

SEPTEMBER 11, 2003

Triumph of the media mill

Without a hint of irony, the "NewsHour" on PBS concluded its Sept. 9 program with a warm interview of Henry Kissinger and then a segment about a renowned propagandist for the Nazi war machine. Kissinger talked about his latest book. Then a professor of German history talked about Leni Riefenstahl, the path-breaking documentary filmmaker who just died at age 101. The conversation was cozy with Kissinger, the man who served as the preeminent architect of U.S. policy during the last half-dozen years of the Vietnam War. Tossed his way by host Jim Lehrer, the questions ranged from softball to beach ball. And when the obsequious session ended, Lehrer went beyond politeness: "Dr. Kissinger, good to see you. Thank you for being with us. Good luck on your book."

After focusing on Kissinger's efforts during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the "NewsHour" interview last Tuesday discussed his role in the April 1975 final withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. Previously, Kissinger had been the Nixon administration's main foreign-policy man while more than 25,000 American soldiers and upwards of 500,000 Vietnamese people — most of them civilians — were killed.

The Nixon-Kissinger policies in Southeast Asia also included illegal and deadly bombing of Cambodia, where the Pentagon flew 3,630 raids over a period of 14 months in 1969 and 1970. (Cambodia's neutrality in the Cold War and the Vietnam War had infuriated Washington.) Military records were falsified to hide the bombing from Congress. Massive carnage among civilians also resulted from U.S. air strikes on Laos.

But in September 2003, the man who largely oversaw those activities sat under bright TV lights and basked in yet more media deference. This is routinely the case for Kissinger. But not always.

Once in a great while, a mainstream news outlet summons the gumption necessary to explore grim truth about those in our midst who have exercised bloody power. That's what happened in February 2001, when "NewsHour" correspondent Elizabeth Farnsworth interviewed Kissinger about his direct contact with Gen. Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean dictator who came to power in a coup on Sept. 11, 1973. Kissinger was

President Nixon's national security advisor at the time of the coup.

Nearly three years after that military coup — which overthrew the elected socialist president Salvador Allende — Kissinger huddled with Gen. Pinochet in Chile. By then, Kissinger was in his third year as secretary of state; by then, thousands of political prisoners had died, and many more had been tortured, at the hands of the Pinochet regime. At the 1976 meeting, a declassified memo says, Kissinger told Pinochet: "We are sympathetic with what you are trying to do here."

Farnsworth confronted Kissinger about the memo's contents during the 2001 interview. She asked him point-blank about the discussion with Pinochet: "Why did you not say to him, 'You're violating human rights. You're killing people. Stop it.'?"

Kissinger replied: "First of all, human rights were not an international issue at the time, the way they have become since. That was not what diplomats and secretaries of state and presidents were saying generally to anybody in those days." He added that at the June 1976 meeting with Pinochet, "I spent half my time telling him that he should improve his human rights performance in any number of ways."

But the American envoy's concern was tactical. As Farnsworth noted in her reporting: "Kissinger did bring up human rights violations, saying they were making it difficult for him to get aid for Chile from Congress."

During the past quarter of a century, Kissinger has become a multimillionaire as a wheeler-dealer international consultant and member of numerous boards at huge corporations, including media firms. Along the way, he has accumulated many friends in high media places. When Washington Post Co. owner Katharine Graham wrote her autobiography, she praised Kissinger as a dear friend and all-around wonderful person.

As it happened, the latest "NewsHour" interview with Kissinger came just two days before the 30th anniversary of the coup in Chile. Although declassified documents show that Kissinger was deeply involved in making that coup possible, Lehrer's hospitality was such that the anchor did not mention it.

Minutes later, during another "NewsHour" interview, historian Claudia Koonz was aptly pointing out that Riefenstahl "saw herself as a documentary maker, not as a propagandist. But what she understood so much before anyone else is that the best propaganda is invisible. It looks like a documentary. Then you realize all you're seeing is glory, beauty and triumph, and you don't see the darker side."

The millions of people who have mourned the victims of the U.S. war in Southeast Asia might feel that such words describe the standard U.S. media coverage of Henry Kissinger. ■