes. You're a young guy and you get smacked around so much." Hoskinson would go to Haig for reassurance. "I said, 'He doesn't like anything I do.' Haig said, 'That means he loves you.' Everyone on that staff had a tempestuous relationship with Henry." He remembers, "He could be quite volatile. You always had to weigh how things were going to go with Henry." Still, he says, "It led to great respect by the staff. There were a few who dropped by the wayside, who couldn't take the whippings. It was the highlight of my career."29

Winston Lord, a young staffer who became Kissinger's special assistant, could take the whippings. He found Kissinger inspiring. "It was terrific," Lord enthuses. "Whatever one's view of Henry on policy or ideology, even his greatest critics have to admit the guy is brilliant." Lord relished Kissinger's intelligence and learned from their discussions of world history and the international scene. He remembers, "He stretched you. He demanded excellence, not to mention hard work." Lord continues, "He pushed his staff very hard. Having a sense of a person's particular qualities. He obviously could drive you crazy at times, and I told him that. At a young age, you saw how hard he was working, what the stakes involved."

Kissinger's other official dealing with South Asia was Harold Saunders, who outranked Hoskinson. Saunders was not the type to complain; a cordial and kindly man with a blue-blooded manner, he had a PhD from Yale and a tweedy air to match. He had first joined the National Security Council under Lyndon Johnson, but quickly became a close aide to Kissinger, sticking with him for some eight years. He would go on to be a key player in Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy between Arabs and Israelis, to work on the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt, and to serve as

assistant secretary of state—one of the most distinguished American peacemakers in the Middle East. Saunders still greatly admires Kissinger and speaks with amused fondness about him. For Saunders, like Hoskinson, working for Kissinger was a formative experience, although not always an easy one for someone who would build his subsequent career around dialogue and mediation.

All these White House staffers understood well which way the president and his national security advisor leaned. For Indira Gandhi, Hoskinson says, “There was respect, but a kind of visceral dislike.” He explains, “Some of this was a traditional Republican reaction to India and Indians. And of course, this is the Cold War era, and her left-wing approach to things, her socialist approach, her dalliance with the Russians, made them very, very suspicious of them. Everything was viewed through the prism of relationships with Russia, and more with China too in that case.” He says, “She was just a steely personality. A real force to be dealt with.”

Kissinger was somewhat less bluntly hostile to India than Nixon. While he scorned nonalignment, he got along chummily with L. K. Jha, India’s urbane ambassador in Washington, and was less fueled by bigotry than the president. Still, Kissinger took insult easily and nurtured a growing list of his own grudges, and he understood the uses of stoking Nixon’s prejudices for the purposes of making foreign policy.30

Yahya was far more to Kissinger’s taste. Kissinger once said that he had “pretty good relations with Yahya,” although without Nixon’s full embrace. “They liked him,” says Hoskinson. “He was a soldier. He had style. He was kind of a jaunty guy.” Hoskinson admits that Yahya was not the brightest person, but says that for Nixon and Kissinger, “He was a man’s man. He wasn’t some woman running a country.”31

Yahya got a reward for his efforts in late October 1970, when he met Nixon in the Oval Office at the White House. In their last meeting before the crisis erupted, Nixon began to sell weapons to Yahya again, in what was officially billed as a one-time exception to the U.S. arms embargo imposed on both India and Pakistan back in 1965. It was the kind of exception that demolishes the rule.

That embargo had already been eroding under Johnson, but Yahya now secured a moderately big haul—a harbinger of much larger ones likely to come. The promised weapons included six F 104 fighter planes, seven B-57 bombers, and three hundred armored personnel carriers, although they would take some time to be delivered.32

India took it badly. Indira Gandhi would bitterly complain that this resumption of U.S. arms supplies to Pakistan increased the threat to her country. General Sam Manekshaw, chief of the Indian army staff, argued that the U.S. and Chinese supply of weaponry allowed Pakistan to take a belligerent stance against India.33

In the Oval Office that day, it was as friendly a meeting as two heads of state ever have, particularly when one of them was Richard Nixon. Yahya was special. Even Kissinger seemed impressed with his toughness and Sandhurst style. The two presidents spoke chummily of military and economic aid. Nixon pledged to support Pakistan despite “strong feeling in this country favoring India.” He promised that “we will keep our word with Pakistan however; we will work with you; we will try to be as helpful as we can.”

Yahya was grateful. He replied, “We appreciate this; our friendship is not new. We were surrounded by enemies when we became friends. We are no longer surrounded by enemies but still we remain friends. We are a sentimental people and we will never do anything to embarrass you.”34

Chapter 2
Cyclone Pakistan

Archer Blood, the ranking diplomat of the United States in East Pakistan, was a patriot and a career man. “From the first time he realized there was such a thing as the Foreign Service, he was keenly interested in it,” remembers his widow, Margaret Millward Blood. “He had always looked at the world, and thought that everything had meaning.”

A sincere and rather bookish man from Virginia, Blood was tall and solidly handsome, with kindly eyes and an athlete’s frame, wearing his dark hair slicked back. Although courteous and well mannered, he confessed to having a turbulent private side, alternating “between my personal Scylla of bright expectation and

Charybdis of black despair.” He kept that to himself.1

His wife, a vivacious and gracious graphic artist from New York, who is vibrant at eighty-seven years old, recalls, “He was an exact person. He could become interested in anything, but he wanted to know the exact facts.” He seemed never to sit down without having a book in hand. She was struck by how disciplined he was when reading. Once, on their honeymoon in Greece, she misquoted a line from a magazine, and he calmly supplied the exact wording, asking her to be careful about such things.

Blood was no rebel. Amid the hippies and burnouts of the 1960s and early 1970s, he was unreservedly square. In the Vietnam era, a group of American officials formed an organization called Foreign Service Officers Against the War, wearing protest badges, sometimes inside their jackets. Not Blood. His most radical affectation was, in the torrid tropical heat of Dacca (today known as Dhaka), to sometimes shed his dark business suit for a short-sleeved white shirt.

In World War II, he served as a supply officer in the U.S. Navy, posted to frigid Alaska to ward off a Japanese onslaught that never came. With the unassuming dedication of the World War II generation, he chose public service. “He was of course a patriot,” says his wife, who goes by Meg Blood. “In those days everyone was geared to the war. The whole world was very, very patriotic, and very anxious to serve.”2

Blood joined the Foreign Service in 1947, part of an entering class made up entirely of white men. He clambered his way up, working relentlessly hard, taking extra duty. His first posting was in Thessaloniki, Greece, during the civil war. He married Meg there. The young couple’s next stop was Munich, in 1949, still shattered in the immediate aftermath of World War II. His wife remembers seeing “whole cities spilled into the street in brick form.” Working in a displaced persons camp, Archer Blood took satisfaction in issuing huge numbers of U.S. visas to Hungarians, ethnic Germans from eastern Europe, many Poles, and even more Jews. He served briefly in Algiers and Bonn, and put in some desk time in Washington, but his career was in the doldrums, and he wanted more challenging political work. In West Germany, a fellow diplomat, asked what his ultimate wish was, replied that he only wanted to be a consul general. Blood was baffled. “I can’t imagine not wanting to be an ambassador,” he told his wife. “It’s the top.”

He grimly rode out the McCarthy era from Bonn, watching with contempt as “McCarthy’s hatchet men” investigated the Foreign Service, driving many good officials out and cowing others into quietude. Blood was not inclined to resign in showy protest, but he rankled at the witch hunts. He believed in independent judgment in the Foreign Service. He remembered that anyone who had served in China was automatically under suspicion, and that careers were ended with accusations of homosexuality. It was, he later growled, “just so obnoxious.” China, soon after its communist revolution, was still a taboo subject at the State Department. One young diplomat in Bonn had worked in China, and Blood was questioned about him.

The security officials asked if this young China hand read the New York Times. “The New York Times was considered by the security people as a leftist newspaper. And I was young enough to say, ‘Yes, I hope to hell he does.’ ”3

Two weeks after joining the foreign service, Blood had watched as the flags of newborn India and Pakistan were hoisted above their Washington embassies. Steeped in British stories of the Raj, he had always been fascinated with South Asia. In 1960, he was offered a choice of postings in Madras, in India, or Dacca, in East Pakistan. He chose Dacca out of ambition: he would have more freedom there, far removed from the oversight of the U.S. embassy, and there would be more political turmoil for him to cover.

Blood arrived on the subcontinent in June 1960, as a political officer and deputy principal officer at the Dacca consulate that he would later run. His wife’s first impression, as their plane neared Dacca, was that their new home would be underwater. “It was an ocean,” Meg Blood says. They did not know if there would be enough land to put down an airplane. “Green and flowering,” she remembers, “but definitely a land of water.” For Archer Blood, as he wrote later, “there was a magical quality to this ubiquitous water, which heightened the green of the rice paddies and the purple of the water hyacinths and furnished a shimmering mirror for the famed golden sun of Bengal.”4

