

Comments on Rehman Sobhan's book From Two Economies to Two Nations: My Journey to Bangladesh

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REVIEWED BY ROUNAQA JAHAN

PROFESSOR Rehman Sobhan and his publisher Daily Star Books deserve our congratulations for bringing out this collection of Professor Sobhan's writings which span a period of forty years from 1961 to 2000. The majority are in fact written between 1961 to 1971. Some of the articles are, academic published in academic journals, others are his popular writings published in news papers or weeklies. Professor Sobhan is one of those rare breed of academics who can also popularize complex arguments through writings in newspapers.

Though Rehman Sobhan often talks about not prioritizing academic publication, his writings in fact had a profound impact on political discourse as well as on academic work. Let me illustrate this point by discussing the influence Rehman's writings had on my own research and writings.

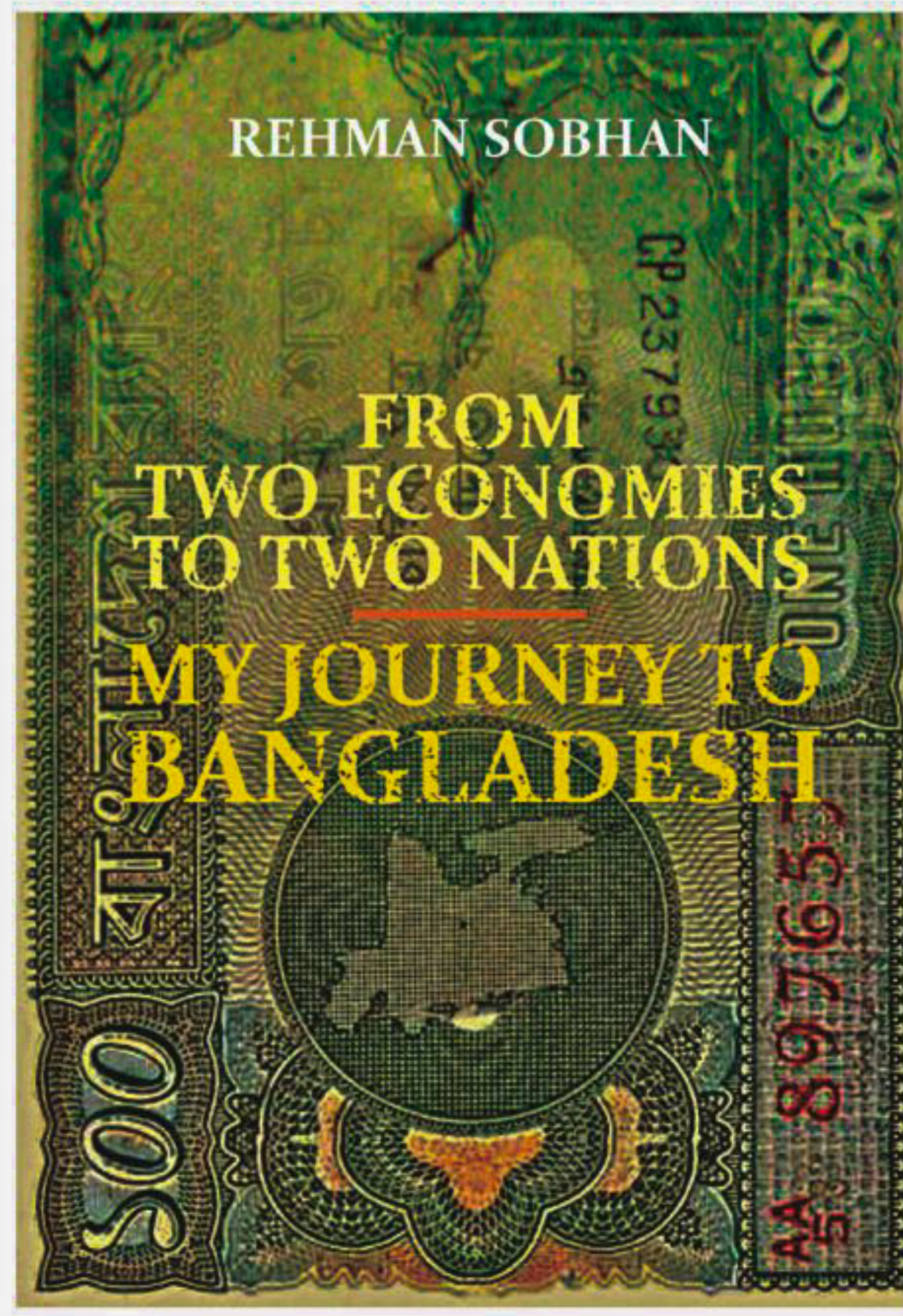
Though Rehman had been writing since the late 1950s, I became exposed to his writings from around 1967 when I started doing research for my PhD in political science at Harvard. His writings influenced my writings in multiple ways. They helped me get a theme, a thread to run through my arguments. They attracted me to a particular approach of analysis. In one specific subject his writings contributed to completely changing my initial understanding. And finally his writings taken as a whole helped me sustain a particular perspective, a prism so to say through which I interpreted the happenings of that particular period.

