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## Opinion

### **The Terrible Cost of Presidential Racism**

*Recently declassified White House tapes reveal how President Nixon's racism and misogyny led him to ignore the genocidal violence of the Pakistani military in what is today Bangladesh.*



*President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, in 1972.*

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As Americans grapple with problems of racism and power, a newly declassified trove of White House tapes provides startling evidence of the bigotry voiced by President Richard M. Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser.

The full content of these tapes reveal how U.S. policy toward South Asia under Mr. Nixon was influenced by his hatred of, and sexual repulsion toward, Indians.

These new tapes are about one of the grimmest episodes of the Cold War, which brought ruin to Bangladesh in 1971. At that time, India tilted heavily toward the Soviet Union while a military dictatorship in Pakistan backed the United States. Pakistan flanked India on two sides: West Pakistan and the more populous, and mostly Bengali, East Pakistan.

In March 1971, after Bengali nationalists won a democratic election in Pakistan, the junta began a devastating crackdown on its own Bengali citizens.

Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger staunchly supported the military regime in Pakistan as it killed hundreds of thousands of Bengalis, with 10 million refugees fleeing into neighboring India. New Delhi secretly trained and armed Bengali guerrillas. The crisis culminated in December 1971 when India defeated Pakistan in a short war that resulted in the creation of an independent Bangladesh.

I documented the violent birth of Bangladesh and the disgraceful White House diplomacy around it in my book *"The Blood Telegram,"* published in 2013. Much of my evidence came from scores of White House tapes, which reveal Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger as they really operated behind closed doors. Yet many tapes still had long bleeps.

In December 2012, I filed a legal request for a mandatory declassification review with the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. After considerable wrangling, the Nixon archivists at last released a few unbleeped tapes in May 2018 and July 2019, then 28 more in batches from October 2019 to this past May. (There are bleeps still remaining on a couple of the reviewed tapes, some of which I am appealing.)

It was stunning to hear a conversation between Mr. Nixon, Mr. Kissinger and H.R. Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, in the Oval Office in June 1971.

"Undoubtedly the most unattractive women in the world are the Indian women," said Mr. Nixon. "Undoubtedly," he repeated, with a venomous tone.

He continued, "The most sexless, nothing, these people. I mean, people say, what about the Black Africans? Well, you can see something, the vitality there, I mean they have a little animallike charm, but God, those Indians, ack, pathetic. Uch."

On Nov. 4, 1971, during a private break from a contentious White House summit with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India — a rare woman leader at the time — the president harangued Mr. Kissinger about his sexual disgust at Indians.



*Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and President Nixon at the White House in 1971.*

Mr. Nixon said: “To me, they turn me off. How the hell do they turn other people on, Henry? Tell me.” Mr. Kissinger’s response is inaudible, but it did not discourage the president from his theme.

The president, in between bitter sparring matches with Mrs. Gandhi about the danger of war with Pakistan, suggested to Mr. Kissinger that his own sexual neuroses were having an impact on foreign policy: “They turn me off. They are repulsive and it’s just easy to be tough with them.”

A few days later, on Nov. 12, 1971, in the middle of a discussion about India-Pakistan tensions with Mr. Kissinger and Secretary of State William P. Rogers, after Mr. Rogers mentioned reprimanding Mrs. Gandhi, the president blurted, “I don’t know how they reproduce!”

Mr. Kissinger has portrayed himself as above the racism of the Nixon White House, but the tapes show him joining in the bigotry, though the tapes cannot determine whether he truly shared the president’s prejudices or was just pandering to him.

On June 3, 1971, Mr. Kissinger was indignant at the Indians, while the country was sheltering millions of traumatized Bengali refugees who had fled the Pakistan army. He blamed the Indians for causing the refugee flow, apparently by their covert sponsorship of the Bengali insurgency. He then condemned Indians as a whole, his voice oozing with contempt, “They are a scavenging people.”

On June 17, 1971 — in the same conversation as Mr. Nixon's outburst at "sexless" Indian women — the president was furious at Kenneth B. Keating, his ambassador to India, who two days earlier had confronted Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger in the Oval Office, calling Pakistan's crackdown "almost entirely a matter of genocide."

Mr. Nixon now asked what "do the Indians have that takes even a Keating, for Christ, a 70-year-old" — here there is cross-talk, but the word seems to be "bachelor" or "bastard." In reply, Mr. Kissinger sweepingly explained: "They are superb flatterers, Mr. President. They are masters at flattery. They are masters at subtle flattery. That's how they survived 600 years. They suck up — their great skill is to suck up to people in key positions."

Mr. Kissinger voiced prejudices about Pakistanis, too. On Aug. 10, 1971, while discussing with Mr. Nixon whether the Pakistani junta would execute the imprisoned leader of the Bengali nationalists, Mr. Kissinger told the president, "I tell you, the Pakistanis are fine people, but they are primitive in their mental structure." He added, "They just don't have the subtlety of the Indians."

These emotional displays of prejudice help to explain a foreign policy debacle. Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger's policies toward South Asia in 1971 were not just a moral disaster but a strategic fiasco on their own Cold War terms.

While Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger had some reasons to favor Pakistan, an American ally which was secretly helping to bring about their historic opening to China, their biases and emotions contributed to their excessive support for Pakistan's murderous dictatorship throughout its atrocities.

As Mr. Kissinger's own staff members had warned him, this one-sided approach handed India the opportunity to rip Pakistan in half, first by sponsoring the Bengali guerrillas and then with the war in December 1971 — resulting in a Cold War victory for the Soviet camp.

For decades, Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger have portrayed themselves as brilliant practitioners of realpolitik, running a foreign policy that dispassionately served the interests of the United States. But these declassified White House tapes confirm a starkly different picture: racism and misogyny at the highest levels, covered up for decades under ludicrous claims of national security. A fair historical assessment of Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger must include the full truth, unbleeped.

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