Their first exposure was a shock. Driving in from the airport, with the car

windows down in the swampy heat, Meg Blood was horrified to find herself face-to-face with a woman beggar with no nose. Their driver explained that the woman had probably been accused of adultery, and her husband had had her nose cut off. The car was surrounded by beggars. They saw disfigured children asking for coins. The water pump at their house turned out to be a twelve year-old boy. There had been a young American diplomat who arrived in Dacca, took one look around, and announced his resignation. But the Blood family—with three children in tow—settled in and learned to love their hardship post. “Our lives were delightful,” says
Meg Blood. The social scene was relaxed, and they made fast friends both among Bengalis and West Pakistanis. “We spent our evenings discussing tigers,” remembers Meg Blood merrily. The tales grew tall. “There were a great many tigers, and they were causing trouble. They lost about ten people a month to the tigers.”5
Unafraid of tigers was an inquisitive little boy who lived one door down from the Bloods. Shahudul Haque, eleven years old, soon befriended the three American children. He taught them cricket; they wowed him with Cokes and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. While most of the foreigners and diplomats living in their peaceful tree-lined neighborhood kept to themselves, the Bloods welcomed the Bengali child into their home for homework sessions and slumber parties, chatting with him, as curious about his life as he was about theirs. Haque fondly remembers how good these friendly Americans were at intermingling.
Archer Blood was soothed by the pounding tropical rain on his roof. He loved to trek around the most remote hinterlands, eating humble chicken curry, finding serenity in long trips by rickety train or river steamer. He liked to be out on a tumbledown steamer, meandering down a tributary of the Ganges, watching hundreds of multicolored country boats speckling a river so vast that he could not see either bank. “I was never really in a hurry to get anywhere,” he later recalled.
Not so at work. Eager for promotion, he threw himself into his duties. Although many Bengalis complained that the Americans were helping West Pakistan exploit East Pakistan, he took pride in the American economic development efforts, like the opening of the renowned Pakistan SEATO Cholera Laboratory, mostly funded and staffed by Americans. When the first young Peace Corps volunteers arrived, he was heartened by their brash vitality. And he enjoyed easy relationships with Bengalis and West Pakistanis alike, once being whirled around at a boisterous dance party by General Muhammad Ayub Khan, then the military dictator of Pakistan.6
Blood’s work as a political officer was, he later remembered, largely about relaying the grievances of Bengalis who felt abused by West Pakistan. “This annoyed Washington because Washington liked
to believe that Pakistan was a stable, united country,” he said later. Still, he thoroughly enjoyed the tour of duty. He remembered, “The atmosphere, despite the grumblings of the Bengalis, was one of progress and hope.” He left in June 1962, hoping one day to return.7
Blood got his chance sooner than he expected, when he was promoted into the senior echelons of the Foreign Service. He relished his first major posting as a deputy chief of mission in Afghanistan, where he loved roaming around places like Mazar-e Sharif and Qunduz, and was surprised to find that the U.S. embassy staff was on friendly terms with the Soviets. He hoped to do the same job in Ethiopia, but was instead shunted back to Greece.
Here, for the first time, he found a posting that he hated. Greece was languishing under a military junta supported by the CIA. Blood, along with most of the political wing of the embassy in Athens, found it painful to watch the generals stifle the Greek people. Keen for elections, he worried that the Greek public would enduringly resent U.S. support of the junta.
But the U.S. embassy was bitterly split. The rival American camps, for and against the military rulers, were openly hostile. He had never been at an embassy where he could not speak bluntly about the local government. He recalled later that “if you said anything mistaken as critical about members of the junta, the C.I.A. would explode in anger.” Blood’s rivals tried to brand him as a troublemaker. When a new ambassador arrived, who argued that providing U.S. weaponry to the Greek junta would somehow return Greece to democracy, Blood hit the roof: “These people will never bring back Greece to democracy. And this is a

lie.”
The State Department, knowing how despondent Blood was in toxic Athens, came to him with welcome news: there was an opening in Dacca. He grabbed it immediately, bolting Athens in March 1970. Back in Washington, with a little pomp, he placed his hand on a Bible and was sworn in as the consul general of the United States in Dacca. He eagerly flew off to command his first post.8
The U.S. consulate in Dacca was a youthful, boisterous place. Despite the dingy, mildewed offices in their Adamjee Court building, the place hummed with energy. Blood, who was forty eight at the time—the same age as Henry Kissinger—ranked as the elder statesman of the outpost, but most of his staff was much younger. Their work was exhilarating.9
Long before Bangladesh was written off by Kissinger and others as a “basket case,” it was known as a terrific place for development work. Some of the best poverty-fighting economists and experts flocked there for cutting-edge work on how to boost crop yields and resist cholera. In the city of Comilla, they worked with Akhtar Hameed Khan, whose pathbreaking work on agricultural cooperatives and microfinance would help pave the way for the Bangladeshi economist Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Bank, winners of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for their own microcredit efforts. Blood’s officials were proud of their professionalism and commitment.10
Dacca was not everyone’s idea of a plum posting, but for scrappy, ambitious juveniles, it was a rush. “This was not your tea-and crumpets European assignment,” remembers Scott Butcher, Blood’s junior political officer. “This was a difficult part of the developing world.” After a relatively quiet stint in Burma, he had gotten word of his posting on April Fool’s Day and at first thought it was a joke. “If you’re a political officer, you’re something of an ambulance chaser in terms of crisis reporting,” he says. “I got that in spades.” While he was on home leave before shipping out for East Pakistan, his predecessor in Dacca, a grizzled former U.S. Army officer, told him to brace himself. When Butcher asked him to sum up the place in a few words, he replied, “Pestilential hole.”
There was considerable ridicule about all the sanguinary names at the post, heightened by a deputy political officer with the unfortunate name of Andrew Killgore. “Archer Blood, of all the names,” says Samuel Hoskinson with a laugh. Scott Butcher remembers drily that cables “would be drafted by Butcher, approved by Killgore, and signed by Blood. The anti-Americans thought, ‘Things bode ill.’ ”
Eric Griffel, the chief of the U.S. Agency for International Development team in Dacca, was happy there too. “I had begun to like Dacca, strangely enough,” he recalls. He came from a Polish Jewish family; his parents had fled from Krakow to London just before World War II, and then he had moved to the United States at age seventeen to go to UCLA. Griffel is round-faced and cherubic, belying his brisk, efficient manner. He speaks with a slight Polish accent, in clipped, blunt sentences. He was a rebellious and unflappable man. (The more buttoned-down Blood found him a little abrasive, but also “a pillar of strength.”) Griffel had always been curious about the subcontinent, and East Pakistan was a place with terrible poverty, and he felt needed there.11
Blood’s youthful staff liked the boss. He was dynamic and relatively young. “He and his wife were a very dashing couple, with bright prospects,” recalls Butcher, who greatly respected Blood. “He was clearly someone who was going on to much higher positions in the State Department.” Griffel remembers, “One would have thought he was completely conventional.” (Griffel is nobody’s idea of conventional.) “He was a very nice, easygoing, conventional Foreign Service officer. Able, did his job well, hardworking. He was always there. There was no golf playing, this sort of thing.” He says, “He was patriotic, very much so, but he didn’t wear it ostentatiously.” He sums the man up: “A very plain, good American civil servant.”
Dacca was a great place for adventuring American reporters too. Sydney Schanberg, the New York Times reporter covering the Indian subcontinent, had wound up there by accident. With piercing eyes and a tidy beard, he is intense and indignant, fiercely moralistic, holding a deep affection for the peoples he has covered in his long career as a reporter. After graduating from Harvard and spending two years in the U.S. Army, he started out as a copy boy at the New York Times, and wound up staying for twenty-six years. As a cub reporter, his

fondest hope was to go to Africa, where he could roam and report widely. Instead, the Times foreign desk offered him the exact opposite: Poland, in the Soviet deep freeze. But by a stroke of luck, the job of Delhi bureau chief came vacant, and Schanberg, in his late thirties, grabbed the chance. He is famous for covering the
murderous fall of Cambodia to the Khmer Rouge in 1975—a nightmarish experience that was turned into a movie, The Killing Fields—but by then he would have already seen plenty of that kind of horror in East Pakistan.12

DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan was in those days a country divided. The British, leaving India, had decided to create a single Muslim state in the subcontinent. To do so, they had to lump together Punjabis, Pashtuns, Baluchis, and Sindhis in the northwest with Bengalis far away in the east. Out of the bloody chaos of Partition, Pakistan was born as a cartographic oddity: a unitary state whose two territories did not connect. West Pakistan was separated from East Pakistan by a thousand miles of India—a gigantic enemy with bitter memories of the displacement of millions of people in Partition in 1947, not long earlier. A senior Indian diplomat execrated the British for leaving behind “this geographical monstrosity.” People joked that only three things kept Pakistan united: Islam, the English language, and Pakistan International Airlines—and PIA was the strongest.13

Scott Butcher, new to the region, was surprised by the strangeness of this bifurcated nation. His first stop was in West Pakistan, to check in with the embassy in Islamabad and the consulates in Karachi and Lahore. It was hot beyond belief, like stepping into a furnace. It was 111 degrees in Lahore, he remembers, and they said it was a cool spell. Everything seemed to him brown, sandy, parched, and dry. Then he flew on to Dacca, the capital of East Pakistan, terrain roughly the size of Florida. It was completely different. “It was so emerald green it almost hurt your eyes,” he says. It was also unbearably hot, in the heat of June 1969, but swampy and moistly tropical. Another official in the Dacca consulate remembers “wonderful rice paddy fields, rivers with fantastic dhows with tattered sails. Everything was so flat you could see what looked like boats sailing through rice paddy fields. They were actually miles away.”

The differences were more than geographic. The central government, the main military institutions, and the established bureaucracy were based in West Pakistan, far from the concerns of the Bengalis. West Pakistanis spoke many languages, the commonest being Urdu, while in East Pakistan almost everyone spoke Bengali. The whole country was dominated by Punjabi elites in West Pakistan, to the resentment of Bengalis in East Pakistan. The Bengalis were mostly Muslim, but in an officially Islamic nation, there was some suspicion of the sizable Bengali Hindu minority. While West Pakistan nursed grudges against India, the Bengalis in East Pakistan took little interest in that feud.14

Many Bengalis had started off as loyal Pakistani citizens, but they came to think that they were worse off economically than their fellow citizens in West Pakistan, and found their own ethnic traditions unwelcome. West Pakistan’s military elite scorned the “Bingos” as weak and unmartial. Bengali nationalists grumbled that they had replaced British colonialism with West Pakistani colonialism.15

It would have been hard to make a united Pakistan function even if it had the best government in the world. It did not. The country had to withstand civilian leaders who high-handedly tried to mandate Urdu as the national language, infuriating Bengalis; and then, even worse, was the imposition of martial law in 1958. Since the British had tended to favor Punjabis as their chosen warriors, there were few Bengalis in Pakistan’s military. The generals stifled the country, banning political parties and making it impossible for Bengalis to voice their grievances as they had loudly done before.16