Let me then briefly elaborate these four different intellectual debts I owe to Rehman's writings. First, let me talk about the theme or the thread. When I was first looking for a topic for my Ph.D thesis my adviser at Harvard Professor Merle Fainsod suggested that I write on the relationship between the central and provincial governments in Pakistan and that I cover the period of 1947-1958. Professor Fainsod was a specialist in comparative administration. But I was not attracted to write a thesis on administrative relationship. I wanted to write more on the political aspect and focus on the contemporary period 1958-1968. I was looking for a theme, a thread to run through my thesis. Rehman's writings of that period which repeatedly focused on the issues of disparity, two economies, regional imbalances which are included in part 1 of the book, helped me get a theme. Rehman was writing mostly on economic disparity. I thought what I

could do is to expand on this theme and look at disparity in other areas such as politics and administration. However, ready made data was not available in these areas. So I had to compile tables on disparities in civil and military bureaucracy and political elite, and I managed to round up the discourse on disparity in my thesis which was later published as a book titled Pakistan: Failure in National Integration by Columbia University Press in 1972.

Let me now talk about Rehman's approach of analysis, which we all know is that of political economy. Rehman was writing on economics but he put that analysis in the context of politics. When I started writing my thesis I decided that I would write on politics but I would use a lot of economic data and analysis to explain the political and social changes. If I wanted I could have written my thesis mainly as a political history of that particular period. But I used a policy framework. Economic policies of Ayub regime and their impact on society and politics constituted a significant part of my thesis. In fact chapter 4 of my book is devoted to economic policies and their impact.

However, the most direct influence of Rehman's writings was in completely changing my initial understanding of one important instrument of Ayub's rule and that is Basic Democracies and Rural Works Programme. When I first went to Harvard in the Spring of 1965 I found the faculty full of admiration for Basic Democracies and Rural Works Programme. Harvard's Development Advisory Services who advised Pakistan government shaped faculty's perspectives on Pakistan. In fact my first seminar paper in 1965 was on Rural Works Programme where I gave a positive review of Work Programme based on what I read at that time. John Thomas, who was then finishing his thesis under the supervision of my advisor, Professor Merle Fainsod wrote a positive account of the programme and I initially accepted his version. Rehman's 1967 book on Basic Democracies and Works Programme presented a much more critical analysis. Two of his arguments had a profound impact on my writing. Rehman showed the differentiated impact of Works Programme on different groups of people in rural areas, and that the poor farmers or landless were not gaining as much as the surplus farmers. His second argument about the political use of the Works Programme, its use as a patronage system to gain legitimacy for the regime was another revelation for me. One chapter of my



book, chapter 6 which is on Basic Democracies and political parties heavily borrowed from Rehman's book.

Finally, let me talk about the impact of his writings in creating a perspective and a mood. Here I refer to mostly to his writings in the Forum. In fact we became personally acquainted with each other mainly because of Forum. When Forum was started in 1969, I was a post doctoral fellow at Columbia revising my thesis for publication by Columbia University Press. Quite by chance I got hold of a few copies of Forum and was so impressed that I sent money for an annual membership of the weekly. But then I was just waiting and not getting any copy of Forum by mail and felt very frustrated. I sent a few strongly worded reminders to Rehman. When we first met at a very historic confer-

ence on Pakistan organised by Professor Khaled bin Sayeed at Rochester in August 1970, before I could open my mouth to register my complaints Rehman produced all the copies of Forum from December 69 to August 70 and I was immediately pacified. I read those copies of Forum in the fall of 1970 when I was putting the finishing touches of my book. In those days when there was no internet and I had no phone it was so difficult to keep abreast of a very dynamic and fast moving political scene. Forum articles gave me a blow by blow account of weekly happenings as I sat and read them in my office in New York. I could sense the pulse of the nation and they kept me going. They created a mood, a passion which was very important. In those days in New York I had no body to discuss with about what I was writing. As I kept reading Forum I felt connected to a fellow group of people far removed from me physically yet I realized we share the same perspective.

