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Cambodia

Noam Chomsky

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It is interesting that Premier Lon Nol requested the use of these troops from President Nixon directly. Obviously, he understands very well who runs Indochina.

It is perhaps relevant that an anti-Sihanouk coup attempted in 1958 is widely assumed to have been inspired by the CIA. See Field, *op. cit.*, for a brief (and somewhat skeptical) account.

CIA involvement with the Khmer Serei is not in doubt, however. Some details were publicly revealed during the recent appeal of Green Beret officer John J. McCarthy, Jr., who had been convicted for killing a member of Khmer Serei. See *The New York Times*, Jan. 28, 1970.

Prince Sihanouk goes on to ask: "Have the US aggressors, through some operation of the Holy Ghost become pure-blooded Indochinese? Who escalated the war in Laos and Cambodia? From which airfield (certainly not from Gia Lâm) do the one thousand daily air-raids over Laos take off? Do the 'Columbia Eagle' and the 'Caribou' planes that are flying an entire arsenal of weapons for Lon Nol and Sirik Matak and their mercenaries come from General Giap? And the hundreds of CIA 'special advisers' who have arrived in Vientiane, are they a 'present' from Premier Pham Van Dong?"

Their presence was noted by the American press a week later. *The New York Times*, May 3, states that 2000 well-armed members were flown into Phnom Penh the preceding night (in fact, Kim Keth, who claims that the K.K.K. has 4500 armed members, arrived in Cambodia in 1956, and claims to have been an interpreter for the American Embassy in Phnom Penh until it was closed, when he became an actor). Kim Keth states that they detested Sihanouk. Other sources report that Sihanouk always permitted a pro-K.K.K. paper to operate, though left-wing papers were suppressed in recent years. One would like to learn more about their activities in Cambodia and South Vietnam in the past fifteen years.

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Asian colonies have plenty of trouble in store for them, here as well as there.

To pursue the war, the government will have to subdue dissent and protest, which is sure to take more militant forms as the war expands and its character becomes continually more clear. It may have to make a choice between abandoning this war, with long-term and unforeseeable consequences for American imperial policy, and jettisoning what remains of the structure of American democracy. The choice might arise fairly soon. Consider, for example, the legislation introduced by Senators Hatfield, McGovern, and others to cut off funds for continuation of the war. This was a courageous move on their part. It establishes a sharp criterion by which it can be determined whether any congressman is for war or for peace in Indochina. Suppose that it becomes law. Then the choice will be posed quite clearly. I would hesitate to predict the outcome.

Notes

For evidence on American defoliation in Cambodia, see "Report on herbicidal damage by the United States in Southeastern Cambodia," A. H. Westing, E. W. Pfeiffer, J. Lavorel, and L. Matarasso, Dec. 31, 1969, Phnom Penh, in T. Whiteside (ed.), *Defoliation*, N.Y., Ballantine, 1970. They note, incidentally, that "despite a week of free and unhampered travel by automobile, on foot, and by low-flying aircraft along hundreds of kilometers of the border, we could find no evidence of Viet Cong activity in Cambodia; nor did our repeated conversations with Cambodians and Europeans living along the border suggest any such activity." But they do report extensive damage from defoliants, in direct and apparently deliberate over-flights.

United States, who will pay the price. It is not unlikely that the price will be that described by Professor Fairbank, in the remarks quoted earlier: a war against the people of Asia and a growing totalitarian menace in the United States.

None the less, the grim game is far from ended. So long as the war continues, it may be impossible to reduce inflation and unemployment to “tolerable” limits without imposing the kinds of controls that are unacceptable to the business community. If so, American workers may refuse to continue to sacrifice their jobs and livelihood in the cause of American domination of Southeast Asia. Perhaps much wider circles can be drawn into the movement against the war. There is no doubt that many, many people are confused and troubled. With serious work, they might be brought to join those great numbers who actively oppose the war. There is resistance in the military and continuing resistance to military conscription—according to a recent report, “The Oakland induction center, which processes draftees for all of Northern California and a portion of Nevada, says more than half of the young men ordered to report fail to show up—and 11 percent of those who do show up refuse to serve.”⁷¹

Many more people are refusing to support criminal acts by payment of war taxes. As I write, there is an unprecedented student strike. Acts of sabotage directed against the military are on the increase. An underground is developing, as such “criminals” as Daniel Berrigan refuse to accept the legitimacy of the authority that has sentenced them to prison for trying to impede the war machine. Congress is seething, and state legislatures are registering opposition in surprisingly strong ways. In short, those who still hope to subdue and hold their Southeast

⁷¹ *New York Times*, May 5.

I

In 1947, commenting on the rising tide of “anti-Communist” hysteria in the United States, John K. Fairbank made the following perceptive observations:

Our fear of Communism, partly as an expression of our general fear of the future, will continue to inspire us to aggressive anti-Communist policies in Asia and elsewhere, [and] the American people will be led to think and may honestly believe that the support of anti-Communist governments in Asia will somehow defend the American way of life. This line of American policy will lead to American aid to establish regimes which attempt to suppress the popular movements in Indonesia, Indochina, the Philippines, and China.... Thus, after setting out to fight Communism in Asia, the American people will be obliged in the end to fight the peoples of Asia.

This American aggression abroad will be associated with an increasing trend toward anti-Communist authoritarianism within the United States, which its victims will call fascism and which may eventually make it impossible to have discussions like this one today. This American fascism will come, if it comes, because American liberals have joined the American public in a fear of Communism from abroad rather than fascism at home as the chief totalitarian menace.¹

¹ Cited by Jim Peck in an excellent discussion of postwar American Asian scholarship, forthcoming in the *Bulletin of the Concerned Asian Scholars*, 1737 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Mass.

These remarks have proved to be accurate. The events of the past few weeks reveal, once again, how the American policy of “anti-Communism”—to be more precise, the effort to prevent the development of indigenous movements that might extricate their societies from the integrated world system dominated by American capital—draws the American government, step by fateful step, into an endless war against the people of Asia, and, as an inevitable concomitant, toward harsh repression and defiance of law at home.