Democracy was always going to be a terrible challenge for a country that was literally split in two. There were plenty of enthusiasts for democracy in both wings of the country, but they faced tough basic demographic facts: East Pakistan, with about seventy-five million people, was more populous than West Pakistan, which had a population of some sixty-one million. The east demanded its proper democratic representation; the west feared losing its grip; and so constitutional negotiations deadlocked. When
Bengalis called for ending martial law and holding elections, they also hoped to turn their numbers into political clout.17 By the time Yahya seized power in

March 1969, East Pakistan was in almost constant turmoil, with Bengali street protesters facing off against the army. When Archer Blood returned to Dacca, he found a much darker mood among his old Bengali acquaintances, including Shahudul Haque, now a restless young nationalist. The old economic resentments had simmered for too long, and after a ruinous war with India in 1965, many Bengalis were sour about being asked to take risks for the remote cause of Kashmir.18

Yahya was not just Pakistan's president, but also its foreign minister, defense minister, and chief martial law administrator. Still, he was far from the most antidemocratic general to rule Pakistan. Soon after taking office, he began working to end martial law and yield power to a new elected government, and then announced historic new elections. Blood and many of his staffers were impressed, but this democratic turn elicited no particular enthusiasm from Yahya's friend in the White House. "I hope you keep a strong Presidency as in France," Richard Nixon told him. Yahya agreed: "Without it Pakistan would disintegrate."19 The elections across the country were, after a postponement, finally set for December 7, 1970. Throughout Pakistan, a remarkably boisterous campaign went into full swing. As the balloting approached, Yahya was relaxed and expansive. "I think they miscalculated the way it would go," says Samuel Hoskinson, the White House aide. "That West Pakistani elite were quite capable of deluding themselves as well. They weren't close enough to it. Or they had faulty information from their own people—sugarcoating bad news for the bosses. I don't think they had a good appreciation of that situation."20

Then a cataclysm struck. On November 13, not long after Yahya's visit to Washington to win U.S. arms, a massive cyclone devastated East Pakistan. The gales shrieked to 150 miles an hour, followed by a monstrous tidal wave over twenty feet high. "There are still thousands of bodies of cattle and hundred of bodies of people strewn on beaches and countryside," Blood's consulate reported over a week later, with an official in a low-flying helicopter staring in horror at the devastation below. "[D]ead and alive cattle and dead and alive humans all mixed in one area." Scott Butcher heard stories of bodies thrown thirty feet into the trees, and of corpses found sixty miles out at sea. By the estimation of U.S. humanitarian agencies, at least 230,000 people died—fully 15 percent of the population of the areas hit by the storm. The State Department put the death toll even higher, at half a million, many of them drowned. One U.S. colonel with four years of battle experience in Vietnam said that it was worse than anything he had seen there.21

"There was nothing to see after that water went through," recalls Meg Blood, who went out to deliver emergency supplies. "People were up in trees holding their children, and the trees were swept clean away. There was nothing to see. The homes were mostly thatch, on the water, and they were the first to go, to be swept away." Approaching the stricken zone in a helicopter, she had the image of a huge chocolate pudding dotted with raisins. As she got closer, she realized with horror that the dots were actually human corpses.

After the natural disaster came the man-made disaster: the central Pakistani government's feeble response. Fully 90 percent of the area's inhabitants needed relief aid. A few days after the cyclone struck, Sydney Schanberg of the New York Times went down to an island in East Pakistan that had been razed by the storm. He heard stories of a baby torn from its mother's arms. But Schanberg was appalled by the Pakistani government's lassitude about delivering aid. Eric Griffel, the development officer who ran the large U.S. relief effort, says, "The West Pakistani government didn't do anything, and other countries did a lot, led by our own."22

"It was almost as if they just didn't care," Archer Blood remembered later. The international response—from the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and other countries—was much more visible than Pakistan's meager effort. American and Soviet helicopters were particularly conspicuous. There was huge resentment among Bengalis, notes Griffel, who saw foreigners doing more than their own government. Griffel says, "The cyclone was the real reason for the final break."23

Blood and Griffel's teams worked day and night, fanning out across the stricken region. The Nixon administration gave substantial aid. U.S. government officials, privately frustrated at the Pakistani government, worried that U.S. emergency measures were getting swamped by complaints about stalled aid. One of Blood's officials in Dacca noted that three months later, nothing whatsoever was

being done for the victims.24

The Bengalis' alienation was all but complete. Even the Nixon administration secretly admitted that Pakistan's government had flubbed it. After getting roasted in the press, Yahya belatedly flew to East Pakistan to take personal command of the disaster relief. His brief appearance did not go well. Blood remembered disgustedly that Yahya had stopped in fleetingly on the way back from a China trip. "There were still bodies floating in inland rivers, mass graves being dug with backhoes, everyone wearing masks because of the smell, throwing lime on it," says Schanberg. "And he was walking through with polished boots and a walking stick with a gold knob. These people didn't have any gold anything. We asked a couple questions, and he brushed us off with blah-blah, then went home." Schanberg asked a Pakistani army captain why the military had not come sooner. The captain explained that if they had, India would have attacked. Schanberg was stunned. "It just was totally paranoid," he says.25

At the White House, Kissinger warned Nixon that the deep antagonism of Bengalis for the central Pakistani government was now much worse. They worried that conspicuous U.S. emergency relief efforts could undermine Yahya's authority. The election, they knew, was just two weeks away.26

On December 7, millions of Pakistanis went to the polls, although some of the most devastated areas of East Pakistan had to delay their voting until January. The timing could not have been worse. Bengali politicians of all stripes slammed Yahya's government for ignoring their people in their hour of need. The voting gave Bengali nationalists a chance to shout their rejection of West Pakistan.27 The leader of the Bengalis was Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman, who led a popular mainstream Bengali nationalist party called the Awami League. He was a middle-class Bengali Muslim, whose lifelong activism had cost him almost ten years in Pakistani jails, making him a hero to many Bengalis. "Mujib's very appearance suggested raw power," cabled Blood, "a power drawn from the masses and from his own strong personality." He was tall and sturdy, with rugged features and intense eyes. Blood found him serene and confident amid the turmoil, but eager for power. "On the rostrum he is a fiery orator who can mesmerize hundreds of thousands in a pouring rain," Blood wrote. "Mujib has something of a messianic complex which has been reinforced by the heady experience of mass adulation. He talks of 'my people, my land, my forests, my rivers.' It seems clear that he views himself as the personification of Bengali aspirations."28

Mujib had distilled Bengali nationalist grievances into "Six Points," calling for democracy, and also for autonomy for both wings of a federal country, with the central government restricted to running only foreign affairs and defense. East Pakistan would be able to engage in trade and aid talks, and even to raise its own militia. The Awami League campaigned hard on their Six Point program. Mujib went to the cyclone areas to personally supervise the Awami League's own relief efforts, and returned to Dacca to declare that the Pakistani government was guilty of murder: "They have a huge army, but it is left to British marines to bury our dead." When Blood met with Mujib, the Bengali nationalist leader predicted with preternatural confidence that he would sweep almost every seat in East Pakistan.29

That would not spell a Cold War defeat for the United States. The Awami League was well known as moderate and pro-American. Blood described the League as center-left, a temperate and middle class party with no animus against the United States. Mujib liked to reminisce about his affection for Americans and his love of San Francisco.30

The 1970 balloting was a tremendous experiment in democracy. This was the first direct election in Pakistan's twenty-three years of independence, with all adults allowed to vote—including, for the first time, women. The people of Pakistan were to choose a Constituent Assembly, which would have the difficult job of drawing up a new constitution for the fragile country. Yahya might have tried to rig the voting, or used the cyclone as an excuse for an indefinite postponement of the elections, but he opted to allow this democratic moment.31

In West Pakistan, the rulers wondered whether Mujib really wanted autonomy, as he repeatedly said, or an independent state of Bangladesh—a debate that goes on to this day. Blood and the Dacca consulate thought that the Bengalis could be satisfied with autonomy. (The Indian government also believed this.) Yahya and many West Pakistani leaders, however, suspected that Mujib's Six Points would

prove to be merely the first six steps toward outright secession. Late in 1970, suspicious Pakistani intelligence agencies captured Mujib in a breathtakingly frank moment. They played their tape to Yahya, who was shocked to hear Mujib declare, “My aim is to establish Bangladesh.” He would “tear” Yahya’s federalist framework for upcoming constitutional negotiations “into pieces as soon as the elections are over. Who could challenge me once the elections are over?” Yahya, reeling, growled to one of his top political aides, “I shall fix Mujib if he betrays me.”32

An almost equally audacious electoral campaign took place in West Pakistan. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, a former foreign minister heading up the Pakistan People’s Party, assembled a coalition for dramatic change, drawing on conservative rural leaders and urban radicals. Bhutto was handsome, sardonic, urbane, and rich—an unlikely background for such a volatile populist. He had earlier been thrown in jail by the military, but was now back out. Yahya may have hoped that a PPP victory would allow him to stay in power, but Bhutto had his own fierce ambitions. He championed a leftist and tough vision of Pakistan, with a strong central government and a foreign policy that stood bitterly against India. Despite his Berkeley education, he was firmly anti-American. So Nixon loathed him: “the son-of-a-bitch is a total demagogue.” (Kissinger, more cautiously, described him as “Violently anti-Indian. Pro-Chinese.”) Blood skewered him with a single word: “malevolent.”33

Blood, who adored elections, was thrilled at the widespread excitement as Pakistanis got their first chance to choose their government. There were plenty of rallies and parades, with Mujib and other candidates in full cry, but relatively little violence. The major party leaders got to broadcast speeches on radio and television, in their choice of two out of three languages: English, Urdu, or Bengali. “It was raucous and colorful,” Butcher says, enjoying the memory. Blood was touched when a Bengali historian explained that the grinding experience of poverty had been relieved by the campaigning: powerful people asked for your vote, gave you respect, and promised to govern with your consent. You were no longer told that you did not know what was good for you.34

When the big day came, U.S. officials in Dacca were pleasantly surprised: the voting was impressively legitimate, the best the country had ever seen. The soldiers and policemen at the polling stations were there only to keep the peace, and Blood saw no signs of voter intimidation. Everyone agreed that it had been free and fair. Women voted in droves. “The elections were remarkably free,” says Butcher. “It was fairly unique, turning a military government to civilian authority. It was a extraordinary thing.”35