Let me now make a comment on Rehman's later writings which appear in part V of the book. Here there are two excellent academic articles, the first one on our nationalism and the second one on Bangabandhu. Both are invaluable resource for students of current politics.

Let me conclude with one final thought. As we all know no body is better than Rehman in popularizing an idea. Through his writings he made economic disparity a household word in the 60s and he endeared himself to Bengali nationalist political leaders. In recent years Rehman had been persistently writing about inequality, about our two societies. I do not know whether these ideas are being welcomed by our current political leaders. In the 1990s Rehman used to write regular columns in the Daily Star and the Prothom Alo under the title: my critic, my friend. I have heard many people did not quite get this concept. They asked how could a critic be also a friend? Rehman had stopped writing those columns. I think it is high time Rehman takes on the challenge of again popularizing a difficult concept and that is my critic is also my friend. I believe our democratic future hinges on how well our political leaders understand and embrace this concept. But of course Rehman has to at the same time complete writing the second volume of his memoir which will be a great resource for the current and future generation of historians and political analysts.

Telegrams that infuriated Nixon and Kissinger

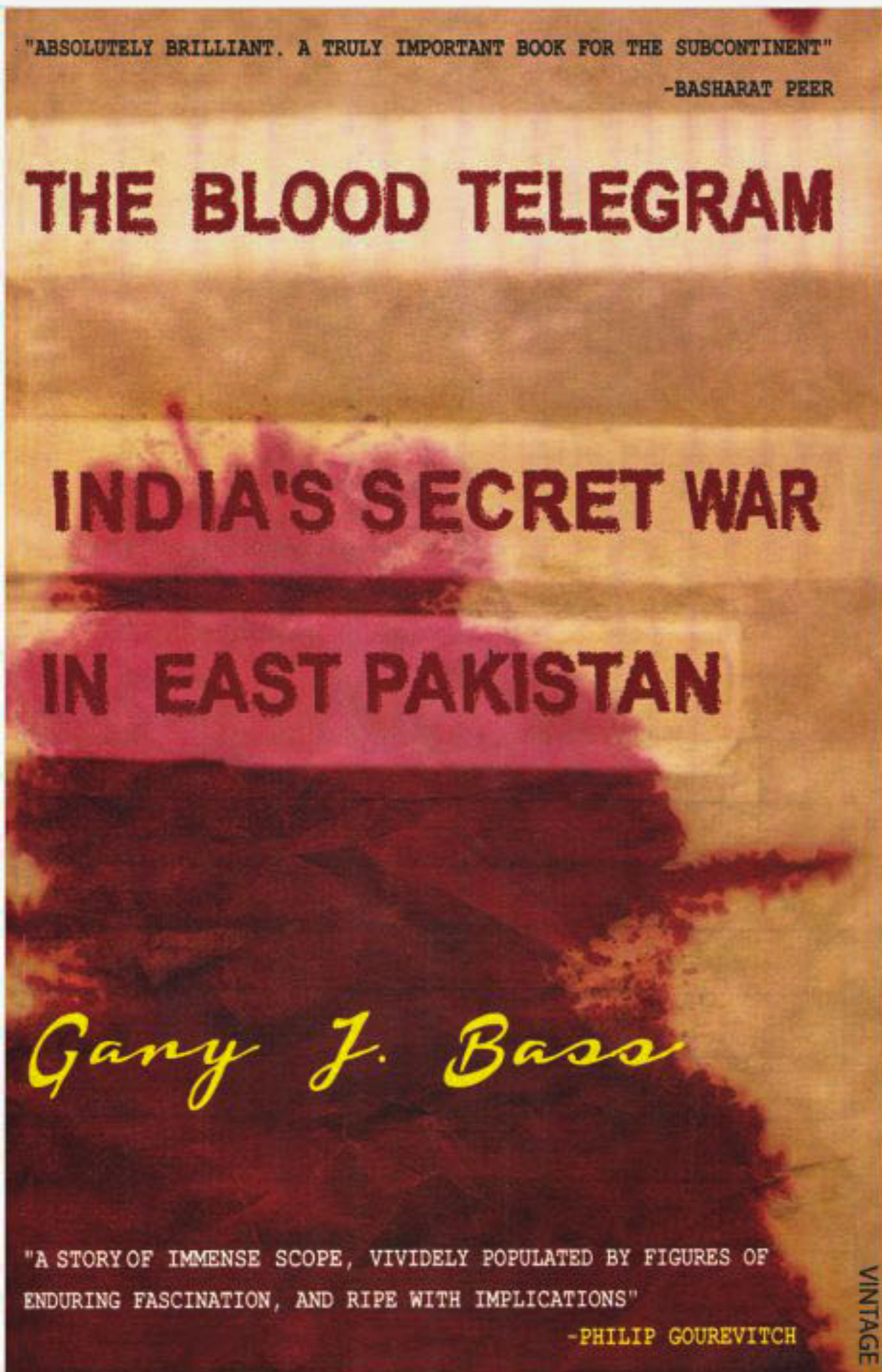
Tale of an American diplomat who fought for Bangladesh

