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Taking Responsibility for War

By Lucy Steigerwald
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On May 10, 92-year-old Henry Kissinger was given the Distinguished Public Service Award by Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter. It does little good to be outraged by this news, in that Kissinger may have the blood of (at least) hundreds of thousands of dead people on his hands, but that seems to bother very few people. Let us at least not take the time to bother being surprised.

Sure, we can mention former Secretary of State Kissinger, we can seriously debate how many Cambodians, Chileans, and East Timorese he is responsible for killing. But at the end of it all, Kissinger is an old man with a funny accent and even seemingly bold and political (at least when going up against George W. Bush) people such as comedian Stephen Colbert feel comfortable palling around with him. If the man who so memorably trashed a sitting president to his face finds it okay to make cute with Kissinger, yeah, let's give the man the finest civilian honor (and, you know, the Nobel Peace Prize. But jokes about that have been exhausted for decades).

Madeleine Albright, the first female Secretary of State who oversaw Bill Clinton's nasty sanctions and sporadic bombing of Iraq in the 1990s is another officially cute old person accordingly to popular culture. Albright has made guest appearances on some great TV shows. To some, she's a kind of feminist success story for being so powerful and also a woman. Debate lingers over the exact body count from the Iraq sanctions. However, that's almost beside the

point when speaking of Albright. After all, she said in a *60 Minutes Interview* “we think the price is worth it” when faced with the number 500,000. Hopefully the number of dead is a great deal smaller than that – death counts are hard to pin down in almost every circumstance – but the takeaway is that even half a million would be acceptable to the great breaker of glass ceilings, Ms. Albright.

But let us not be unkind, or too youthful about this. *The LA Times* recently published an editorial scolding students at Scripps College for not wanting Albright as their commencement speaker.

Now, the question of whether it’s better to welcome a speaker and then question, protest, or stage some kind of civil disobedience than to get her disinvited is one thing. But the ease with which the *Times* dismisses these kids’ objection to Albright is telling. She might open their minds, she will bring new ideas. You should sometimes listen to nasty people, and it can be educational to listen to them speak. But you shouldn’t necessarily sit quietly and accept their presence when they are going to defend their records. It is not “sensitive” to be bothered by Albright’s presence on campus.

College students may be a little melodramatic with some of their protests these days, but it’s heartening to see them not fall prey to hawk-feminism here. Albright broke barriers. She just did so in an inexcusable fashion. To complain that kids today are too “sensitive” about a face of militarism is to prepare them for a role in a society which treats crimes committed by politician as meaningless. How useful!

Yes, we can debate George W. Bush’s Iraq crimes, or whatever the hell Clinton did in Benghazi (the obsessives there never seem to mention the rest of the Libyan invasion). But we must never get anywhere beyond academic or punditish on it. We must not admit that violent acts done by a US politician count as anything more than papers pushed, orders signed, commands given. It can’t be a crime if the perpetrators are so far from the victims. Government and our democratic-republic diffuse the responsibility for terrible things. Nobody is the only one to blame, not even a president violating the War Powers Resolution, so nobody at all is to blame.

Bush, Dick Cheney, both Clintons, Kissinger, and Albright all probably sleep easily at night. So do most people who accept that upon leaving politics, someone may simply run back to private life, yell “base!” and they are free from substantial critique. Bush paints, Albright and Kissinger make appearances on comedy shows. It didn’t count, because it was done from far away, and with the claimed best intentions.

Worse still is how the people who wake up to their own culpability are treated in America. Whistleblowers Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and Daniel Ellsberg have several things in common, one of which is that they were all originally part of the problem. Manning worked dutifully in Iraq as an intelligence analyst. Snowden was a computer wiz who helped spy on Americans while in the CIA, and then as an NSA contractor. Ellsberg, a “decision theory” expert put together helpful studies, including one on bombing North Vietnam. In his early days, he wasn’t terribly comfortable with that violence, but he still allowed his brain and his economics degree to be used for the war.

Every one of them saw secret conflicts, and they saw excessive spying, and they knew the public had no idea. Ellsberg wrestled with a slow-building conscience for years (helped by an activist girlfriend) and finally broke down in tears after he saw an antiwar activist happily announce he was about to go to prison for dodging the draft. He leaked the Pentagon Papers soon after.

Manning, Snowden, and Ellsberg were all inspired to steal documents just so the public could know what they knew. And they all risked prison to do so. Manning remains locked away under a 35-year sentence. Snowden may never feel safe enough to come back home to America. And Ellsberg and his friend faced down a one hundred-plus-year sentence, and were saved mostly because Richard Nixon's hysterical paranoia had irrevocably tainted Ellsberg's trial.

These two men and one woman were not naive activists. They saw the inside, and they saw their own parts in it, and at some point they couldn't live with being silently involved. Compared to a Kissinger or a Bush or anyone truly powerful, these three were tiny cogs in a dangerous machine. Yet they still figured out that they were indeed participating. At some point, they stopped being able to excuse themselves, and they acted. Their rewards were telling.

Sure, Snowden, Manning, Ellsberg, and Kissinger can all be debated by the serious thinking. But Kissinger is free, happy, and excused. Anyone who wakes up to the blood on the studies they commission, or on the orders they sign is not to be trusted, and depending on how loud their conscience starts to roar, they can look forward to a long stretch in a prison cell.

And if you really, really mean that these people are criminals, blood-soaked, or deserving of something tougher than a thoughtful debate over their legacy, you're dubbed a God-damned kook.

This is very much on purpose. And it's not that Stephen Colbert, the *LA Times*, or the makers of *Parks and Recreation* know they're part of the system that rubs blood-soaked bureaucrats clean. It's only that it's much easier to cuddle up to Kissinger and Albright and to accept such people's status as elder statesmen and women. To go too far, to shun them, would be to bring the whole thing down. It would be too much, and too blatant. It would be too childish.

Maybe Scripps students are right to protest Albright. Maybe they should let her come, and then they should raise some hell. What they shouldn't do is let the *LA Times*'s opinion of their delicacy bother them. Maybe they don't want to go out into the world with life advice from a warmonger snapping at their heels. Maybe they know something most of us don't. Maybe they have a seed of whatever blossomed out of Manning, Snowden, and Ellsberg starting to grow in their heads.