The Awami League won hugely. Out of 169 contested seats in East Pakistan, the League took all but two, winning an outright majority in the National Assembly. Mujib stood to be prime minister of all of Pakistan. “I was not surprised that Mujibur Rahman won easily and tremendously in East Pakistan,” recalls Eric Griffel. “There was tremendous Bengali pride in Mujibur.”36

Yahya’s military dictatorship got trounced. His preferred candidates did miserably in both wings of the country. Humiliated, he was ruling over people who had rejected him east and west. Meanwhile the Pakistani military—some of them more hard-line than Yahya—recoiled at the prospect of Mujib running East Pakistan, demanding autonomy and resources, and perhaps making friends with India.37

Bhutto had ridden a populist wave to an impressive victory in West Pakistan, but because East Pakistan was more populous, Mujib won twice as many seats. The ambitious Bhutto thus found Mujib’s triumph blocking his way. While Yahya and Bhutto were cutthroat rivals—a conservative, pro-American military man pitted against a leftist, anti-American firebrand—they were driven together in the panicky days after the election by a shared hostility toward India and a fear of losing East Pakistan.38

Blood, worried that Mujib would overplay his hand, coolly put off congratulating him for weeks. (He would later fault an exultant Mujib for a “blind faith in ‘people power.’ ”) When an Awami League leader asked if the United States would mediate if East Pakistan declared its independence, Blood flatly refused. He wanted nothing to do with secession, and hewed to the U.S. official line: one Pakistan.39

Galvanized by their triumph, Mujib and the Awami League had to make good on their campaign for autonomy for the Bengalis. Showing his popular strength,

Mujib called a huge rally, where he pleaded with the rapturous crowd to carry on if he was assassinated. As Yahya, Mujib, and Bhutto began negotiating about the future of the country, Blood still hoped to avoid violence. He believed that Mujib was not aiming for secession except as a desperate last resort. “My thinking was that the Awami League platform was a recipe for the dissolution of Pakistan,” he said later, “but it could be a recipe for the peaceful dissolution of Pakistan.”40

This was a moment when the United States might have stood on principle. There had been a free and fair election, truly expressive of the will of the people. The democratic superpower could have encouraged Pakistan to deepen its democratic traditions. “We are the great democracy,” says Meg Blood. “And here was a democratic game being played, as if they would pay any attention once Mujib had won. They were prepared to simply push him aside.” She adds, “We, the great American nation, leaned back and said nothing.”41

The White House took almost no interest in upholding the results of Pakistan’s grand experiment in democracy. Instead, the Nixon team dreaded the loss of its Cold War ally. The State Department unhappily thought that Pakistan was likely to crack apart. Kissinger asked Nixon whether the United States should be warming up to Mujib, who was friendly to the country. But Nixon, sticking with Yahya, scrawled, “not yet” and “not any position which encourages secession.”42

Harold Saunders, the White House senior aide for South Asia, braced Kissinger for the prospect of another partition. Expecting East Pakistan to secede, he asked Kissinger how hard the United States should work to avoid bloodshed. They were, he wrote, “witnessing the possible birth of a new nation of over 70 million people.… [W]e could have something to do with how this comes about—peacefully or by bloody civil war.”43

A protracted series of negotiations between Yahya, Bhutto, and Mujib amounted to nothing. “Mujib has let me down,” Yahya bitterly told one of his ministers. “I was wrong in trusting this person.” On March 1, under pressure from Bhutto, Yahya indefinitely postponed the opening of the National Assembly, which had been scheduled for March 3. To the Bengalis who had decisively voted for the Awami League, this looked like outright electoral theft. Yahya, wiping away the democratic election that he had allowed, declared that Pakistan was facing its “gravest political crisis.”44

When Blood heard the news of the postponement on the radio, he dashed up to the roof of the Adamjee Court building. “We could see Bengalis pouring out of office buildings all around that neighborhood,” he remembered. “Angry as hornets.” They were screaming in rage. They had believed Yahya, he thought, and now were being robbed of their democratic victory. Although the crowds stayed peaceful, many people were carrying clubs or lathis (long wooden staffs, a weapon of choice for police in the subcontinent). He told the State Department, “I’ve seen the beginning of the breakup of Pakistan.”45

Scott Butcher, the young political officer, remembers a wave of civil disobedience, with outraged crowds in the streets and a number of clashes with the Pakistani authorities. The next day, Bengalis launched a general strike, in the storied tradition of mass mobilizations against the British Empire. This showed the generals who really ran East Pakistan. At Mujib’s word, normal life came to a halt. The shops were shuttered, and neither cars nor bicycles were allowed on the streets, which instead were filled with Bengalis chatting and wandering around. Bands of youths roved the city, shouting, “Joi Bangla!”—victory to Bengal.46

Catastrophe loomed. Blood worried at incidents of arson and looting, and ugly acts of intimidation of West Pakistanis. There were some small but potentially disastrous skirmishes with the army, which was out in full force. Mujib called for disciplined and peaceful mobilization of his followers. “I thought that the situation was intolerable to the army,” says Griffel. “The solemnness of the population, the mild violence, the civil disobedience, the constant strikes, the university students—I don’t think that was tolerable for long.”47

Butcher was impressed by the military’s restraint, which he found remarkable: “They were being spat upon, harassed and hassled by locals, but behaving quite well under the circumstances.” Yahya broadcast an angry speech to the nation on March 6, accusing the “forces of disorder” of engaging in looting, arson, and killing. Under pressure from these mass demonstrations, he announced that the new National Assembly would now open on March 25. But with the politicians still

deadlocked, Yahya threatened the worst: “It is the duty of the Pakistan armed forces to insure the integrity, solidarity, and security of Pakistan, and in this they have never failed.”48

“THE RESULT WOULD BE A BLOOD-BATH”

The only possible hope was to avoid a military crackdown. Once the shooting started, the Bengalis would be radicalized; the military’s prestige would be engaged; the violence could escalate into civil war. The whole region might plunge into chaos. In the last days before Yahya fired his fateful first shots, the United States did not exert itself to prevent that doom.

There was plenty of warning. Kissinger was alerted that, according to Blood’s consulate, there was almost no chance of Pakistan holding together. But Nixon put his trust in Yahya. “I feel that anything that can be done to maintain Pakistan as a viable country is extremely important,” he said. “They’re a good people. Strong. People like Yahya are responsible leaders.” Soon after, when Kissinger mentioned there was a problem coming with the separation of East Pakistan, the president was surprised: “They want to be separated?”49

Kissinger might breeze past advice from Blood and the distrusted State Department, but it was much harder to ignore similar alarms from his own handpicked White House staff. Samuel Hoskinson, who knew more about South Asia than anyone else in the White House, warned of a looming civil war that Yahya’s government would probably lose. He recalled the recent horrors of the attempt by the Biafrans to secede from Nigeria. He suggested that Pakistan would be better off with a confederal system, giving East Pakistan under Mujib the maximum amount of autonomy short of secession. “It was not the popular thing to say,” Hoskinson remembers. “We had some concern what kind of blowback we would get from Henry, which could be pretty bad.” But he says, “He didn’t blow up on me. Not that time.”50

Harold Saunders was quieter and impeccably polite, but on March 5 he warned Kissinger that the Pakistan army was probably preparing to launch a futile crackdown. There was still a last chance to avoid slaughter by leaning hard on Yahya. Saunders recommended a government report that argued for threatening to stop economic aid to Pakistan to prevent bloodshed. He emphasized the crucial decision: “The tough question is whether to make a major effort to stop West Pakistani military intervention.”51

The next day, Kissinger convened one of his frequent meetings in the White House Situation Room, gathering senior officials from the State Department, Pentagon, and CIA. It was the last high-level overview of U.S. policy before Yahya began his killing spree—a final opportunity for the United States to use its considerable influence to dissuade its ally from violence. A senior State Department official warned, “The judgment of all of us is that with the number of troops available to Yahya (a total of 20,000, with 12,000 combat troops) and a hostile East Pakistan population of 75 million, the result would be a blood-bath with no hope of West Pakistan reestablishing control over East Pakistan.” Another senior official warned of a possible “real blood-bath … comparable to the Biafra situation.”

Kissinger seemed convinced at first. “I agree that force won’t work,” he said. But when a State Department official argued that the United States should discourage Yahya from shooting, Kissinger dug in his heels. “If I may be the devil’s advocate,” he asked, “why should we say anything?” He asked warily, “What would we do to discourage the use of force? Tell Yahya we don’t favor it?” Kissinger said firmly, “Intervention would almost certainly be self-defeating.” He invoked Nixon’s friendship with Yahya: “The President will be very reluctant to do anything that Yahya could interpret as a personal affront.” He was skeptical of even the gentlest U.S. warnings: “If we could go in mildly as a friend to say we think it’s a bad idea, it wouldn’t be so bad. But if the country is breaking up, they won’t be likely to receive such a message calmly.” He said, “In the highly emotional atmosphere of West Pakistan under the circumstances, I wonder whether sending the American Ambassador in to argue against moving doesn’t buy us the worst of everything. Will our doing so make the slightest difference? I can’t imagine that they give a damn what we think.” The group, following Kissinger, settled on what a State Department official called “massive inaction.”52

