remain limited in scope. On the other hand, he demanded that no limits be placed on the force statesmen and military leaders could use to fight those wars (including the tactical use of nuclear weapons). Diplomacy, Kissinger had consistently argued, needed to be backed up by credible threats, and threats could only be credible if they were limitless.

In small places of true insignificance, such a paradox could be contained. Brutalizing a small island in the Gulf of Thailand and killing an unknown number of Cambodians to “rescue” the Mayaguez was one thing. Unleashing a war on Cuba, allied with the Soviet Union, was another. But his advisors told him that, unlike Kennedy’s success in 1962, “a new Cuban crisis would not necessarily lead to a Soviet retreat.” The crisis could “escalate in areas that would maximize US casualties and thus provoke stronger response.” “Serious business,” Kissinger admitted. There was no way to imagine a “little war” against Cuba that might not lead to what Kissinger’s advisers called a “general war” between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Kissinger knew he was backed into a corner. There was nothing Washington could do that wouldn’t seem like it was playing catch-up to Havana. Ignore Cuba, and the United States appears weak. Hit Cuba, and it seems reactive, dramatizing that the world’s greatest power had been played by a small island nation, a giant swatting at a fly. Kissinger admitted as much: “The problem is that no matter how we build our policy in southern Africa anything that happens will appear to have resulted from Cuban pressure.” Just so. Castro had checkmated Kissinger.

“I think we are going to have to smash Castro,” Kissinger told Ford, but, he conceded, “we probably can’t do it before the elections,” referring to the presidential vote in November 1976.22 “I agree,” Ford responded. And that was that. Afterward, Kissinger reversed his “tar baby” tilt, implementing what some commentators called an African détente.

* * *

In Latin America, Kissinger, having been denied a public triumph, continued private plotting. In 1969, when he first took office, only Paraguay and Brazil in South America were ruled by right-wing dictatorships. Nearly every other country was experiencing a revolutionary upheaval, inspired, to some degree, by Cuba. That would soon change. Bolivia was the first Latin American democracy to fall to a military coup on Kissinger’s watch. “We are having a major problem in Bolivia,” said Kissinger on June 11, 1971, telling the CIA to “crank up an operation, post-haste.”23 On August 21, a military coup installed a right-wing dictator promptly recognized by Washington (according to the State Department, the CIA moved in “response to a White House request for a political action program to arrest the leftward trend” of the Bolivian government). A few months later, Brazil, acting as Nixon and Kissinger’s deputy, “helped rig the Uruguayan elections,” as Nixon put it, making sure a popular left coalition could not take power.24 The turmoil that ensued fed directly into a June 1973 coup led by Juan María Bordaberry, who turned Uruguay into a police state. Shortly after the coup, Kissinger sent Bordaberry a note wishing him “best wishes on this happy occasion.”25 The dictator’s wife had just given birth to their second child.*

Then came Chile, on September 11, 1973. It was Kissinger who had pushed Nixon to take “a harder line,” as he himself put it, against the country’s democratically elected socialist president, Salvador Allende, who died in the coup.26 Chile was followed by coups in Peru and Ecuador. Then on March 23, 1976, the Argentine military took over the government. This putsch corresponded with Kissinger’s renewed obsession with Cuba in Southern Africa. And as it became clear that Castro was going to win the day in Angola—and then possibly send his troops into Rhodesia—Kissinger moved closer toward Latin America’s new praetorians.
Over the last decade, more and more government documents have been declassified revealing Kissinger’s involvement in and cover-up of human rights abuses in Latin America. He’s tried to defend himself. “Just to take a sentence out of a telephone conversation when you have 50 other conversations, it’s just not the way to analyze it,” he said, after a particularly unflattering recording of him plumping for Pinochet was released. “I’ve been telling people to read a month’s worth of conversations, so you know what else went on.” But now that more information is available, a month’s worth of conversations reads like one of Shakespeare’s bloodiest plays. Perhaps Macbeth, with its description of what today is called blowback: “We but teach bloody instructions, which, being taught, return.”

There’s Kissinger’s support of Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile. In August 1975, Kissinger had received Chile’s foreign minister, Vice Admiral Patricio Carvajal, in Washington. By this point, Chilean security forces had killed or disappeared thousands, tortured even more, turning Santiago’s soccer stadium into a concentration camp. Kissinger had pushed back hard on Congress’s attempt to impose sanctions on the country for these violations. And so he opened his meeting with Carvajal with a joke, making fun of the fretting, by some of his staffers, over human rights: “The State Department is made up of people who have a vocation for the ministry. Because there were not enough churches for them, they went into the Department of State.” The discussion then took a cryptic turn. Carvajal told Kissinger that Chile was having trouble with about two hundred people it had just released from prison. “They are creating problems,” the minister said, and he couldn’t find a country that would take them as exiles. Kissinger responded: “You will know what to do. We cannot go beyond what we have said. What other problem do we have to discuss?”