The invasion of Cambodia by the United States and its Saigon subsidiary comes as no surprise, in the light of recent events in Southeast Asia. Since 1968, the United States has steadily escalated the war in Laos, both on the ground, as the CIA-sponsored Clandestine Army swept through the Plain of Jars in late 1969, and from the air. When the report of the Symington subcommittee on Laos was finally released on April 20, the *Washington Post* carried the front-page headline: *US ESCALATES WAR IN LAOS, HILL DISCLOSES*. The headline was accurate; other evidence, to which I shall return in a later article, shows that the subcommittee hearings seriously understate the scale, and the grim effects, of the American escalation. This American escalation provoked a response by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnam, who now control more of Laos than ever before, and led to devastation and population removal on a vast scale.

the destabilizing event in Cambodia—assiduously ignored by President Nixon in his speech of April 30 announcing the American invasion²—was the right-wing coup of March 18

² I will not discuss the content of this speech, which was an insult to the intelligence and an expression of contempt for Congress and the American people.

this policy has been seen, from the start, as a central component in global American strategy. In a perceptive article, Walter LaFeber observed several years ago⁶⁹ that when Eisenhower announced his “falling dominoes” theory on April 7, 1954, he referred specifically to Japan:

[Communist success in Indochina] takes away, in its economic aspects, that region that Japan must have as a trading area or Japan, in turn, will have only one place in the world to go—that is, toward the Communist areas in order to live. So, the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world.

LaFeber added that “This thesis became a controlling assumption: the loss of Vietnam would mean the economic undermining and probable loss of Japan to Communist markets and ultimately to Communist influence if not control.”⁷⁰ Although the Indochina war in part develops through its own dynamics—the President is hardly likely to be willing to face the domestic political consequences of an American defeat, even if the alternative is a possible global war—it seems to me, nevertheless, that LaFeber is correct in identifying this “controlling assumption,” and in arguing that it is an important factor in accounting for the persistence of our effort to control Southeast Asia.

One can, of course, trace the policy of expansion into Asia far back in American history. The postwar American effort to dominate Southeast Asia has an element of “rationality,” according to the perceived interests of many of those who manage American society—unfortunately for the people of Indochina and the

⁶⁹ “Our illusory affair with Japan,” *Nation*, March 11, 1968.

⁷⁰ A similar analysis has been developed by others since. See the references in “After Pinkville”; also, Peter Wiley. “Vietnam and the Pacific Rim Strategy,” *Leviathan*, June, 1969.

It is not difficult to imagine other reasons, in each of the countries named, for the expansion of “people’s war.” The American involvement alone is a contributing factor. The US can hardly expect to turn Thailand into a military base for its Southeast Asian wars without calling forth a response by “Communists” who refuse to follow the rules.⁶⁷ Domestic reasons are also not difficult to conjure up. The editorial comment in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* also notes that “China would probably be much happier with a neutralist Laos and a neutralist Cambodia.” This is no doubt true. Sihanouk, for one, continually emphasized this point, as noted earlier. The United States, however, is unlikely to permit this option.

By its insistence on imposing rightwing governments with virtually no popular support on the people of Indochina, the United States may ultimately succeed in bringing about a Pacific or even a global war. Though this may not appear likely at the moment, it is easy to imagine a sequence of events that would lead to this consequence. In any event, the future for the people of Southeast Asia is dim. The United States is using its incomparable technological resources and its internationally based military forces to occupy and destroy vast territories, to uproot and demoralize the population, to disrupt social life in the areas it cannot physically control. So long as the American people tolerate these atrocities, the people of Southeast Asia can look forward only to continued misery.

In an earlier essay, I noted that the American policy of conquest in Indochina has continued, without fundamental change in goals, for twenty years.⁶⁸ It is important to reiterate that

⁶⁷ On the American role in creating guerrilla activity in Thailand, see some interesting comments by George Kahin in *No More Vietnams?*, Harper, 1968 (Pfeffer, ed.), with the assent of Chester Cooper of the State Department.

⁶⁸ “After Pinkville,” *New York Review*, Jan. I, 1970. See the references there for much more extensive discussion.

which overthrew Prince Sihanouk and drove him into an alliance with the Cambodian left and the mass popular movements of Laos and Vietnam, which are dominated by left-wing forces. The coup, and the events that followed, must be understood as a further step in the internationalization of the Vietnam war. However, the coup should also be seen in the context of developments internal to Cambodia over the past several years. These factors are, of course, inter-related.

Since early 1964 the United States has been conducting its war in Indochina from sanctuaries scattered from Thailand to Okinawa. The bombardment of Laos, which appears to have begun in May, 1964, and the intensive bombardment of North and South Vietnam that followed in February, 1965, make use of bases in Thailand, South Vietnam, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Guam, not to speak of the naval units that control the surrounding oceans. The control center for the bombing of North Vietnam and Northern Laos is in Thailand, presumably, at Udorn airbase. In 1968, the bombing of Laos greatly increased in intensity, when aircraft formerly employed against North Vietnam were shifted to the bombardment of Laos. In 1969, the bombing of Northern Laos was again greatly intensified as infiltration fell off on the so-called “Ho Chi Minh Trail.” Most of this area has long been under Pathet Lao control.

As a glance at the map makes clear, the bombing of Northern Laos takes place in a region far removed from the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” and has no direct connection to the war in South Vietnam. It is, in fact, directed against civilian targets and has resulted in almost total destruction of most settled areas and forced evacuation of much of the population. Where people remain, they live, for the most part, in caves and tunnels. According to American Embassy figures, the population remaining in the Pathet Lao zones is over a million, well over a third of the population of Laos. There may be as many as three-quarters of a million refugees in the government-controlled areas. The planes that attack Northern Laos are based in Thailand,

whereas the bombing of Southern Laos (including the “Ho Chi Minh Trail”) originates from Danang, Pleiku, and the Seventh Fleet. Now the Thai bases are also being used to bomb Cambodia.³

The American escalation of the war in Laos provoked a response by the Communist forces, which now control more of Laos than ever before. (I shall return to the details in a later article.) Since this result was predictable, the question naturally arises: What was the American government hoping to accomplish by the 1968–9 escalation? Some regard this escalation as merely another major error of the Pentagon and the CIA, but there are grounds for skepticism. The objective of the bombing seems to be to destroy the civil society administered by the Pathet Lao. Quite possibly, the United States is pursuing in Laos the dual policy of massive destruction in areas that are beyond the reach of American-controlled armies, and removal of the population to refugee camps and urban slums wherever this is feasible. This has been the effect of the American escalation, and it is likely that it was the intended effect, as in Vietnam.