AUTHOR: GARY J. BASS

Publisher: Vintage Books Random House India

REVIEWED BY SHAHNOOR WAHID

Blood Telegram is especially recommended for readers who were adults in those tumultuous days of 1971 and had suffered mental and physical torment while fleeing from the barbaric Pakistani killers. Each chapter of the book will bring back memories and readers will be able to relate them to their personal experiences.



READING through the pages of 'The Blood Telegram' was like watching the flashback of the events of 1971 in my mind's eye. It was like reliving the fearful days when the line separating life and death had thinned down perilously for the freedom-seeking Bengali people of the then East Pakistan. The book chronicles the political developments in Dhaka, Rawalpindi, Delhi and Washington during the painfully long nine months, at the decisive moments of the history of making of a nation state - Bangladesh. Blood Telegram provides authentic accounts of classified telegrams, responses, high level meetings, conversations, notes, comments, tussle between White House and the State Department, role of Henry Kissinger and imperceptive diplomacy of president Nixon and much more, all on the basis of recently declassified documents by the State Department, White House tapes and praiseworthy investigative reporting by some very courageous correspondents of the time.

One would be emotionally moved reading about the stand taken in favour of the Bengalis by Mr. Archer Blood the then American Consul General in Dhaka Consulate, and his staff members. He remained steadfast in his position against overwhelming odds and sent telegrams after

telegrams to Washington regarding the genocide being perpetrated in East Pakistan by the West Pakistani military. He had taken great risks on his career while doing this despite words of caution from the US Ambassador to Pakistan Mr. Joseph Farland posted in Islamabad. If not with Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his telegrams had indeed worked at various levels of the then US administration and political circles to help perceive the truth about Bangladesh despite Pakistani propaganda. In the White House, Kissinger's Aides were shocked by Blood's reporting. "It was a brutal crackdown," said Winston Lord, Kissinger's special assistant...and Samuel Hoskinson, Kissinger's junior staffer for South Asia said, "He was telling power in Washington what power in Washington didn't want to hear."

About the US Consul General in Dhaka Gary Bass writes in the preface: "Archer Blood was a gentlemanly diplomat raised in Virginia, a WWII navy veteran in the upswing of a promising Foreign Service career after several tours overseas. He was earnest and precise, known to some of his more unruly subordinates at the US Consulate as a good, conventional man." Appalled by the brutality and wanton killing of the unarmed Bengalis on March 25, 1971 and the following days, Blood and his colleagues at the Consulate decided to relay as much of this as possible to keep Washington updated. He wanted the US Government to put pressure on the Pakistani government to stop the killings and send back the military to the barracks and go for political settlement. They continued to give details of the horrific slaughtering of the civilians in towns and villages. They wrote in details about the killings at the Dhaka University, of students, teachers and general staffs. One of Blood's cables used the term "Selective Genocide" and yet there was no response from Nixon. In Blood's words, his cables were met with "deafening silence." Why Nixon chose to ignore Blood's telegrams and similar texts from the US Ambassador to India Kenneth Keating?

