Dear Mr. Rogers:

Attached, please find Christopher Hitchens’ article about Dr. Kissinger. It was published in the December 2004 issue of Vanity Fair.

Yours,

Maggie
sometimes, in spite of its stolid, boring commitment to lying, a despotic regime will actually tell you all you need to know. It invents a titanic system of slave-labor camps, for example, and it gives this network of arid, landlocked isolation centers the beautiful anagram of GULAG. (Adding the word "archipelago" to that piece of bureaucratic compression was the work of an aesthetic and moral genius.) The stone-faced morons who run the military junta in Burma used to call themselves SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council), which was hardly less revealing. The Brezhnev occupation regime, imposed on the romantic city of Prague after the invasion of 1968, proclaimed its aim as "normalization": a word eloquent enough in itself to send every writer and artist either hastening across the border or entering "internal exile." The British colonial official who thought up the term "concentration camp" (because, after all, the discontented Boer families of South Africa needed to be "concentrated" somewhere, if only for their own good) was an innocent pioneer of this lethal and revealing euphemism. In the end, the mask will grow to fit the monstrous face that lies underneath.

A possible exception to this is the word desaparecido, which was the special new expression that was added to the bulging, ugly lexicon of terror and dictatorship in the 1970s. In English, it simply means "the one who has disappeared." But when pronounced in Spanish it possesses, at least to my ear, a much more plaintive and musical tone. It's as if you could hear the lost ones crying out, still. It has an awful, lingering attractiveness to it, which becomes chilly and almost pornographic when you reflect how long and how loudly they were made to scream before they were dispatched, and buried like offal or garbage.

I want to write, now, exactly about the pornography of power. In South America today, the hidden resting-places of los desaparecidos are being found all the time. New and democratic governments, assisted by principled lawyers and judges and forensic investigators, are disinterring and identifying the maimed and twisted corpses of men and women, and of boys and girls, who were lost to their friends and families about a quarter of a century ago (The critical resource for this and the rest of the story of Argentina is Martin Edwin Andersen's 1993 book, Dossier Secreto.) At the same time, in Washington, D.C., the declassification process for government documents is entering...
the disclosure phase. And, in a horrible way that is not being faced, the two excavations have begun to converge. From the standpoint of their victims, the death squads of Argentina and Chile were going about their busy work with the approval—no, the encouragement—of the secretary of state of the United States of America.

There it was in cold print in the early fall of 2004, filtered through the comparatively inoffensive bureaucratic term “Telephone.” These were the “telephone conversations” which Henry Kissinger ordered his State Department subordinates to record, most often in secret. At the time, he probably thought they would give him leverage. Now they have returned to haunt him, and also us. (See the National Security Archive: www.nsarchive.org.)

The most significant of these is dated June 30, 1976. In it, Kissinger displays tremendous ill temper. He has just learned of a complaint to the Argentinean generals about their regrettable habit of making their critics disappear. How, Kissinger demands to be told, has anyone gotten the idea that this démarche represents his view: “In what way is it compatible with my policy?” Addressing his aide for Latin America, Harry Shlaudeman, Kissinger says, “I want to know who did this and consider having him transferred.”

The person responsible for this atrocity—of having protested murder and torture rather than having endorsed and incited it—was the late Robert Hill. I have good reason to remember Mr. Hill, a very conservative gentleman who had served several American administrations as a Cold War diplomat, and who was known for his stoic anti-Communism. Nonetheless, Ambassador Robert Hill knew enough to know that the Argentinean junta, which had grabbed power in 1976, was keeping itself in power by illegal means. There might be a threat from Communist and Peronist subversives in the country, Hill told Admiral Cesar Augusto Gussetti, Argentina’s foreign minister, but “murdering priests and dumping 47 bodies in the street in one day could not be seen in the context of defeating the terrorists quickly; on the contrary, such acts were probably counterproductive. What the USG [United States government] hoped was that the GOA [government of Argentina] could soon defeat terrorists, yes, but do so as nearly as possible within the law.”