To facilitate the all-weather bombardment of North Vietnam, advanced navigational facilities were established in Northeastern Laos. One of these, at Phou Pha Thi, became known to the American public when it was overrun on March 11, 1968. It was seventeen miles from the border of North Vietnam, on a mountain peak. There were American casualties, but the number remains classified. The base had been established in 1966. Other such facilities were established, but information is classified. The CIA has also endeavored to maintain guerrilla bases in these territories, long administered by the Pathet Lao.⁴

³ Sidney Schanberg, *New York Times*, May 7.

⁴ Much of this information is presented in the report of the Symington sub-committee: *Hearings before the Sub-committee on US Security Agreements*

cal governments will continue to be the forte of the Viet Cong as South Vietnam approaches peaceful conditions. The ultimate victor in South Vietnam will not be that party which necessarily wins the war, but rather that party which organizes for peace.⁶⁵

Thus the United States is forced to resort to the Phoenix program to destroy the Viet Cong “infrastructure,” and to the other means of annihilation and population control with which it experiments throughout Indochina. In Cambodia too it is likely that the United States will have to undertake intensive bombardment of civilian targets, as in Laos, or direct occupation, as in South Vietnam, to maintain in power the right-wing elements to which it is committed.

Nor is this likely to be the end. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* comments editorially that there are grounds for “claiming that the revolutionary situation in the region is excellent.” Extending their “gloomy speculations” about Indochina, they proceed:

...to envisage a people’s war, supplied and supported from Laos, engulfing the northeast and north of Thailand, eventually linking up with dissidents in the south fomented by Ching Peng and the rump of the Malayan Communist Party, and spreading across the country to join hands with the numerous factions in open revolt within Burma. From here the revolutionary line leads via the Nagas and other minorities to the Naxalites and West Bengal.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ “South Vietnam: Neither War nor Peace.” *Asian Survey*, February, 1970.

⁶⁶ April 9, 1970.

political element in Cambodia, in the opinion of US Government experts on Indochina.”⁶² The Khmer liberation forces, if they continue to expand, can be expected to link up with the NLF (now the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam), the Pathet Lao, and the North Vietnamese in a general Indochina war against the rightwing elements backed by the United States.

It is widely admitted that the revolutionary groups we confront in Laos and Vietnam—and soon, very likely, in Cambodia—are the only indigenous forces that have any immediate prospect of mobilizing mass support in Indochina. For example, a recently published RAND Corporation study concedes that apart from the Neo Lao Hak Sat (the political party of the revolutionary movement in Laos), there is no “broadly based political organization” in Laos, a country run by an “extremely small elite,”⁶³ to be more precise, hardly more than a façade for the Americans. Similarly, the Council of Vietnamese Studies of SEADAG (the Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group) in its meetings of May 3, 1969, struggles with the fact that the NLF is the “best organized political group,” the “strongest political group in South Vietnam.”⁶⁴ The same conclusions are reached in scholarly literature. For example, the Vietnam scholar Allen Goodman concludes:

Indeed, it would appear that the organization of a cadre structure and the nurturing of strong lo-

⁶² *New York Times*, April 19.

⁶³ P. F. Langer and J. J. Zasloff, *The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao*, RM-5935, September, 1969. They claim, however, that the Pathet Lao could not function without North Vietnamese control. Their evidence, and other evidence that is available, does not seem to me to support this conclusion.

⁶⁴ In a letter to *The New York Review*, Feb. 26, 1970, I naively accepted Samuel Huntington’s statement that the Council is primarily concerned with fund-raising for scholarly research on Vietnam. Having read the report of this meeting, which is concerned to find a proper strategy for ensuring control at the national level for “our side,” given the insistence of the public on scaling down the US military role, I would like to retract my acquiescence.

The United States also has employed extensive mercenary forces—the term is precise—from South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, as well as Chinese and Cambodian mercenaries. The number of these forces, taken together with the troops from Australia and New Zealand, over the years, has been about the same as that of the North Vietnamese claimed by the Americans to be in South Vietnam. Of course, all of these forces and their fire power are quite small as compared with the American occupying army, even apart from the Pacific Naval and Air Command operating from its privileged sanctuaries.

During the 1960s, Prince Sihanouk tried, with much success, to save Cambodia from the spreading Indochina war. Nevertheless, the war has spilled over into Eastern Cambodia. Those whose information is restricted to American government propaganda may have visions of an invasion of Cambodia by great North Vietnamese armies. The truth is rather different. As American ground sweeps and aerial bombardment devastated much of the Vietnamese countryside, Vietnamese resistance forces have taken refuge in sparsely inhabited areas of Eastern Cambodia, which have increasingly been used as rest-and-recreation areas and, conceivably, command posts. At the same time, the armed forces of the United States and its allies and collaborators have carried out substantial military attacks against Cambodia. Evidence is meager, but what there is supports these general conclusions.

The earlier stages are described as follows by the American journalist Michael Leifer:

and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 91st Congress, first session, October 20–28, 1969, Government Printing Office, 1970. Other details come from interviews with refugees and on the scene reports by journalists and other visitors to the bombed areas.