Gary Bass writes: "Nixon enjoyed his friendship with Pakistan's military dictator, General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan, known as Yahya, who was helping to set up the top secret opening to China. The White House did not want to be seen as doing anything that might hint at the breakup of Pakistan - no matter what was happening to civilians in the east wing of Pakistan."

When his volleys of cables failed to achieve desired results, it was on April 6 that Archer Blood dispatched his most damaging telegram from Dhaka. It formally declared their "strong dissent" - a total repudiation of the policy that they were there to carry out. Bass writes: "That cable - perhaps the most radical rejection of US policy ever sent by its diplomats - blasted the United States for silence in the face of atrocities, for not denouncing the quashing of democracy, for showing 'moral bankruptcy' in the face of what they bluntly call genocide." The full text of that dissent cable is given below.

Sub: Dissent from US policy toward East Pakistan
"With the conviction that US policy related to recent

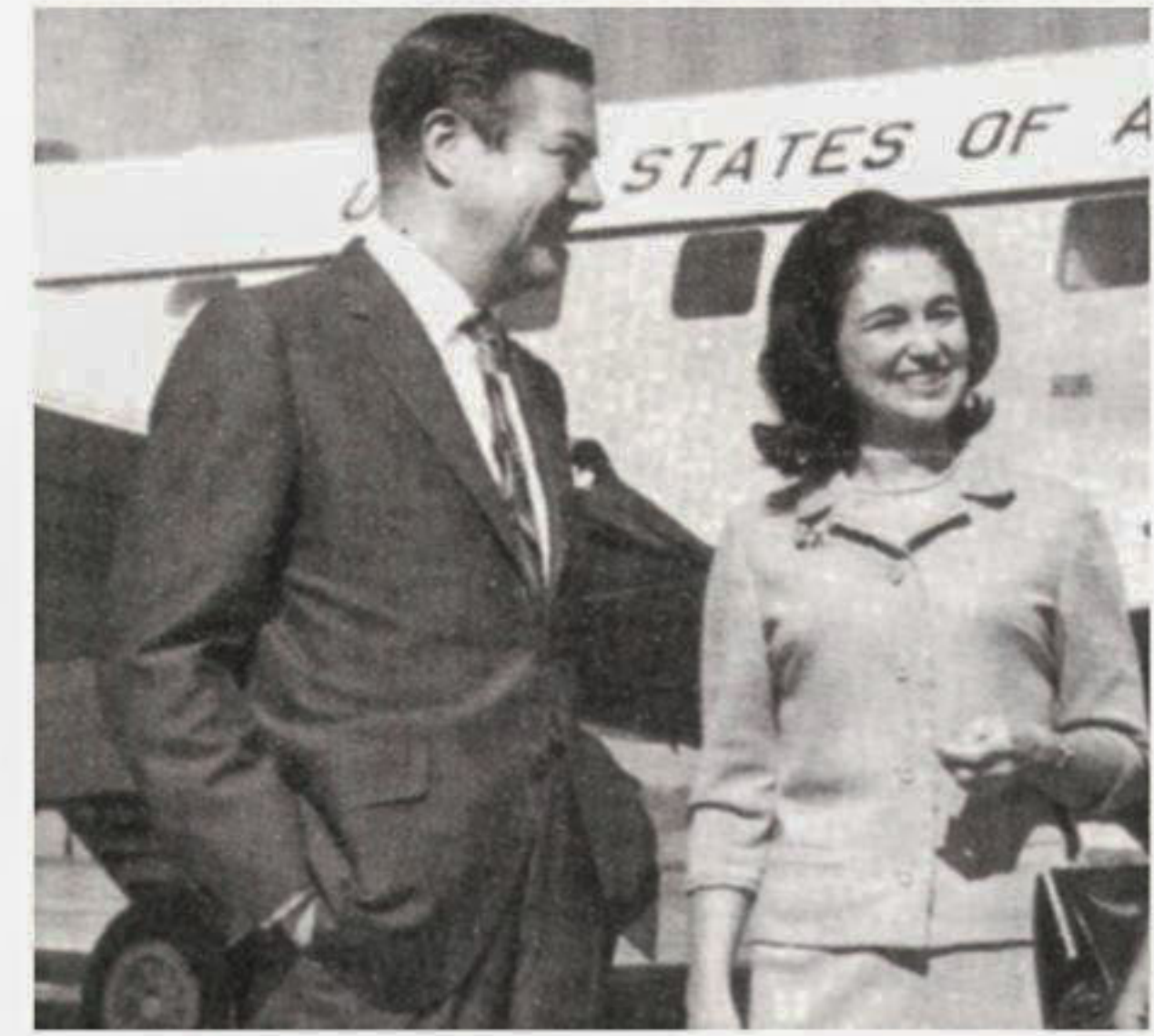
developments in East Pakistan serves neither our moral interests broadly defined nor our national interests narrowly defined, numerous officers of American Consulate General Dacca...consider it their duty to register strong dissent with fundamental aspects of this policy. Our government has failed to denounce the suppression of democracy. Our government has failed to denounce atrocities. Our government has failed to take forceful measures to protect its citizens while at the same time bending over backwards to placate the West Pak dominated government and to lessen likely and deservedly negative international public relations impact against them. Our government has evidenced what many will consider moral bankruptcy, ironically at a time when the USSR sent president Yahya a message defending democracy, condemning arrest of leader of democratically elected majority party (incidentally pro-West) and calling for end to repressive measures and bloodshed...We have chosen not to intervene, even morally, on the grounds that the Awami conflict, in which unfortunately the overworked twin genocide is applicable, is purely an internal matter of a sovereign state. Private Americans have expressed disgust. We, as professional public servants express our dissent with current policy and fervently hope that our true and lasting interests here can be defined and our policies redirected in order to salvage our nation's position as a moral leader of the free world."