You can easily see that this was not an especially hard-line position on the part of Kissinger, who wanted to transfer him, and went on to do worse.

Before I explain what the “worse” was, I must purge my memory of a story that still plagues me. I possess a photograph of myself, from December of 1977, shaking the hand of General Jorge Rafael Videla, who was then the dictator of Argentina. The picture was taken in the Casa Rosada, that pink presidential palace in Buenos Aires from which Juan and Evita Perón had once harangued the masses. General Videla is now under house arrest in his own country for, among other things, trading the babies of the tortured rape victims who were held in his own secret prison. You might want to run your eye back over that last sentence and appreciate every stage of it. The Macbeth family had a notoriously hard time getting the blood off their hands, or shaking the impression that their hands were still reeking. To this day I wish that I had stiffly sat down for that interview without the polite grip-and-grin that I gave to Videla.

Our conversation was horrifying. I asked him about the desaparecidos, who then numbered about 15,000, according to reputable international reports. (The true figure is probably more like 30,000.) He gave me the “shit happens” response that he had already evolved. People disappear in all societies. Teenagers run away, cars crash, suicides occur. Moreover, some panicked subversive elements were in hiding or “underground,” because they were afraid of the wrath of their former comrades, whose ranks they had wisely deserted. What could one do? The accusation that his government was responsible was one that he denied roundly. (I still remember how he spoke the word rotundamente.)

Well, I had a reply to that, which I had learned from the desperately brave Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, the group of white-Scarved mothers who assembled every week in the main square, under the glare of the soldiers with dark glasses and steel helmets, to display pictures of their missing children. Even allowing for all that the general had said, and even supposing that those on the run had never managed to telephone their families to say that they were still alive, what of the case of Claudia Inez Grumbberg? She was a quadriplegic. She could therefore have neither become a runaway nor joined a guerrilla group. And many witnesses placed her last sighting in the hands of General Videla’s government. Hardly abashed, the dictator replied that, if what I said was indeed true, then the girl must have been guilty of “ideological crime.” Those who attacked the “Western and Christian” way of life with spoken words and written articles were, he added, often more dangerous than bombers.

One reads occasionally about the face of Fascism and all that, but this was the first time that I had really looked straight down the gun barrel at what was involved. The regime was openly anti-Jewish and had kidnapped the courageous editor of La Opinion, Jacobo Timerman. The government’s whole ideology was thoroughly racist and totalitarian. My neck hair stood up, not just at this obvious realization but at a nasty glance I received from one of Videla’s side-kicks. This thug had understood that the general had made a stupidly revealing admission. I had been given a damaging story. I was followed, too, for some days afterward, and wouldn’t happily repeat the experience.

But the general had felt he had to answer my questions, and his goons didn’t feel quite up to menacing me further, because the whole context had recently changed. Henry Kissinger was gone. President Carter had appointed an assistant secretary of state for human rights, Patricia Derian, a true civil-rights southern belle who had made it clear that the sunshine days for the regime had passed. She wouldn’t stop asking about the whereabouts of Jacobo Timerman until his Jew-baiting torturers finally gave up and let him go. The difference made by the change in Washington’s policy was the literal difference, for many Argentinean dissidents, between life and death.

And the corollary of that cliché applies. This is what I meant by “worse.” Only a few months before the election of Carter, Ambassador Robert Hill had spoken mildly to the insufferable Admiral Gussetti, as quoted above, about the murdered priests and the cadavers in the street, before the latter left on a ticklish visit to Henry Kissinger. When Gussetti came back, according to Hill in a subsequent cable, he had stopped being nervous and had become cocky. Having departed “fully expecting to hear some strong, firm, direct warnings on his government’s human rights practices,” he came back from Washington’s policy was the literal difference, for many Argentinean dissidents, between life and death.

Based on what Gussetti is doubtless reporting to the GOA [government of Argentina], it must now believe that if it has any problems with the U.S. over human rights, they are confined to certain elements of Congress and what it regards as biased and/or uninformed minor segments of public opinion. While that conviction lasts, it will be
unrealistic and unbelievable for this embassy to press representations to the GOA over human rights violations.