From the early 1960's charges had been levelled from Saigon and later from Washington that Cambodian territory was being used as an active sanctuary for Viet Cong insurgents. Prince Sihanouk had denied the charges consistently and the denials had always been substantiated as a result of inquiries by the International Control Commission for Cambodia, by Western journalists, and even by Western military attachés stationed in Phnom Penh.⁵

In July, 1966, an American study team investigated specific charges by the US government on the scene and found them to be entirely without substance.⁶ However, the team happened to be present immediately after an American helicopter attack on the Cambodian village of Thlok Trach, and its published report, relying on information supplied by Cambodian officials, also mentions other specific attacks on villages. The Thlok Trach attack was at first denied by the US, but was then conceded, since eyewitnesses (including a CBS television team) were present. (This, incidentally, is the usual pattern. To cite only the most recent case, the bombing of North Vietnam on May 1, 1970, was admitted by the US government, but, it appears, only after a report was filed by an American newsman, Robert Boyd, who happened to be present near the site of the bombing.⁷)

⁵ Michael Leifer, "Rebellion or Subversion in Cambodia," *Current History*, February, 1969.

⁶ *Is Cambodia Next?*, Russell Press, Washington, D.C., 1967. An ABC television crew had also been unable to substantiate the American charges. Both groups were free to travel anywhere in Cambodia and checked locations specifically alleged to be base camps and transit routes.

⁷ Details are still obscure, but this appears to be the order of events, as well as I can reconstruct from the information in the Boston *Globe* and *New York Times*, May 3. In his statement of May 2, in which he discussed the possibility of a resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam, Secretary Laird

be seen. That the countryside will be devastated and its population removed or destroyed is reasonably certain. Very probably, if these territories are abandoned by the invading forces, some, at least, will be joined to the area on the South Vietnamese side of the border as an extended free fire zone.

IV

The amazing, unanticipated popular revulsion against the American invasion of Cambodia indicates that it will be very difficult, in the short run at least, for the government to make use of American ground troops to ensure its control of those who remain refractory. The Pentagon will therefore have to learn to rely more effectively on the technology of destruction. Chances are that a ring of fire and devastation will surround the outposts of the "free world" in South Vietnam, protecting the American army of a quarter of a million men and its permanent bases from attack. If Eastern Cambodia must be sacrificed to this end, neither General Thieu nor his employers can be expected to shed many tears.

As in Laos and Vietnam, the United States is intervening—whatever its immediate reasons—to support reactionary, even feudalistic elements, and to suppress an emerging peasant-based movement of national independence. As I have already noted, there is some evidence that the CIA had a finger, and perhaps a hand, in the March 18 coup. In any event, when Sihanouk refused to retire to France like a well-behaved Bao Dai, as the Viet Cong strategy of arming the peasants and encouraging the formation of a pro-Sihanouk Cambodian liberation army became evident, American intervention became essential. Tad Szulc reported from Washington that "The Khmer Rouges, the Cambodian equivalent of the South Vietnamese Vietcong guerrillas, may become an important

sitting and waiting after several days of obvious preparations for an invasion, any more than they expect to find Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops strolling through the market place when they wipe out a Lao village from the air. The experience of earlier sweeps within South Vietnam has been that there was little contact with Communist forces, and virtually no correlation between contact and prior intelligence. This is a story in itself, still largely untold. For example, a map of Operation Junction City in the 1966–67 Yearbook of the 25th Infantry Division shows extensive “objective” areas that were devastated prior to the sweep, but virtually no “contact”—sniper fire or soldiers, dead or alive—within the objective areas, several of which were heavily settled.⁶¹

It is a virtual certainty that great victories will be claimed in the Cambodian invasion, and that the military will release reports of arms caches and rice destroyed, military bases demolished, and much killing of “North Vietnamese,” i.e., people who find themselves in the way of an American tank or in an area bombed or strafed. So many reputations and careers are at stake that glorious victories are guaranteed.

Furthermore, some of these reports may even be correct. On probabilistic grounds alone, one would expect that American military intelligence can’t always be wrong about everything. The headquarters of the Vietnamese resistance forces and the bases that they use for R-and-R must be somewhere, and they may well be found and destroyed during the American-Saigon sweep. Whether the invading troops will withdraw remains to

⁶¹ Further evidence of major war crimes, as hardly need be stressed. These facts were brought out at a press conference held in Boston, May 7, under the auspices of the National Committee for a Citizen’s Commission of Inquiry on US War Crimes, 156 Fifth Avenue, Room 1005, New York 10010. I might add that they desperately need funds to continue the important work of permitting former soldiers, many of whom are eager to cooperate, to testify concerning their experiences. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of bringing out this kind of information about the nature of the war.

The Cambodians report many other such incidents. For example, on 24 February 1967, “a large number of armed forces elements consisting of Americans, South Vietnamese and South Koreans entered Cambodian territory and fired heavily on the Khmer defenders of the village of Duan Roth... On the same day...aircraft of the same armed forces heavily bombed the Khmer village of Chrak Krank...[which] was then invaded and burned by the United States-South Vietnamese troops” who occupied the village until March 3.⁸

According to official Cambodian statistics, up to May, 1969, the United States and its allies were responsible for 1864 border violations, 5149 air violations, 293 Cambodian deaths, and 690 Cambodians wounded.⁹

In a review of events of 1967, Roger Smith writes that relations between Cambodia and the United States “were strained because of periodic South Vietnamese bombing of Cambodian villages along the South Vietnamese frontier, armed incursions from Thailand, and, late in the year, a reported South Vietnamese-inspired blockade of shipping to Phnom Penh via the Mekong River.”¹⁰ Additional problems

made no mention of the attack that had already taken place. Later, the Pentagon admitted the raid (presumably after Boyd’s story was intercepted), but claimed that it was a “protective reaction” against anti-aircraft guns. Boyd reports that he heard several dozen explosions but heard no defensive fire and saw no smoke from anti-aircraft.

⁸ UN Document s/7820 15/3/6, quoted in *Is Cambodia Next?*

⁹ T. D. Allman, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Feb. 26, 1970. Cited in an informative discussion of the Cambodian situation in *Vietnam International*, April, 1970, 6 Endsleigh St., London, WC1. Allman noted that the number has continued to rise, and that not all such incidents are reported. More details are given in a Cambodian Government White Paper, Jan. 3, 1970. The report also notes that not a single Viet Cong body has ever been found after US-Saigon bombardments or ground attacks.