The Pinochet regime did know what to do; torture, murder, and disappearances in Chile continued.

There’s his support for the Argentine junta. Shortly after the coup, one of Kissinger’s aides advised him not to “rush out and embrace this new regime.” “We’ve got to expect a fair amount of repression,” the aide said, “probably a good deal of blood, in Argentina before too long. I think they’re going to have to come down very hard not only on the terrorists but on the dissidents of trade unions and their parties.” Kissinger disagreed with the suggestion that he keep his distance. “Whatever chance they have, they will need a little encouragement,” he replied to his cautious aide, “because I do want to encourage them.” The next day, on March 27, 1976, the International Monetary Fund extended $127 million line of credit to the junta, with many millions more to come from both public and private loans.

There’s also Kissinger’s visit to Santiago, Chile, in early June 1976, to attend a session of the Organization of American States. There, he had a one-on-one with Pinochet and assured him that whatever mild criticism he might hear in his remarks to the OAS shouldn’t be taken seriously. Just a month later, Kissinger’s assistant secretary for Latin America, Harry Shlaudeman, urged Kissinger to help tone down the “rhetorical exaggerations of the ‘Third-World-War’ type.” Shlaudeman meant those conservative militants who thought they were on the front line of an international crusade against global Marxism. Chile was the worst of the lot. “Perhaps,” Shlaudeman said, offering understated advice, “we can convince them that a Third World War is undesirable.”

But in his meeting with Pinochet, Kissinger stoked the fire: they commiserated about Vietnam and agreed that the Spanish Civil War was but the first battle in the current “world war.” The general, Kissinger said, is “a victim of all left-wing groups around the world” and that his “greatest sin” was that he “overthrew a government that was going Communist.” Kissinger told Pinochet that he would have to include a few words about human rights in his upcoming remarks to the General Assembly but that Pinochet could safely ignore them: “The speech is not aimed at Chile.”

In Santiago, Kissinger also met with Admiral César Augusto Guzzetti, of the newly installed Argentine military junta. He gave Guzzetti the same advice he gave to Suharto a year earlier: “If there are things that...
have to be done, you should do them quickly. But you should get back quickly to normal procedures.” As he did with Pinochet, Kissinger encouraged the idea that Argentina was a frontline state in a global war, telling the admiral that the United States “will do what we can to help it succeed…. We understand you must establish authority.” As in the earlier meeting with Pinochet’s foreign minister, the problem of displaced peoples came up; these included a number of exiles from the neighboring countries fleeing right-wing repression. Again Kissinger was cryptic: “I understand the problem.” They are creating “unrest,” Guzzetti said. “We wish you success,” Kissinger, himself a refugee, answered.

At the end of the meeting, Kissinger and Guzzetti left the room for “a word alone,” according to the note taker. It was a brief four-minute conversation. What was said? Judging from the incriminatory comments Kissinger allowed to stay on the public record, we can assume he wasn’t urging Guzzetti to act with restraint.

The next day, June 11, a death squad abducted and tortured twenty-four Chilean and Uruguayan refugees living in Argentina. There were many other operations that day, including the executions of Raúl Albert Ramat, a twenty-seven-year-old student activist at the Catholic University, in Buenos Aires, and fifty-nine-year-old Santiago Bruschtein, the last of seven members of his family to be either killed or disappeared. The junta was in no rush to get “back quickly to normal procedures.” The admirals and generals stayed in power for seven years and the murders and disappearances continued. Surviving military documents suggest that the dead or disappeared numbered 22,000 by July 1978.

Then there’s Kissinger’s involvement in the establishment of Operation Condor, an international death-squad consortium that carried out operations in Latin America, the United States, and Europe. J. Patrice McSherry, one of the foremost researchers into Condor activities, argues that the available State Department documentation was actually designed to mislead. That may well be the case. Kissinger himself has noted that the sheer volume of foreign policy paperwork makes it impossible to determine “which documents were produced to provide an alibi and which genuinely guided decisions.” “Kissinger rarely put anything on the record in normal diplomatic channels if he could devise a more secretive back channel instead,” writes Walter Isaacson.