Harold Saunders remembers that “there was a principle in their minds, which

could be intellectually justified, although maybe not in practical terms: we're not going to tell someone else how to run his country." This was, he adds, the same tenet used for the shah of Iran. "I think it was the wrong principle myself," he says. "I heard it articulated by Henry on a number of occasions."53
Kissinger's decision stuck. He seemed more influenced by warnings that many West Pakistanis suspected that the United States was plotting to split up the country. The State Department instructed Blood not to try to dissuade Yahya from shooting.54
On March 13, Kissinger sent Nixon what would turn out to be his final word on Pakistan before the killing started. Kissinger made "the case for inaction."55 He correctly warned that Yahya and the Pakistani military seemed "determined to maintain a unified Pakistan by force if necessary." And he noted that a crackdown might not succeed: "[Mujib] Rahman has embarked on a Gandhian-type non-violent non cooperation campaign which makes it harder to justify repression; and … the West Pakistanis lack the military capacity to put down a full scale revolt over a long period."
But Kissinger urged the president to do nothing. He wrote that the U.S. government's consensus—forged by him—was that "the best posture was to remain inactive and do nothing that Yahya might find objectionable." Kissinger did not want to caution Yahya against opening fire on his people, ruling out "weighing in now with Yahya in an effort to prevent the possible outbreak of a bloody civil war." It was "undesirable" to speak up, because "we could realistically have little influence on the situation and anything we might do could be resented by the West Pakistanis as unwarranted interference and jeopardize our future relations." Kissinger preferred to stick with Yahya: "it is a more defensible position to operate as if the country remains united than to take any move that would appear to encourage separation. I know you share that view."56
There was one consideration that, while voiced by other U.S. officials, never made it into Kissinger's note to the president: simply avoiding the loss of life. The last chance of maintaining a united Pakistan would have been warning Yahya that force—especially brutal force—would be disastrous and have consequences for Pakistan's relationship with the United States. Just two weeks after the slaughter began, Kissinger would say that if the United States had had a choice on March 25, it would have urged Yahya not to
use force. He was already covering up the fact that the Nixon administration had had many opportunities to make such requests to Yahya, and had expressly chosen silence.57
East Pakistan teetered on the verge of anarchy. With the days dwindling until the fateful March 25 deadline for opening the National Assembly, the three main Pakistani leaders kept on bargaining, but with frighteningly few signs of a political breakthrough. Bhutto insisted that his party, dominant in West Pakistan, should take a big role in any new government, and that Pakistan could not be allowed to disintegrate.58
Mujib, at another huge rally of half a million people—many of them carrying iron rods and bamboo sticks—held back from declaring an independent Bangladesh, but demanded that the army withdraw to its barracks and yield power to the winners of the election. "It was a vast number of people who had suddenly become political," says Meg Blood. "They had been insulted because their vote had been ignored." The Pakistani security forces found themselves overwhelmed by an uprising that roiled throughout Dacca, Chittagong, Jessore, and elsewhere. The Pakistani martial law administration admitted that 172 people had been killed in the first week of March—figures they had to put out to debunk stories among livid Bengalis that hundreds or thousands had been killed. Archer Blood found the military's statement "reasonable, almost apologetic in tone, and seemingly honest."59
Ominously, Pakistan flew in more and more troops, who landed from West Pakistan at the Dacca airport. The airport became an armed fort, bristling with dug-in automatic antiaircraft weapons and gun emplacements. Several times in March, Blood watched about a hundred young men debarking from a Pakistan International Airlines plane, all of them dressed alike in neat short-sleeved white shirts and chino trousers. They lined up and marched off smartly. Yahya shoved aside the moderate general who had been governor of East Pakistan, terrifying Bengalis with his replacement: Lieutenant General Tikka Khan, known widely as "the butcher of Baluchistan" for his devastating repression of an uprising in that

West Pakistani
province. Blood knew he was one of the most extreme hawks in the military—a killer.60

Blood still did not quite see the massacres coming. He was relieved that Mujib had chosen to avoid declaring independence, and predicted an "essentially static waiting game" as Bengali crowds faced off against the army. (He would later be ashamed of his assessment.) He knew that Bengali nationalists would not be cowed by a whiff of grapeshot, and could not believe that Pakistan's generals would be stupid enough to try it.61

Blood was anything but an Awami League partisan. He saw Mujib as principled but exasperatingly obdurate, and warned the League that Yahya and his prideful senior officers had been restrained in the face of considerable provocation. Afterward, he would disgustedly condemn Mujib for overreaching. The nationalist leader had been swept away by the spectacle of "tens of thousands of militant people, men, women and children of all classes thronged by the sheikh's house chanting slogans" about the " 'emancipation' of Bangla Desh." (The name is Bengali for "Bengal Nation.") The U.S. consul was baffled by "the mystic belief that essentially unarmed masses could triumph in test of wills with martial law government backed by professional army."62

Still, Blood admired the Bengali nationalist crowds. Swept up in their effusive mood, he confessed in a cable "a certain lack of objectivity. It is difficult to be completely objective in Dacca in March 1971 when, out of discretion rather than valor, our cars and residences sport black flags and we echo smiling greetings of 'Joi Bangla' as we move about the streets." He enthused, "Daily we lend our ears to the out-pouring of the Bengali dream, a touching admixture of bravado, wishful thinking, idealism, animal cunning, anger, and patriotic fervor. We hear on Radio Dacca and see on Dacca TV the impressive blossoming of Bengali nationalism and we watch the pitiful attempts of students and workers to play at soldiering."

But his zest was tempered with growing dread. He came to realize how this would probably end. He hoped the army would follow logic rather than emotion. Blood, whose pragmatism outweighed his
Bengali sympathies, evenhandedly hoped for a political "solution which will give something to Bhutto, something to Mujib, something to Yahya and the army, still preserve at least a vestige of the unity of Pakistan, and hopefully buy time for a cooling of passions."63

The best prospect would be a confederation, with Yahya as president of both wings, Bhutto as prime minister of West Pakistan, and Mujib as "prime minister of Bangla Desh (East Pakistan has become a term for geographers)." Mujib could not compromise on his promises of autonomy; his people would never accept that now. But autonomy came dangerously close to independence for Bangladesh, and Blood thought that Yahya would likely balk. He presciently wrote, "The ominous prospect of a military crackdown is much more than a possibility, but it would only delay, and ensure, the independence of Bangla Desh." Blood suggested telling Yahya that the United States wanted a political solution, but the State Department—following Kissinger's guidance—maintained its silence.64

Dacca became a more menacing place for Americans. The CIA warned Blood that communists were trying to assassinate him. Late one night, three Urdu-speaking men in a car without a license plate drove up to the Adamjee Court building that housed the consulate, threw two handmade bombs, and fired a revolver into the air. The building shook. A few nights later, Archer and Meg Blood heard several gunshots at their house. Someone in a jeep had driven up to the consul's residence, fired three shots, and raced off. Meg Blood remembers suspicions fell on the Naxalites, the Maoist revolutionaries: "They thought it would be a nice chaotic thing to assassinate the man in charge." The Bloods found bullet holes in the veranda off their bedroom. The U.S. consulate and other American buildings in Dacca faced regular bombings with Molotov cocktails, which were nerve-jangling but so far mercifully amateurish. After two Molotov cocktails were thrown at American business offices in downtown Dacca, Archer Blood shrugged it off: "Bombing gang still active and happily still ineffective."65

On March 15—which Blood bookishly noted was the Ides of March—Yahya arrived in Dacca for more negotiations. It was, one of Yahya's ministers despairingly recalled, "like giving oxygen to a dying patient when the doctors have declared him a lost case." Blood suffered a moment of optimism. "Things are looking up,"

he reported after talks between Yahya and Mujib. The same day that he wrote that, there was a serious clash twenty miles north of Dacca, as Pakistani troops opened fire when they were stopped by a furious crowd, killing at least two civilians. Mujib privately passed along a message to Blood that these provocations made it hard to sell a peace deal to his own people. Blood, having none of it, sent to Mujib "the natural rejoinders: rise above the matter; play the statesman; surely Yahya must be as unhappy about such incidents as Mujib."66
Despite pressure from more militant Bengalis, Mujib continued to insist to other East Pakistani politicians that he wanted to keep Pakistan's wings together, perhaps in some kind of confederation. Bhutto, adamant about Pakistan's unity, had been sitting out the negotiations. But on March 22, he came to Dacca to join in the talks with Yahya and Mujib. Blood happened to be at the Intercontinental Hotel for a lunch, and caught a glimpse of the politician in the lobby. The hatred of the Bengalis for Bhutto was palpable; people hollered obscenities at the grim-faced man, who was flanked by bodyguards with AK-47 assault rifles. Blood later remembered Bhutto staring straight ahead, his "reptilian eyes fixed on the wall. He was in the enemy's camp and he knew it." Another eyewitness saw eight truckloads of armed troops protecting Bhutto's car. At a press conference at the Intercontinental Hotel, Bhutto announced that Yahya and Mujib had reached a general agreement that made a promising basis for future negotiations.67
Blood was satisfied with the prospect of a deal that gave Mujib "everything but independence and which, we believe, he could sell to people of Bangla Desh." On March 24, Blood shrugged off a plea from Mujib, who wanted U.S. pressure on Yahya to avoid a crackdown. Blood saw little evidence that Yahya was "about to take a harder line." As Yahya, Bhutto, and Mujib negotiated frenetically, Blood's disastrously incorrect evaluation was agreeable to the higher-ups at the State Department, who preferred to avoid taking sides in Pakistan's politics. But Mujib suspected that the West Pakistanis were dragging out the talks to buy time to reinforce their military.68
The defense attaché at the Dacca consulate, a U.S. Air Force colonel, visited two senior Pakistani officers. They were unbearably tense. One of them, a Pakistani wing commander, said that they would carry out their orders, but hoped they would not have to do the worst: "It is [a] terrible thing to shoot your own people."69

Chapter 3
Mrs. Gandhi

Indira Gandhi had a personal connection to Bengal. Her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, the great opponent of British colonialism who would become India's founding prime minister, had given her a demanding if inconsistent education. In 1934, at the age of sixteen, with her father once again stuck in a cramped British jail, Indira Nehru—who would grow up to be the first woman prime minister of India—was packed off to study in the wilds of Bengal.
She had already had a singular schooling, of a kind: enduring an uncertain, anxious, and often lonely childhood, with her aristocratic grandfather, resolute father, and sickly mother campaigning for India's freedom and paying for it with long, wretched tours in British prisons; sitting in on her father's meeting with Albert Einstein; visiting her father's dear friend and mentor Mohandas Gandhi—the revered Mahatma himself—in jail, where he would affectionately pull her ears.1
But Santiniketan (the Abode of Peace), in the glorious countryside of what today is West Bengal, north of Calcutta (now called Kolkata), was no common place to learn. The school there was founded by the celebrated Bengali poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, who would write the national anthems for two unborn states, India and Bangladesh. The Nobel laureate meant to realize Indians' intellectual independence through learning, studying all of humanity, with a special attention to Japanese and Chinese civilization. The institution was determinedly unconventional: on arriving, Indira Nehru searched in vain for the classrooms and was startled to discover that her classes were held under the trees. "Everything is so artistic and beautiful and wild!"
she wrote to Nehru. In a respite from all too much politics, she was transfixed by art and poetry. She was awed by Tagore himself, a humane prophet complete with cascading white beard and hair. Following his universalist vision, she took courses in French and English, in Hindi and Bengali.2
Nehru wanted his daughter to learn to speak some Bengali and "get to know the