¹⁰ “Cambodia: between Scylla and Charybdis,” *Asian Survey*, January, 1968.

were caused by the activities of the Khmer Serei (Free Khmers), which, in the beginning of 1966, “declared war on Cambodia and claimed responsibility for incursions across the border.”¹¹

The Khmer Serei is led by an adventurer named Songsak, who fled Cambodia by bribing a pilot of an aviation club (taking with him all its funds), and the fascist Son Ngoc Thanh, who was the head of the Cambodian government under the Japanese, and then switched his allegiance to the CIA—not an unfamiliar pattern.¹² This group is made up of Cambodians who were trained by the American Special Forces in South Vietnam and have carried out operations against Cambodia from bases in South Vietnam and Thailand.¹³ We shall return to this interesting organization and its recent activities in a moment.

The Cambodian Government White Paper of January, 1970 (see note 9) covers events up until May, 1969. Since then, there

¹¹ Michael Leifer, “Cambodia,” *Asian Survey*, January, 1967.

¹² For example, the dictator of Thailand under the Japanese, who had in fact declared war against the United States, was reinstated by an American-backed military coup in 1948; the liberal Pridi Phanomyong, who had worked with the OSS against the Japanese during the war and later won easily in the only relatively free election in Thailand in 1946, soon found his way to Communist China, where at last report he still remains. It should, incidentally, be noted that the involvement of a Southeast Asian political leader with the Japanese in itself proves very little, since there were many possible motivations, including opposition to Western colonialism.

¹³ This characterization of Son Ngoc Thanh and Songsak is given by Daniel Roy, “Le Coup de Phnom-Penh,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, April, 1970. Other sources indicate that Songsak was a millionaire who did not need to resort to petty theft, and that Son Ngoc Thanh is essentially an apolitical opportunist. For example, the English journalist Michael Field suggests in his book *The Prevailing Wind* (Methuen, 1965) that Thanh gravitated toward the South Vietnamese and the Thais (i.e., the American-supported right-wing dictatorships) only when he could receive no other support in his effort to oppose the far more popular Sihanouk. Those familiar with internal Cambodian politics regard the information that is available to Westerners as being of highly uncertain quality, and any effort at detailed interpretation must surely be taken with caution.

The *Observer* (London), May 3, cites

...reports that seem to carry a grimmer significance. Apart from the Viet Cong casualties, the Americans have announced that scores of “persons” have been detained by the allied forces. They have been led out of the area under guard, blindfolded with their hands tied behind their backs, suspected of being North Vietnamese soldiers. The area is inhabited by many civilians, both Vietnamese and Cambodians, families of rubber plantation workers and woodcutters.

This lends a fearful emphasis to the remarks of American officers on the spot that American observation and gunship helicopters have been given clearance “to fire on anything that moves” in an area extending about three miles north and west of the ground operations.

What of the Cambodian troops? Jack Foisie, reporting from Svay Rieng, describes “the churlishness of Cambodian army troopers who appeared dismayed that the Saigon government army was occupying their town, even though at the moment they were allies”⁶⁰—a fact too subtle, apparently, for the simple peasant mind to comprehend.

And so we proceed to save the people of Cambodia from Vietnamese aggression, just as we have been saving the Lao and the Vietnamese themselves.

It is difficult to believe that American strategists expect to find the highly mobile Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops

⁶⁰ Los Angeles *Times*-Boston *Globe*, May 5.

Returning to our comrades in arms, Gloria Emerson reports from Prasaut, totally abandoned before the South Vietnamese troops entered. French-speaking General Do Cao Tri (“smoking a pipe and holding a swaggerstick”) did not discourage his troops from writing anti-Cambodian slogans on the walls of buildings, for example: “Now is the time for the killers to pay in blood,” a reference to the Cambodian massacre of eighty-nine Vietnamese in Prasaut on April 10, when the Lon Nol government was desperately attempting to hold its authority by brutally fanning ethnic hostilities:

If this was a triumphant day for the South Vietnamese, it was a bewildering, frightening one for the Cambodians who hid inside their houses near Route 1 or fled their homes. Close to the Vietnamese border at Godauha, only a few men watched the South Vietnamese troops pass. They stared with tight, sullen faces. Just outside Prasaut, the doors of the wooden houses that stand on stilts were empty and silent. There were thick locks on the doors of the better houses, and portraits of Prince Sihanouk, the deposed Chief of State of Cambodia, still hung on the walls of one porch.⁵⁹

assaulted. The French manager of a rubber plantation informed him that between fifty and sixty North Vietnamese had driven off a 500-man Cambodian garrison on April 22. They armed the 1600 workers, 95 percent of whom are Cambodians, and took them along as they fled from US tank and air attacks. “They gave guns to the people and now they are fighting with the Viet Cong,” the plantation manager reports. *Boston Globe*, May 7. Daniel reports that the only dead he saw were Cambodian civilians, including “a little girl horribly maimed by what must have been napalm.” The US Army claimed to have killed 88 Communist troops in the area. Daniel doubts it. *Boston Globe*, May 8, 1970.

⁵⁹ Gloria Emerson, *New York Times*, May 3.

have been many further incidents. The American biologist Arthur Westing, who was investigating American defoliation in Cambodia (see note 9), inspected the site of one such incident shortly after it occurred last November. He describes this as a “particularly vicious” case. A village was attacked, and houses, a school, livestock, a hospital marked with a giant red cross on its roof, and a well-marked ambulance trying to retrieve wounded were all destroyed by bombs, rockets, and napalm. The ICC reported no evidence of the presence of Viet Cong, nor could the US produce any photographic (or other) evidence, despite daily reconnaissance flights. The US charge suggested that “our pilots must have lost their cool”—for about forty-eight hours.

Westing speculates that the attack may have been “a punitive or retaliatory measure following the destruction of a US helicopter last October 24 and particularly of a US F-105 on November 14, both shot down in the course of attacking Dak Dam in casual and callous disregard of Cambodian neutrality.”¹⁴ The American government apologized and paid \$11,400 in reparations. I shall return below to other recent incidents reported by Americans present at the scene.

