

And Here's to You, Henry Kissinger...

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He was a war criminal, and he also transformed many into activists.

On the occasion of his death at 100, praises and denunciations of Henry Kissinger are being sung and spewed out in record numbers. Let me add to the “praises.” More than anyone else, Henry, along with his boss, Richard Nixon, was responsible for my transformation into an activist.

This transition from being a free-floating intellectual into an activist took place unexpectedly. It happened sometime in April 1970, when Kissinger and Nixon said they were going to end the war in Vietnam by expanding it to Cambodia. I was rushing along Prospect Road—where Princeton’s “eating clubs” or fraternities were located—to attend class when I was attracted to a commotion at a building housing the Institute of Defense Analysis (IDA). A crowd of about 100 surrounded some 15 people who had sat down and linked arms to block the entrance to the Institute, which was known to be doing contract work for the Pentagon. I crossed the street to see things, more out of curiosity than anything else. Then a phalanx of policemen arrived and shoved people aside in order to clear a path to arrest those who were seated on the ground with arms linked.

When the police started to brutally cut the human chain and pull people into the paddy wagon, something in me snapped and I leaped into the empty space opened up by an arrest and found myself linking up with two people that I later learned were Arno Mayer, a distinguished professor of diplomatic history, and Stanley Stein, an equally prominent professor of Latin American history. All I was conscious of as I joined them was: there goes my PhD. At that time, foreign students who were arrested in political events could expect deportation according to Immigration and Naturalization Service rules. In a split second, I had given up my future as a sociologist.

As we were processed after arrest at the Princeton police headquarters, I called Madge, my wife, and told her what had happened but left unmentioned the likelihood that we would be deported. I had made the leap, and, surprisingly, I had no regrets since I felt I had found my place in life: being an activist, an organizer for social change. Like the other participants in the IDA rally, I was judged guilty of trespassing and resisting arrest and given a punishment of community service, that is, cleaning the streets of Princeton on weekends for a whole month.

I waited for the deportation order. And waited. After a month of waiting, I began to realize what was happening. The local government in Princeton was not coordinating its work with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, as I had been led to expect. That would not happen until after 9/11, under the aegis of the newly established Department of Homeland Security, over 30 years later.

My profession as a sociologist, for which I was being trained at Princeton, was given a new lease on life. But I was no longer the same. The arrest had transformed me.

At that point, my priority during my stay at Princeton became stopping the war in Vietnam, and when I was not deep into reading Marx and Marxists and post-Marxists, much of my work was leading or participating in discussion groups on how to organize more and more students into a critical mass on campus against the war.

By the time that Kissinger and Nixon invaded Laos early in 1971 to destroy the traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, I had become part of the informal leadership of the anti-war movement on campus. We called for a boycott of classes, but the coup de main was the takeover and shutting down of what was then called the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton's school of public administration that served as a recruiting ground for the Central Intelligence Agency and the trained bureaucrats of foreign governments allied with the United States. I led the successful occupation of the School by hundreds of students, but at the price of my incurring the perpetual enmity of one of its professors. The prominent sociologist of modernization Marion Levy tried his best in the next few years to worm his way onto my dissertation panel with the sole aim of torpedoing the person he regarded as sullyng his beloved Woodrow Wilson School.

I went on to do my dissertation, a study of the counterrevolution in Salvador Allende's Chile from a Marxist perspective, and this was approved in 1975, thanks partly to the successful effort of the department chairman, Marvin Bressler, to keep the vengeful Marion Levy from getting onto my committee.

I went on to do full-time underground work as a cadre of the Communist Party of the Philippines for the next 15 years, incurring more arrests and jailing for civil disobedience in protests in the United States against the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Later, as an international activist during the George W. Bush era, I again gave full play to my anti-war addiction, participating in mobilizations across the globe, from Baghdad to London to Beirut.

So, here's to you, you old devil, Henry, for saving me from what would surely have been an unexciting academic life specializing in some godawful field such as Marion Levy's "modernization theory

Walden Bello

P.S.

- Foreign Policy in Focus (FPiF) . December 4, 2023:
<https://fpif.org/and-heres-to-you-henry-kissinger/>