Bengalis a little better.” Later, when Bengalis were slaughtered and West Bengal was overrun with desperate refugees, Bengalis would often say that she had a special feeling for them. She was hardly the most sentimental individual, but she was familiar with Bengal’s heat and spring flowers, all the sounds and smells of the place. She had found Bengali “a very sweet & nice language,” and had soon gotten good enough that Tagore suggested she take literature classes in it. There was nothing abstract for her about the people who were suffering and dying. In a cruel twist, the site of this misery in 1971 was where she had tried to escape from politics long before. “I was away from politics, noise,” she once said. “It was a refuge and a new world.”3

She grew up to plunge back into the politics and the noise. Her idyll in West Bengal gave way to more standard schools, in India and Britain. There are not a lot of government chiefs trained at both Santiniketan and Oxford. In 1942, she married a worldly, outgoing politician and journalist, Feroze Gandhi, taking his last name. (She was no relation to Mahatma Gandhi.) In the family tradition, she was arrested by the British after speaking to a rally in Allahabad. She languished in a dirty gray prison cell, sleeping on a concrete bed in the freezing cold. In the violence of Partition, she on two separate occasions protected presumably Muslim men being chased by Hindu mobs. And she worked in filthy refugee camps for Muslims displaced by Partition.4

After all that, it is hard to say what the humane lessons of Tagore might have meant to a steely, calculating politician. Her wariness of others was heightened by a miserable marriage, which ended when her husband died of a sudden heart attack at the age of forty-seven. While Jawaharlal Nehru was prime minister, she was uneasy around
the courtiers and hacks crowding his grand Delhi residence, Teen Murti Bhavan. But in 1959, she threw herself into public life, becoming president of the dominant Indian National Congress, her father’s political party.5

All grown up, Indira Gandhi was nobody’s idea of a charmer. Jacqueline Kennedy, who scored rather higher in the social graces, found her “a real prune—bitter, kind of pushy, horrible woman.” Even those who liked her found her remote and withdrawn. Her closest friend wrote that she had a sharp temper and nursed grudges, and was secretive and private. She worked relentlessly, with the disconcerting habit of reading papers while someone was talking to her. One of her top advisers explained sympathetically that she was constantly tense from having to contend with the man’s world of Indian government (her aunt once famously called her “the only man in her cabinet”), which earned her a reputation as “aloof, secretive and haughty.” K. C. Pant, then a young Indian official from a prominent political family who went on to be defense minister, and says he was on friendly terms with her, recalls, “She could be very cold. Occasionally she had to freeze somebody. She could freeze them just by looking at them. She listened, she absorbed, she didn’t speak much.”6

India was born democratic. Nehru had a bedrock devotion to freedom of thought, the verdict of the ballot box, and the independence of the courts. But Gandhi had inherited somewhat less than a full portion of her iconic father’s fundamental and sophisticated commitment to democracy. She was far more willing to manipulate people, and seemed quite aware that she lacked her father’s saintliness. Jaswant Singh—who has served as India’s foreign minister, defense minister, and finance minister in a rival party—remembers, “All along she felt, and she often said it, that ‘my father was a saint in politics. I am not.’ She had not the same tolerance and acceptance of a differing viewpoint.”7

Nehru died in 1964, leaving some people wondering if India could survive as a unified and democratic country. His daughter was given the modest job of running the ministry of information and broadcasting, but when the new prime minister, Lal Bahadur
Shastri, dropped dead of a heart attack early in 1966, her name was suddenly floated for prime minister. Many of the ruling Congress party’s grandees imagined that she could be easily shoved around. They were wrong. In January 1966, Indira Gandhi was sworn in as prime minister in the magnificent Rashtrapati Bhavan.8

She was a novice, just forty-seven years old and untested, abruptly in charge of the world’s largest democracy. It was and is an impossible job. She was confronted with all of India’s problems: terrible poverty, widespread illiteracy, secessionist movements, bloody-minded revolutionaries, sclerotic

government. But she quickly learned on the job. She reached out to the public, while presiding over a titanic patronage machine, doling out appointments and favors to every part of the country. She dedicated herself to fighting poverty. But it was rough going as she faced years of drought, a weak economy, and riots.9

Gandhi struggled to keep India united. She lived in dread of communal bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims in such vital states as Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. To quell violence, she reminded the state governments that the central government's security forces, including the army, were available for use, and hoped "that these would be called in in time and not after the event."10

The new prime minister had to face secessionist revolts far from the country's center: Nagaland, Mizoram, and of course Kashmir. And while Indians preferred to point to their success stories—where democratic federalism managed to hold the country together—the Indian state sometimes harshly used force. When in March 1966 Mizo insurgents in the hill country declared their independence from India, Gandhi's government sent in both the army and the air force—the first time that the Indian air force had been unleashed against Indian citizens. India marched troops against rebels in Nagaland too, where a peace effort fell apart, followed by brutal Naga terrorist attacks on civilians.11

Gandhi had been installed in office by the politicos, but in 1967 she won her first electoral mandate from the Indian public. In elections for the Lok Sabha (House of the People), the lower house of India's Parliament, her Congress party managed to hold on to a majority, but was much weakened (which had the benefit of getting rid of some of her rivals inside the party). In 1969, the party split between the leftist Gandhi and her more conservative competitors, with intense sparring among them.12

By then, Gandhi was already chafing against the democratic restraints on her authority, eerily foreshadowing her notorious 1975 declaration of Emergency rule—the terrible rupture in India's long history of democratic governance. When she first became prime minister, she was skeptical not just about the civil service and her own Congress party, but also about parliamentary democracy itself. She bridled at the incrementalism of the unwieldy Indian political system, with its thousands of daily compromises: "Sometimes I wish … we had a real revolution—like France or Russia—at the time of independence." She had a penchant for crude censorship. In some of this, she had a little more in common with Richard Nixon than either of them would have liked to admit.13

THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

Indira Gandhi's most important adviser by far was P. N. Haksar, the principal secretary to the prime minister. Of all the self-important mandarins in South Block, arriving each morning to have their briefcases carried from the car up to the office by a servant striding ahead of them, he was the top. The job title is much too humble: he functioned essentially as her chief of staff and foremost foreign policy adviser. (Henry Kissinger once called him "my opposite number there, Haksar, who is probably a communist.") In terms of the Nixon administration, P. N. Haksar was something like the Indian equivalent of H. R. Haldeman and Kissinger combined. He got vastly more face time with the new prime minister than any cabinet official, and exercised tremendous influence on her.14

Haksar was given to daydreaming and liked to dawdle in his bed, but, as he wrote late in his life, was driven to diligent toil out of "moral obligation, or out of a sense of duty." Like Nehru, he hailed from an eminent family of Kashmiri Pandits, and strove to live up to the legacy. He inherited both a sense of perfectionism and a dread of dishonor, which was, he reflected, "probably imbibed through constantly hearing since early childhood that our family could never be bribed, bought or made to bend. Such, at any rate, was the mythology of our family. And mythologies have a way of taking hold of one's mind, just as gravity holds one's body."15

He studied both mathematics and history, and became a conspicuously erudite lawyer, educated at Allahabad and the London School of Economics. His background was sufficiently posh that one of his uncles, who was prime minister of Jaipur under the British Empire, always served the teatime cake iced with the colors of the Union Jack. But Haksar grew up amid political turmoil, surrounded by talk of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru's freedom struggle, with his mother telling him that the English were a nation of scoundrels. "Gandhi had appeared on our horizon," he later said. "And he grew larger every day, until he covered the

entire sky.” As a young man, dreaming of doing extraordinary deeds, Haksar gambled on an independent India.16

After Partition, which he said made him “spiritually sick,” he hitched his fortunes to the Nehru family. This paid off handsomely. Haksar first met Indira Nehru Gandhi in his childhood: a tiny girl, perched on a servant’s shoulder, was brought over to the Haksars’ house in Nagpur, fondly announced as the only child of the great Nehru. Haksar later remembered only that “her eyes seemed to get bigger and brighter the more my mother fussed over her.” Nehru himself encouraged the promising young man to join India’s new foreign service, extolling his flair for political work.17

Haksar, with a beaky nose and bushy eyebrows, was more of a professional civil servant than a politico. His government service centered on the Ministry of External Affairs, with tours of duty in Nigeria, Austria, and Britain. His British posting particularly helped him clamber upward: Indira Gandhi was then studying at Oxford, and he got to know her. His loyalty to the family was smoothly extended to her.18

Where Gandhi lacked a well-considered political philosophy, Haksar was there to help provide it. He anchored her in democratic politics. His words could sometimes echo Nehru’s. In the great fight against poverty, Haksar wanted to work within the existing secular democratic system. He struck liberal notes on minority rights, expansively declaring his commitment to freedom of speech, assembly, and worship for every single Indian citizen.19

Like Kissinger, Haksar was brainy, witty, verbose, arrogant, and abrasive. He took a long-range view—again like Kissinger— sometimes to the annoyance of those who wanted immediate policy and were less indulgent of intellectualism. He consolidated power over foreign policy in his office, pushing aside foreign ministers who came belatedly to realize who the real boss was. Haksar could be merciless to underlings, while always cultivating his relationship with the prime minister.20