As in the case of Laos, it may be asked what the United States hoped to achieve by these repeated attacks on Cambodia, in which, so far as is known, no Viet Cong or North Vietnamese was ever killed and no damage was done to any Vietnamese military site. Again, it is possible that “faulty intelligence” is to blame. I suspect, however, that the aerial, naval, and ground attacks were for the most part capricious or vengeful, as appears to have been the case in the incident that Westing reported. The American military does not recognize the right of others to defend their own territory from American attack or overflight, or to interfere with American plans by inhabiting areas

¹⁴ Letter, *New Republic*, March 28, 1970.

that the US government feels should be cratered or defoliated. And when such people aggressively insist on these rights, the US authorities feel free to react as they choose. Where we have evidence at all, it appears that the American attacks on Cambodia were governed by such assumptions, though it is possible that in some cases it was believed (apparently falsely) that Vietnamese military targets were being attacked.

A European resident of Phnom Penh described to a reporter a visit, before the recent coup, to Svay Rieng town in the "Parrot's Beak" area, five kilometers from the closest border point:

During lunch, an American plane came over and looped the loop over the governor's house. The plane kept diving at a Cambodian flag which was flying in the front garden. A policeman took out his pistol and fired a few shots at the plane. I suppose if he had hit it, the Americans would have come in and napalmed the whole town.¹⁵

An exaggeration or a joke? One can hardly say so, given what evidence we have regarding American military actions.¹⁶ Very likely something of the sort accounts for many, perhaps most, of the attacks on Cambodia.

The first attested case of a Viet Cong installation within Cambodia was in November, 1967, when American journalists claimed to have found a Viet Cong campsite four miles within Cambodian territory (see Leifer, *op. cit.*). Since that time, Viet Cong and NVA forces have taken refuge in Eastern Cambodia after intensive bombardment and American ground

¹⁵ Allman, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Feb. 26, 1970.

¹⁶ For innumerable examples taken from the press see *In the Name of America*, Turnpike Press, 1968. Capricious terror bombing of civilians has been reported even from sources highly sympathetic to the Pentagon, for many years. See, for example, Richard Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963.

one there [the policeman reported]. No Vietcong, no Cambodian. But one rice field and a grove of mango trees are being destroyed."

From these accounts, it is not difficult to predict the character of the invasion of Svay Rieng province, now in its initial stages. It will lead to the destruction of villages and the displacement of population, but probably little else. Early reports indicate that this is exactly what is being achieved. James Sterba reports that "few people were to be seen in the Parrot's Beak...but animals were everywhere," water buffalo and herds of cattle near abandoned houses.⁵⁶ The ARVN soldiers as usual were stealing chickens. "Dozens of houses were burned by South Vietnamese troops in the Parrot's Beak. Their charred frames dotted the landscape."

American troops will be unable to match the ARVN accomplishments, since the "Fishhook" area that they are invading is more thinly settled. But at least they are trying:

...troops of the US 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment burned down at least five villages, each with 30 to 40 houses. Officers said they were told to burn the villages because they could be of use to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops. The Americans met no resistance. Villagers fled.⁵⁷

Peter Arnett is quoted as reporting that American troops entering Snoul were ordered to "blow the town away."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *New York Times*, May 3.

⁵⁷ AP, *Boston Globe*, May 4.

⁵⁸ CBS radio news, May 5. They did: "Front line reports said American tanks and aircraft strikes that included napalm drops against Communist defenders destroyed the town of Snoul inside Cambodia on Tuesday. UPI correspondent Leon Daniel reported some of the GIs looted goods from deserted shops Wednesday as they swept through the town of 10,000 in the heart of rubber plantation country." Henry Huet reports from Snoul that it was reduced to rubble with tank guns and air attacks the day before it was

3. In fairness to all sides, it is obvious that the Americans, South Vietnamese, Vietcong and North Vietnamese are all making some degree of effort to keep the war out of Cambodia.

4. The Cambodian effort to hold ground against all comers belies any reports that they have an “agreement” with the communists—or for that matter with the Americans.

He describes this dangerous “sanctuary” as “an absolutely flat country—rice paddies, villages, occasionally a small grove of trees...scanning the open horizon, broken only by Cambodian villages and mango groves, there seemed no place the Vietcong could hide, let alone establish a permanent sanctuary.” Allman spent a day in the isolated district of Chantrea. The evening before, American planes had bombed and strafed a village “2300 metres inside Cambodia and clearly visible across a rice field,” killing two farmers and destroying a hectare of paddy. The district officer stated:

There are no Vietcong in Chantrea district. They never enter our territory more than 500 metres, even at night. Mostly they are passing. There are no camps here. No sanctuaries.

During 1969 [the district officer added], in this one district of Svay Rieng province, nine Cambodians were killed by American bombs or guns; 20 Cambodians were wounded; 100 hectares of rice paddy was damaged; and more than 100 farm animals were killed; no Vietcong were killed by Americans, and no Cambodians were killed by Vietcong.

As they spoke, a policeman entered to report bombing and strafing 200 meters inside Cambodia: “Incidentally, there is no

sweeps in South Vietnam, using these territories much as the United States makes use of Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, Okinawa, Guam, Hawaii, and the oceans of Asia and the Pacific. (The analogy is, of course, inexact, since the Vietnamese obviously do not dispose of anything like the resources that the United States employs for its war against the people of Vietnam, Laos, and now Cambodia.) T. D. Allman, one of the most knowledgeable and enterprising of the American correspondents now in Cambodia, describes the situation as follows:

...although tens of thousands of Vietnamese Communist troops have been for long on Cambodian soil, they have been lying low in the border regions and causing little trouble.... The arrangement has meant the presence of foreign troops on Cambodian soil, but it has also allowed Cambodia, alone among its neighbors, to pass through the dangers of the Vietnam war without having its countryside ravaged and its population brutalized.¹⁷

I will not take the space to comment on the hypocrisy of the reference to “sanctuaries” by the American government and its propagandists and apologists. Perhaps the most appropriate remark, in this connection, was made by Prince Sihanouk after the coup:

The cynicism of the United States executive reached its peak when he demanded that the