What does exist is damming. Condor was formally established on November 26, 1975, in Santiago, Chile (just after Castro decided to send combat troops to Angola) at a meeting attended by intelligence and military officers, as well as a few heads of state, representing nearly all of South America. It is clear that they had Washington’s help. The US ambassador to Paraguay confirmed that the different franchises of Condor kept “in touch with one another through a U.S. communications installation in the Panama Canal Zone which covers all of Latin America.” It was an “encrypted system within U.S. communications net” that allowed Condor countries (Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile) to “maintain the confidentiality of their communication.” And it was after Kissinger’s visit to Santiago, and his conversations with Pinochet and Guzzetti, that Operation Condor got fully under way, including so-called phase III operations—the carrying out of executions outside of Latin America.

The most famous of these took place on September 21, 1976, in Washington, DC’s Sheridan Circle, near Embassy Row, when a car bomb killed Orlando Letelier and his assistant, Ronni Moffitt. Letelier held a number of high-level positions in Allende’s government and after the coup had established himself in Washington, where he lobbied Congress to impose sanctions on Chile. In his meeting with Kissinger, Pinochet had complained twice about Letelier.

Kissinger had been briefed repeatedly about Condor by the CIA and the State Department. He knew it was conducting operations in Latin America, Europe, and the United States. And he knew that it was targeting, as Assistant Secretary Shlaudeman told him, “nonviolent” leftists and center leftists living abroad, like Letelier. “What we are trying to head off is a series of international murders,” Shlaudeman
would subsequently write, just before Letelier’s killing.

On August 23, Kissinger did approve a “stand down” cable, instructing his ambassadors to approach “the highest appropriate official” in their respective countries and tell that person that the “assassination of subversives, politicians and prominent figures … abroad … would create a most serious moral and political problem.” But then Kissinger reversed himself. On September 16, told by an aide that such an order might offend Pinochet, he rescinded his démarche. He was in Africa, in the middle of his goodwill tour to reverse the damage of his “tar baby” policy and the disastrous Angolan civil war, and he sent a note to Shlaudeman instructing that “no further action be taken on this matter.” Shlaudeman, in turn, told Kissinger’s ambassadors to “take no further action.”

Five days later, Letelier and Moffitt were dead. Condor continued on.

All told, the allies that Kissinger “encouraged” in Latin America murdered tens of thousands of civilians and tortured an equal number.* Among those abducted and brutalized by Kissinger’s proxies include the current presidents of Chile and Brazil and a former president of Uruguay. Brazil’s Dilma Rousseff was captured in 1970 and “spent three years behind bars, where interrogators repeatedly tortured her with electric shocks to her feet and ears, and forced her into the pau de arara, or parrot’s perch, in which victims are suspended upside down naked, from a stick, with bound wrists and ankles.” A recent Brazilian truth commission investigation found that over three hundred Brazilian soldiers were trained by the United States in the “theory and practice of torture.” Uruguay’s former president, José Mujica, was also tortured. Kidnapped in 1971, Mujica spent fourteen years in prison, including extended periods at the bottom of a well. The father of Michelle Bachelet, Chile’s president, was kidnapped and tortured, dying in Pinochet’s prison. President Bachelet and her mother were also captured and tortured but were eventually released, upon which they went into exile.34

* * *

The silent nod, the public gesture. A four-minute “word alone” with a key player in an international death-squad consortium, an impassioned speech on human rights. Secrecy and spectacle. Modern statecraft has long operated between these two poles, as diplomats have moved back and forth between the dark corner and the limelight. Do it quickly, Kissinger told his foreign allies. Do it theatrically, he told Ford: “Let’s look ferocious!”

As Kissinger’s experience in Latin America and southern Africa suggests, the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate revival of the national security state came to depend, to a greater extent than it had in the past, on a dynamic coupling of secrecy and spectacle. On one level, the relationship of the overt to the covert is sequential. Kissinger wanted to go big after Vietnam, to take “tougher stands” someplace around the world over some issue. But he couldn’t. Checked by Castro and worried about a post-Vietnam public and Congress with no appetite for further war, he had to go dark and throw in with the men of Condor. On another level, though, secrecy and spectacle coexist simultaneously, feeding off each other. The death-squad disappearance regime put in place in Latin America during Kissinger’s tenure was a clandestine network of undisclosed prisons and torture rooms, hidden graves, and shadowy paramilitary units. But its effectiveness in spreading terror resided in public knowledge, publicizing death lists, adopting brand names for the death squads—“The White Hand,” “Eye for an Eye,” and so on—and snatching people off the street in broad daylight, never to be seen again. The message was clear.

In southern Africa, Kissinger wanted to teach Cuba a public lesson for all the rest of the Third World, allies and adversaries, to see. But even as he was drawing up plans to do so, he was running a covert war in multiple countries. In the United States, he didn’t just lie to the public about that war. He ran domestic