The message was signed by 20 officials from the consulate's diplomatic staff as well as the US government's development and information programs. Blood took full responsibility of authorising the transmission of the cable. He was aware that by sending the dissent cable he could wreck his career as a diplomat. A Consulate officer named Griffel said years later, "Blood risked everything."

About the reaction to Blood's dissent cable, Gary Bass writes: "The telegram detonated in all directions, to diplomats in Washington, Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore...it provoked rage at the highest levels in Washington. 'Henry was just furious about it,' says Samuel Hoskinson. 'Within hours nine of the State Department's veteran specialists on South Asia wrote to the secretary of state that they associated themselves with the dissent cable and urged a shift in US policy.'

Although Blood and his team in Dacca were unaware of their newfound support, from Dacca to Delhi to Washington, the middle ranks of the State Department were massed in protest.

Blood's telegrams also reached Edward Kennedy whom Nixon loathed with all his heart. Kennedy used them in his speeches denouncing Yahya's killings, Nixon's silence and the use of US arms by Pakistan in the east wing. On May 3 he told the Senate that thousands or even millions of lives were at stake, "whose destruction will burden the conscience of all mankind." He complained that Blood's reports were being suppressed. Bass writes: "Other Senators rallied too, including some Republicans, and almost all Democrats. Senator Walter Mondale introduced legislation to suspend military aid to Pakistan.



Archer Blood, the US consul general in Dacca, became a staunch dissenter against White House policy. He (left) was at Dacca airport with his wife, Meg Blood.

Senator William Fulbright, who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asked the administration for the Blood telegrams and other Dacca cables. When the State Department refused, Fulbright and other Senators publicly excoriated the Nixon administration for downplaying the atrocities."

Meanwhile Archer Blood was called back from Dhaka and was given an unimportant desk at the State Department to his great dismay. Senator Fulbright summoned Blood to testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on June 24. Bass writes: "Blood, defying Nixon's policy, said that the United States should speak out against the killings, suspend economic aid to Pakistan, and pressure Yahya to make a political settlement." Four days later, Blood had to appear before Kennedy's own sub-committee. He was happy that someone of Kennedy's stature was taking interest in the Bengalis.

The book, Blood Telegram, goes on to open one window after another on the eventful months of 1971, telling us about the Americans who stood up boldly to protest the killings of the Bengalis by the Pakistanis. He also talks about the bitter sweet dramas surrounding the birth of Bangladesh that unfolded in the international arena. While geo-politics took the centre stage, we waited and waited for the longest days and longest nights in the lives of every Bengali to come to an end. We waited for the sun to rise on a new country - Bangladesh - and it did without fail on 16 December, 1971.

Bangladesh recognises the contributions of Archer Blood and remembers him with profound respect and gratitude.

The reviewer works at The Daily Star. He can be reached at: shahnoorwahid@yahoo.co.uk