¹⁷ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, “Anatomy of a Coup,” April 9, 1970, an excellent analysis of the immediate background of the March 18 coup. A more far-reaching analysis of the events leading up to the coup appears in the article by Daniel Roy cited above. These events are placed in the relevant historical context by Jean Lacouture, “Opération-suicide.” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 20 April. For additional background, see the articles by Michael Leifer cited above, and also Roger M. Smith, “Prince Norodom Sihanouk,” *Asian Survey*, June, 1967, and the articles already cited.

resistance forces of our three peoples [i.e., of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia] evacuate their own countries in response to the withdrawal of a part of the United States forces, and especially when our resistance has become “foreign intervention” on our own soil. Where then should our liberation armies go? To the United States?¹⁸

Sihanouk is quite correct. When President Nixon refers to the lack of sincerity on the part of the “North Vietnamese” (an expression now used by American propaganda as a cover term for Cambodians, Lao, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese who obstinately refuse to obey American orders) in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, to their continued aggression in the face of American withdrawals which now leave in South Vietnam a force considerably larger than the entire North Vietnamese Army, the meaning of his words is, plainly, that these “aggressors” have refused to surrender to the right-wing governments that the United States has installed and the native military forces that it organizes, trains, supplies, pays, and “advises.” With equal justice, Hitler might have spoken of the aggressiveness of the French Maquis, who were of course supplied and advised by the Anglo-Saxons, and Tojo of the lack of sincerity of the Chinese bandits, who refused to accept the rule of Wang Ching-wei, whom the Japanese installed as a puppet ruler in 1940.

But Wang Ching-wei had at least been a leading Chinese nationalist, not a General Thieu. Nor did the Germans deploy an expeditionary force on anything remotely approaching the American scale to ensure the rule of the Vichy government. It

¹⁸ Speech to the closing session of the Summit Conference of Indochinese Peoples, which took place at an unidentified location in South China on April 25, 1970, translated and slightly shortened by Maria Jolas. I use her translation, and a few sentences quoted by Stanley Karnow, *Washington Post*; May 1.

ideas happen to occur to them. The disparity of force between the American government and its victims is so enormous that American planners can pretty much do as they wish, without fear of serious retaliation. In such a situation, it is quite pointless to try to explain the actions of these frightened and limited men on rational grounds. They have the force at their command, and can use it with impunity. Further explanations are in a sense superfluous.

President Nixon wishes us to believe that after a right-wing coup in Cambodia, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese have become a more serious military threat to South Vietnam. This is as convincing as his fantasies about North Vietnam surrounding the South with its awesome military might. He also alluded ominously to the sanctuaries in Svay Rieng province (“Parrot’s Beak”), “as close to Saigon as Baltimore is to Washington,” and spoke of the rapid NVA build-up in Cambodia in April. As to the latter, military sources in Saigon report that they know of no Communist build-up in Cambodia.⁵⁴ What of the prior situation in the densely populated flat riceland of Svay Rieng province? The province was visited by T. D. Allman a few months ago.⁵⁵ Four things, he wrote, seem evident as a result of his investigation. I quote:

1. The Vietcong use Cambodian territory much less than the Americans in Saigon claim.
2. US aircraft violate Cambodian air space and bomb and strafe Cambodian territory in violation of the US guidelines, frequently with no cause at all, and much more often than the US admits.

⁵⁴ Robert G. Kaiser, *Washington Post-Boston Globe*, May 3.

⁵⁵ See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Feb. 26, 1970.

coup in 1958, the Saigon government diplomatic representative in Phnom Penh (later a minister under Diem), who appears to have been implicated in the coup, told a reporter:

You must understand that we in Saigon are desperate men. We are a government of desperadoes.⁵¹

An accurate description, which applies with equal force to those who design American policy. These men have enormous power at their command and can do very much as they wish, with few restrictions. As recent events once more reveal, the Constitution and unorganized public opinion serve as no serious constraint, and international law and our “solemn treaty obligations”—to the UN Charter, for example, which remains, if anyone cares, “the supreme law of the land”⁵²—have long faded from consciousness. Reference to them has become “moralistic” or “naïve,” as it no doubt is.

More seriously, the victims have absolutely no way of striking back at the United States, the source of aggression, and it is unlikely that their allies will risk the fury of American nuclear attack by threatening the United States with retaliation. Therefore, the American government can “experiment” with one technique of destruction after another—“population control methods” and other police state tactics, assassination teams to destroy the enemy “infrastructure,” defoliation, forced evacuation, concentration of the population in camps and urban slums, bombardment on a scale unknown in human history,⁵³ invasion of other countries, and whatever other

⁵¹ Field, *op. cit.*

⁵² A fact that leads to some weird contortions. For example, Ambassador William Sullivan, now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, makes the absurd claim that the Truman Doctrine is a “parsing” of the UN Charter (Symington Subcommittee Hearings).

⁵³ According to Pentagon sources, aerial bombardment of Indochina from 1965 through 1969 reached 4.5 million tons, nine times the total tonnage in the entire Pacific theater in World War II. This is about half of the total ordnance expended.

cannot be stressed too strongly that what is remarkable about the Indochina war is the inability of the American invaders to establish indigenous governments that can rule effectively and control their societies with their own means. In this respect, the United States in Indochina still falls short of its distinguished predecessors, though the American White House easily matches them in cynicism and mendacity, and surpasses all current competitors in its reliance on violence and terror.

II

To return to Cambodia: the country was, then, partially drawn into the Indochina war, though Prince Sihanouk managed to maintain neutrality by a delicate balancing act and to save it from the terror that ravaged Vietnam and Laos. The contrast between Cambodia and its immediate neighbors was described by T. D. Allman, just a few months ago, as follows:

A few days later, in a commercial plane, I flew over Svay Rieng province. From the air the frontier is now clearly defined: beyond the parrot’s beak peninsula of neat Cambodian rice fields and villages the land is pitted by literally hundreds of thousands of bomb and shell craters. In some cases the years of day-and-night bombing have changed the contours of the land and little streams form into lakes as they fill up mile after square mile of craters. Above this desolation and along and just across the Cambodian frontier, the American helicopters and planes whirr continually, firing their guns and cannon, dropping their bombs.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Feb. 26.