Under Haksar, the prime minister’s secretariat dominated the government. His senior colleagues found him warm and approachable, running the prime minister’s team with a combination of energy and confidence, although, as one top aide noted, he “tended to pontificate.” Arundhati Ghose, a diplomat who served under Haksar in Vienna and after, who would later read to an elderly Haksar as he slowly went blind, remembers him fondly. “Haksar had a very wry sense of humor. He was extremely well read, very affectionate, and very warm.” She recalls his outsized influence, with all the powers of the prime minister’s office, and his guiding role in India’s foreign policy.21

According to Nehru’s grand vision of nonalignment, India was to stand warily above the quarrelsome superpowers of the Cold War. But Haksar was in the thick of it—firmly committed to the Soviet side. He was staunchly leftist at home and abroad, leaning toward the Soviet Union so much that it alarmed other Indian officials. He was joined in this by some of the other leading pro-Soviet Indians who were Gandhi’s closest advisers—all of them Kashmiri Brahmins like her, thus quickly dubbed the “Kashmiri Mafia.” Ghose remembers that her mentor never hid his left-wing views. Although
he did not impose his leftism on his subordinates, she says, “It came out in everything that he said or did.”22

Indira Gandhi was not as pro-Soviet as Haksar, but she was already leery of the United States. On her first visit to Washington as prime minister in 1966, she got along well with Lyndon Johnson, and tried to get him to restart U.S. economic aid to India, which had been suspended during the India-Pakistan war of 1965. But they sparred over the devaluation of the rupee and, later, over the Middle East and the Vietnam War. She was stung by Johnson’s attempts to use food aid for leverage and by lectures from other U.S. officials. Facing famine in 1966, she resented the slowness of U.S. food shipments. Meanwhile, Haksar pushed her further toward the Soviet Union. She sought more Soviet arms sales, helping India to build up a formidable military machine. When the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, India refused to vote for a United Nations resolution condemning the brutal crackdown on Czech liberals. Gandhi’s government was grateful to the Soviet Union for help with industrialization and nurturing India’s defense industry. Ghose says that largely “as a result of Haksar-sahib’s influence,” the government had a “distrust of the Americans. They didn’t trust us, we didn’t trust them.”23

For that, the Nixon administration loathed him. Samuel Hoskinson, Kissinger's staffer for South Asia at the White House, shudders operatically at the mention of his name. "It brings back nothing but bad memories," he says. "He was an arrogant Brahmin, pretty far left, difficult to discuss anything with. He always wants the upper hand. You don't have a discussion. He fires verbal volleys." Hoskinson hated his pro-Soviet politics too. "He was quite far left. He may have been a communist." (He wasn't.) Although Hoskinson doubted it, some U.S. officials felt that "he might be controlled by the Russians, that he was actually an asset of the KGB."24

Indira Gandhi's power was limited by her party's standing in Parliament. Frustratingly dependent on socialist and leftist parties, she was in a weak position, while her more conservative foes were maneuvering against her. She had no patience for the opposition. In December 1970, taking advantage of her popularity, she boldly chose a democratic way out: calling new general elections.25

The Lok Sabha was dissolved, and Indian politicians hit the hustings, from Uttar Pradesh to Gujarat to Kerala. It was the biggest election in the world. In the end, more than 151 million voters cast their ballots. She gambled her entire political future on the outcome.26

Gandhi campaigned hard on a populist platform, dedicated to ending India's grinding poverty. When her rivals put up the Hindi slogan of "Indira Hatao!" (Remove Indira!), she parried with what became her famous catchphrase: "Garibi Hatao!" (Remove Poverty!) She spoke to some 375 meetings, barely sleeping or eating as she campaigned all across the vast country. Astonishingly, in forty-three days of electioneering, she claimed to have given speeches in front of as many as thirteen million people. She later liked to boast that she never spoke at a rally with fewer than a hundred thousand people. She hammered home her core themes: getting rid of unemployment, helping peasants and shopkeepers, whipping the much-despised civil service into line.27

It worked. Gandhi and her team won a massive landslide. Her party—known since the split in the Congress party as Congress (R) —seized a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha. Her own campaigning was crucial to this terrific sweep and she was now in an extraordinarily strong position. Her foreign minister, Sardar Swaran Singh, would later brag about "the Indira typhoon." Sydney Schanberg, the New York Times correspondent in Delhi, was impressed. Settling into the newspaper's bureau on Janpath, in the heart of Delhi, he had grown fond of India. "It has terrible problems, but it is a democracy," he says. "The people do like to throw the bums out when they vote."28

Having won the election on her antipoverty campaign, Gandhi faced high expectations at home. But the crisis in Pakistan quickly overwhelmed her government's focus on relieving India's poor. As Gandhi said, "our country was poised for rapid economic advance and a more determined attack on the age-old poverty of our people.

Even as we were settling down to these new tasks, we have been engulfed by a new and gigantic problem, not of our making."29

While Gandhi's government might have been tempted to gloat at Pakistan's troubles in governing East Bengal, the Indian government was painfully aware of its own difficulties in keeping a grip on its own state of West Bengal.

The Indian state was a hotbed of Marxist and Maoist agitation, notorious as the home of the fiery Maoist revolutionaries known as the Naxalites—named after the West Bengali village of Naxalbari, where the movement originated. Haksar despised the "cult of violence" of the Naxalites and radicals in West Bengal. Gandhi's government, horrified by the violent and pro-Chinese Naxalites, feared an armed communist takeover of parts of the country. Gandhi and her allies struggled to get the better of both the Naxalites and the powerhouse Communist Party (Marxist). "Calcutta was flooded with Maoist literature," remembered one journalist. "Mao Tse Tung, Liu Shao Chi, Marx, Lenin. The city was Red."30

"From October 1969 to the middle of 1971, we broke the back of the Naxalite revolt in West Bengal," remembers Lieutenant General Jacob-Farj-Rafael Jacob, then a major general and the chief of staff of the army's Eastern Command. "Mrs. Gandhi told me to do it." People were thrown in jail on specific charges or under a notorious Preventive Detention Act. Haksar knew that there were some ten thousand young people in jail in West Bengal, and that more than a hundred thousand political workers were facing criminal charges. The West Bengal state

government requested the deployment of Indian army troops to maintain order. Gandhi's central government offered large coercive forces to the West Bengal local government, including battalions of police, the Border Security Force, and almost two divisions of the Indian army.31

Moderate politicians feared what the communists—who had done well in the elections—might do if they were allowed to run the state, and violent mass unrest if they were not. The governor of West Bengal bleakly told Gandhi that "restoring law and order … may be an unpleasant duty." The Indian ambassador in Washington
admitted, "Considering that we ourselves have plenty of problems in east India, we would not wish for East Bengal to be in a disturbed state."32

PAKISTAN VOTES

India was thrilled by Pakistan's novel experiment in democracy. The Pakistani elections in December 1970 touched a chord in India, where democratic precepts ran deep—and where Gandhi had just had her big electoral win.

Indians savored the drubbing the Pakistani military received at the hands of their electorate, and many educated Indians relished the voting as a repudiation of the founding ideal of Pakistan as a Muslim state, which was not enough to keep the two halves of the country from coming unglued. "Mujib's thumping victory in East Bengal was a foregone conclusion," wrote a senior Indian diplomat. "Culturally they're quite different," recalls Jagat Mehta, a former Indian foreign secretary. "It was in the seeds of time."33

The Indian government was heartened to hear Mujib call for friendship with India and for a peaceful resolution in Kashmir. Indians hoped that a democracy in Pakistan would prove peaceful toward them, particularly if the Awami League, warm to India, managed to form a government in Islamabad. India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW)— created as a kind of Indian answer to the CIA—concluded that a genuinely democratic Pakistan would increasingly desist from military confrontations against India.34

Not everyone swooned. Haksar worried that the humiliated Pakistani military would lash out against India. "I have long been feeling a sense of uneasiness about the intentions of Pakistan," he wrote to Gandhi. The Awami League's resounding victory made Pakistan's internal problems "infinitely more difficult. Consequently, the temptation to seek solution of these problems by external adventures has become very great." He implored Gandhi to quietly convene her service chiefs of staff and defense minister to "share
with them her anxieties," and have the military make "a very realistic assessment both of Pakistan's capability and our response. I have a feeling that there are many weak spots in our defence capabilities."35

India's spies were similarly uneasy. The R&AW answered directly to Gandhi's office, and was run by yet another Kashmiri Brahmin, R. N. Kao, who was eager to burnish his agency's reputation. It delivered a top secret alert to Gandhi's government on the impressive increase of Pakistan's military power in recent years, and warned that Pakistan might foment "violent agitation" and sabotage in Kashmir. The R&AW warned that there was a "quite real" risk that Pakistan, bolstered by Chinese support, would attack India. Like Haksar, the R&AW worried that Yahya would be tempted into "a military venture against INDIA with a view to diverting the attention of the people from the internal political problems and justifying the continuance of Martial Law."36

But despite this, the R&AW was confident that Mujib and Bhutto —the dominant popular forces in their respective wings—would probably cut a deal, avoiding a crisis or military crackdown. Similarly, one of Gandhi's inner circle remembered that the prime minister's secretariat, reading its reports from Dacca, thought that sort of settlement between Yahya and Mujib was in the works. He recalled that even the appointment of the brutal Lieutenant General Tikka Khan as governor of East Pakistan was seen as just for show.37

Haksar, however, quietly prepared for the worst. "Our requirements are extremely urgent," he wrote, alarmed at Pakistan's new offensive capabilities. With Nixon starting to sell weapons to Pakistan again, India made a huge request to the Soviet Union for bomber aircraft, tanks, armored personnel carriers, ammunition, surface-to-air missiles, and radar. Haksar nervously instructed the Indian ambassador in Moscow, "We have no repeat no other source of supply."38

India's diplomats in Dacca made no attempt to disguise their sympathies. They eagerly reported the mass mobilization of the Bengalis. When Mujib spoke to a

colossal rally of over a million people at the Race Course in Dacca, with the crowds singing Rabindranath Tagore's nationalist song "My Golden Bengal," the top Indian official in Dacca effused that "Bengali nationalism has gone deep into the minds of the people."[39]