How had Guzzetti managed to walk away from a chat with the secretary of state with this impression? And how did the vendor of those privatized rape-babies (the fate of whose mothers is something you don’t really want to think about for too long) get a smirk on his face when he heard his envoy’s news? That’s easy. Kissinger had explicitly told Guzzetti not that he should slow down the rate of kidnappings and murders and disappearances but that he should speed it up. Hill’s memo to Kissinger is perfectly plain. Guzzetti was told in June 1976 that “if the terrorist problem was over by December or January . . . serious problems could be avoided in the U.S.” Get on with it, in other words. The number of desaparecidos in Argentina at that stage has been calculated at 1,022. In October, at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, Kissinger told Guzzetti, “the quicker you succeed the better.” The steep and rapid climb into the tens of thousands was indicated. And the sick friendship continued. Even after he had been retired by the election of 1976, and even as the Argentinian dictatorship became a skunk among nations, Kissinger accepted an invitation to be General Videla’s personal guest at the soccer World Cup, hosted in Buenos Aires in 1978. On that occasion, he chose to publicly sneer at the Carter administration for its emphasis on human rights. He could give up his role as a diplomat, but not his career as a one-man death-support machine.

At the same gathering of Latin-American dictators at which he reassured Guzzetti, Kissinger had also met with General Augusto Pinochet, of Chile. In a private session, he promised the man who had abolished civilian rule that the United States was on his side against the international Communist conspiracy. The transcripts show another detail: in some ways a more sinister one. General Pinochet twice makes nasty references to the former Chilean foreign minister Orlando Letelier, who had gone into exile in Washington, D.C., and who was making life difficult for the regime by his lobbying of senators and congressmen. Kissinger says nothing in reply. Three months later, a car bomb was detonated by a car stalking Letelier’s, creating mayhem during a D.C. rush hour and killing Letelier and his American secretary. No other dictatorship, unless you include the Taliban, has ever tried anything so hideous on American soil. It is now impossible to doubt that the order for this outrage was directly given by General Pinochet.

True, as has also been established by equally meticulous inquiries, Kissinger himself was complicit in the assassination of a Chilean general, René Schneider by name, on a street of Santiago in 1970. But this is not exactly tit for tat, since General Schneider was a constitutional officer opposed to a coup, and so both murders were designed to help General Pinochet. And both—need I add?—subverted or circumvented the legal and democratic order in the United States.

Publication of the “telcons” drew no comment from Henry Kissinger, whose office informed The New York Times that he was in Washington, D.C., to stash a fortune in stolen money and other loot. The families of the disappeared have begun to receive a measure of justice and honor. The graves are being exhumed. But these inquiries can go only so far. Judges in Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Paris have asked for Henry Kissinger’s testimony, since it is only in his papers and memos that the answers to many vital (and lethal) questions can be found. He persists in refusing to cooperate. The Bush State Department, to its shame and ours, continues to say that such questions should be addressed only through official diplomatic channels. This makes us complicit in the criminal behavior of a man who was in his time the (naturally, unelected) chairman and patron of the international dictators’ club. A suit has also been filed in a federal court in Washington, D.C., by the family of General René Schneider, charging Kissinger with orchestrating his killing. Every single paper in the prosecution dossier is a United States government declassified document.

The Schneider family has standing in this matter, not just morally, but legally—because of the Alien Tort Claims Act, which allows non-Americans to seek redress in American courts.

This act dates from the 18th century and was one of the first laws of the American Republic. The Bush administration recently tried and failed to have the Supreme Court strike the ancient legislation down . . . If I add that Henry Kissinger was offered the chairmanship of the 9/11 commission, and declined the honor only when he realized that he would have to disclose his unsavory client list at Kissinger Associates, you might start wondering which country is the real banana republic. While we ponder this solemn issue, the citizens of neighboring democracies petition us for simple justice and are contemptuously turned away, and we earn the distinction of harboring a man who does not travel anywhere outside the United States without legal advice, and who now fears even to set foot in the countries he so recently desolated and profaned. □