As Yahya flew to Dacca for constitutional negotiations with Mujib, the Indian government watched hopefully. India's chief diplomat in Dacca worried that Mujib's call for an autonomous East Pakistan seemed to undercut Pakistan's unity. Mujib ominously warned that conspiracies in Pakistan's ruling classes were trying to thwart the democratic will of the people: "But they are playing with fire. Our people are conscious and they would resist any conspiratorial move."[40]

In private, India's diplomats heaped spiteful abuse on Bhutto, who was notoriously hostile to their country. India's enthusiasm for democracy in Pakistan did not include Bhutto's own electoral triumph; the Indian mission in Karachi sneered, "Mr. Bhutto … has really secured power through slogan-mongering and his not inconsiderable histrionic talents." Indian officials blamed him for stonewalling the constitutional talks. A senior Indian diplomat posted in Islamabad would later accuse Bhutto of being "directly responsible for encouraging Military action against Awami League." Bhutto, one of Gandhi's senior aides later wrote, "approved of the merciless military offensive."[41]

In the middle of these tense negotiations, India faced a spectacular act of terrorism. On January 30, in Srinagar, two young separatist Kashmiri Indians hijacked an Indian Airlines airplane to Lahore, in West Pakistan, and then blew it up in a fiery blaze. Although nobody was hurt, the furious Indian government immediately assumed the hijackers were Pakistani agents. As a tough reprisal, Gandhi's government suspended flights of Pakistani military and civilian aircraft over Indian territory, making it hard for Pakistan to keep up links between its two far-flung wings. (Yahya would accuse India of arranging the hijacking to justify this decision to ban overflights.) In West Pakistan, politicians fired off denunciations of India, and Bhutto had a friendly meeting with the hijackers; but in East Pakistan, Mujib swiftly denounced the destruction of the airplane, while Bengalis, unconcerned with competing claims in Kashmir, condemned the terrorists. This episode afforded India a tantalizing glimpse of the transformed relationship that it might have enjoyed with Pakistan under a Bengali-led government.[42]

The R&AW's prediction of a deal among Pakistan's leading politicians proved far too optimistic. Mujib insisted that his majority in the National Assembly entitled him to frame a new Pakistani constitution, ushering in autonomy for East Pakistan. But when Bhutto dug in his heels in early March, Indian officials noted sourly that "Mr. Bhutto took recourse to his familiar anti-Indian bogey."[43]

From Islamabad, Indian diplomats warned that hard-liners were putting increasing pressure on Yahya. An Indian official wrote that "the Armed Forces and the pre-dominately Punjabi Establishment in West Pakistan is back at its 23 year old game of not allowing East Pakistan to exercise its majority share in the country's affairs." As Bengalis protested, Indian diplomats in Dacca reported with alarm that hundreds of civilians were killed or injured, and scorned Yahya's suggestion that the "the army is above democratically elected representatives 'playing at' Constitution-making." This, Indian officials wrote, smacked of Latin American–style despotism.[44]

India's government remained wholeheartedly for Mujib. The top Indian diplomat in Dacca admiringly reported, "His constitutional method, solicitude for democratic process, discussion with west Pakistan leaders and the spirit of accommodation within the framework of his commitment are likely to create a favourable impression on President Yahya Khan and the people of west Pakistan." One of Gandhi's top advisers remembers that the prime minister's staff thought that some kind of deal had been struck.[45]

Other senior Indian officials in Delhi, however, were bracing for disaster. On March 2, over three weeks before Yahya launched his slaughter, Gandhi ordered her best and brightest—including Haksar and the R&AW spymaster Kao—to evaluate "giving help to Bangla Desh" and the possibility of recognizing "an independent Bangla Desh." That, Gandhi feared, could easily prompt Pakistani retaliation in Kashmir, or a Chinese military response. The prime minister was already considering military aid to the Bengalis, who would need not just

medicine and food, but a helicopter and a small airplane for “quick movement inside India around the borders of Bangla Desh,” as well as “Arms and ammunition (including L[ight] M[achine] G[un]s, M[edium] M[achine] G[un]s and Mortars.”46
India urged the United States to hold Yahya back from a crackdown. In Washington, the Indian ambassador pleaded that “nothing would be more tragic than President Yahya Kahn trying to suppress East Bengali aspirations for autonomy by force.”47
By March 15, the Pakistani foreign office complained that India had built up its military forces in West Bengal. But Yahya showed no signs of taking on India now. In the days after the hijacking, Pakistan had massed its troops on West Pakistan’s border with India, but now the R&AW and the chief of the army staff, General Sam Manekshaw, found that most of those troops had been withdrawn. Yahya had more than doubled his army strength in East Pakistan. Pakistan’s military rulers seemed to be marshaling their fire for their own populace.48
Haksar urged Gandhi to stand firm: “we should not at this stage of developments in Pakistan say anything at all placatory, but be ‘tough’ within reason. This is not the time to make gestures for friendship for Pakistan. Every such gesture will bring comfort to Yahya Khan and make the position of Mujib correspondingly more difficult.” Haksar ominously warned the prime minister: “2½ Divisions of Pak Army is poised to decimate East Bengal.”49

Chapter 4
“Mute and Horrified Witnesses”

Dacca is a tropical, impoverished, polluted, and verdant river city, in the middle of the great part-submerged marsh that is Bangladesh. The capital city is clamorously loud, from honking cars, radios, conversations, muezzins, and mechanical disasters. People toil in steamy heat, in acrid haze and dust, hefting stones at construction sites or holding together a small shop. The streets are crammed with rickshaws decked out in explosive color, and with rickety buses whose mangled flanks, painted only a little less gaudily beautiful than the rickshaws, bear the scars of abrupt lane changes gone bad. People drive with a headlong recklessness. They jaywalk worse. The palm trees offer shelter from an implacable sun. At night, it falls truly dark in the way of very poor cities; there is only a fraction of the garish neon and fluorescent light that illuminates the wealthier megacities of South Asia. In March, it is already sweltering.
In 1971, March 25 marked the twenty-third long day of the Bengali nationalist protests in Dacca and beyond. Archer Blood warned Washington, “Storm before the calm?”1
He nervously reported a worsening crisis, with the army clashing with civilians in several spots in East Pakistan. In the port city of Chittagong, thousands of Bengalis tried to prevent the unloading of a cargo ship laden with weaponry and ammunition for the Pakistani military. The army—which Blood called “restrained (but presumably increasingly irritated)”—sent in five hundred troops, and eventually opened fire on the crowds, killing at least fifteen people.2
Finally, with ominous swiftness, Yahya flew out of Dacca for West Pakistan, abandoning the talks once and for all. Whatever hope
there had been for a political deal, it was now extinguished.
That night, trying to break the tension, Archer and Meg Blood hosted a dinner party at their residence. It was supposed to be a morale booster, for a mixed crowd of Americans, Bengalis, and foreign diplomats. Nobody was in the mood. The anxious group was watching an old, downbeat Spencer Tracy movie when the emergency telephone rang. Blood was told that students were barricading the streets against Pakistan army vehicles, and that Yahya was gone. The Bengali guests, two High Court justices with their wives, decided to chance running home, and vanished into the dark. But when two American guests ventured out into the streets, they saw a dead body, and raced back to the consul’s residence. A dozen of Blood’s guests—including the Yugoslav consul—nervously camped out there for the night, too afraid to risk going home.
From the roof, they had a view of fires and shadowy terrors all across the city. They spent much of that night, Blood later recalled, “watching with horror the constant flash of tracer bullets across the dark sky and listening to the more ominous clatter of machine gun fire and the heavy clump of tank guns.”3
They could see explosions in the sky. “Dark, dark, dark skies, but with flak,” remembers Meg Blood. “It was not like fireworks. It was continual. It was

exploding all over the sky.” The detonations were small, but bright and loud. Some of the Bengalis who worked for the Bloods said that they knew people in the neighborhoods that were being set aflame, including a poor bazaar area. There were army jeeps moving around. Some of the fires were in nearby places that were heavily populated with extremely poor people. “They were suffering terribly,” Meg Blood says.

The Pakistani military had launched a devastating assault on the Bengalis. Truckloads of Pakistani troops drove through the city, only barely slowed by Bengali barricades. U.S.-supplied M-24 tanks led some of the troop columns. Throughout Dacca, people could hear the firing of rifles and machine guns. Windows rattled from powerful explosions from mortars or heavy weapons. The night
turned red from burning cars and buildings. It was only near daybreak that the gunfire slowed.4

Sydney Schanberg of the New York Times was stuck at the Intercontinental Hotel, beside himself with frustration. On that night, he was jolted by explosions. The army corralled the foreign press. “They kept pushing us into the hotel,” he remembers. They ended up watching from the tenth floor of the Intercontinental Hotel. They could see flames from Dacca University, which was a mile and a half away, where, Schanberg says, the army seemed to be shooting artillery. The trapped reporters watched a Pakistani soldier on a jeep that had a mounted machine gun—equipment probably provided by the United States. He recalls, “They started shooting at students coming from the university, up the road about a mile. They were singing patriotic songs in Bengali. And then the army opened up. We couldn’t tell when they hit the ground if they were ducking or killed.”5

The soldiers turned on the Bengali media. “They headed for a newspaper,” Schanberg remembers, “and then people were jumping out of the windows to get away from that. There wasn’t any paper that wasn’t supporting Mujib.” As Blood’s consulate reported, the Pakistani authorities violently targeted the local press, starting with pro–Awami League local newspapers like The People and Ittefaq. According to a survivor, tanks opened fire on Ittefaq’s building without warning. The newsprint would still be burning two days later, with a charred corpse lying outside.6

The army aimed to cow the foreign reporters into silence rather than kill them. Schanberg and the other captive journalists could only manage fragmentary reporting. On March 26, Pakistani troops stormed into the Intercontinental Hotel. An officer warned, “Anyone who leaves the hotel will be shot.” The soldiers tore down a Bangladesh flag and burned it. Schanberg remembers being herded up with the other journalists. With their guns on showy display, the soldiers packed the foreign correspondents onto planes for Karachi. When a stubborn reporter tried to sneak out of the hotel, a Pakistani