The March 18 coup against Sihanouk marked the end of this period of fairly effective neutrality. It is safe to predict that the frontier will no longer be so clearly defined.

Evidently, it was the coup of March 18 that destabilized the Cambodian situation. It created an entirely new situation within Cambodia, and may also prove to have affected significantly the long-term relations among the peoples of Indochina. Cambodia, like the other states of the region, is a *mélange* of ethnic groups. The large majority of its population of about 7 million is Khmer (the term is often used as synonymous with “Cambodian”), but there are substantial Chinese and Vietnamese minorities of perhaps about half a million each, in addition to mountain tribes. Many Vietnamese were brought to Cambodia (as to Laos) by the French to work in rubber plantations (in Laos, in the mines), but also to serve as administrators for the colonial government and private businesses. They also succeeded in taking over a large share of local commerce.

The French capitalized on feelings of inferiority toward the Vietnamese among the native Khmer and Lao, and by so doing, no doubt intensified these feelings, which remain an important factor in current politics. They adopted the standard colonialist policy of using minorities or outsiders to help control native populations. Jean Lacouture describes the French colonial system as one of “double domination: that of the [French] administration over the three Vietnamese regions and that of the Vietnamese cadres over the two small countries of the west [Laos and Cambodia].”²⁰ The French scholar Jean Chesneaux writes:

If the popular movements of Cambodia were repressed by “Annamite riflemen,” it was the “Cambodian riflemen” who were brought in to

²⁰ Lacouture, *op. cit.*

shot.”⁴⁹ As he also notes, they have not even attempted “to prompt uprisings in areas like western Battambang Province, where a local left-wing dissident movement has been implanted for years.” They appear fully confident that, without the commitment of major forces,⁵⁰ they can create a peasant-based guerrilla force loyal to Sihanouk that will restore him to power, this time in a firm alliance with the Cambodian left and a peasant-based popular movement. Reports from the field support this judgment. No doubt the Americans agree as well. This is surely one major reason for the invasion of Cambodia during the last week of April.

There were, no doubt, other supporting reasons. Nixon implied in his April 30 speech announcing the invasion that the alternatives were escalation or defeat. That seems a not unreasonable assessment. The invasion may indicate that “Vietnamization” is so fragile that even reduction of American forces to a quarter of a million men is regarded as unfeasible in Washington—that it is feared that to secure this immense army of occupation much wider areas of Indochina must be turned into free fire zones, empty and desolate.

However, it is hardly clear that there are “reasons,” in any serious sense, for the new escalation, any more than one can hope to construct a sensible and reliable explanation for the thinking, such as it was, that led to the unprovoked bombardment of North Vietnam in 1965. Shortly after the anti-Sihanouk

⁴⁹ *Washington Post*, April 24.

⁵⁰ “According to well-informed sources there are about 24,000 Communist troops in Cambodia or on the border.” (Ian Wright, London *Guardian*, April 27). Other estimates go as high as 50,000. As noted earlier, prior to the coup they remained in uninhabited areas. Wright reports that American military sources give little credence to Cambodian army reports of VC and NVA military action. Actually, official American government statements are almost worthless unless subject to independent check. I shall return to this matter, in connection with Laos, in a later article.

then “distributed arms and ammunition to the villagers in the name of the ‘Sihanouk’ army.” Three Cambodian spies reported that “the Viet Cong were backed by local Khmer and Cham villagers, who had joined the Communist forces.”

More generally, *Le Monde* reports that “the NLF in Cambodia is not trying to capture the capital, but to establish ‘freed zones’ where the ‘Red Khmers can build up their own armies...they would rather arm the peasantry than establish a puppet regime.”⁴⁷ Jean-Claude Pomonti reports, after the American invasion, that the aim of the war

...is no longer to push [the Viet Cong] out of Cambodia but to prevent their gaining enough local support and power to sooner or later threaten General Lon Nol’s government. On one side, an embryonic Khmer Communist Party, backed by active and vital support from the Viet Cong, has temporarily allied with Prince Sihanouk to organize a liberation army. On the other, a large segment of the upper class has called for foreign aid in order to build up its authority throughout the country.⁴⁸

Pomonti’s report has a familiar ring to it.

III

The Viet Cong strategy of establishing freed zones in which the Red Khmers can build up their own armies, based on the peasantry, no doubt explains Stanley Karnow’s observation that “the Communists have carefully refrained from moving against towns they could probably capture without firing a

⁴⁷ *Le Monde Weekly Selection*, April 29.

⁴⁸ *Le Monde Weekly Selection*, May 6.

restore order among the Vietnamese of the lower Mekong.²¹

(The Americans do much the same, relying on Khmer mercenaries in South Vietnam—see note 32—and using the Saigon Army to restore order in Cambodia.)

At the same time, there is a Khmer minority of about 700,000 in the western part of South Vietnam. According to Chesneaux, the Khmer minority, oppressed by Saigon’s policies of racial discrimination, gave “massive support” to the NLF.²² He also reports that the Khmer peasants in Cambodia took no part in the recent pogroms initiated by the Lon Nol government against the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia.

Such observations suggest that there has always been a possibility of peaceful cooperation among the peoples of Indochina—the Viet, the Lao, the Khmer, the Chinese, and the mountain tribesmen—if the Western imperialists, whose presence has exacerbated all potential conflicts, were to depart. It is interesting, in this connection, that the 1962 Congress of the NLF of South Vietnam called for a neutralist bloc including South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The United States, hoping to convert South Vietnam into a permanent base for its colonial operations, showed no interest in this idea (if, indeed, it even took official notice of it).

In 1965 Prince Sihanouk convened a “Conference of the Indochinese People” in Phnom Penh. It brought together representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), the NLF of South Vietnam, the Pathet Lao, the ruling

²¹ *Le Monde diplomatique*, May, 1970.

²² One of the vice-presidents of the NLF is a Buddhist monk of the Cambodian minority, who joined the NLF after a destructive Saigon Army sweep through his province in 1961. See George M. Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, Dial Press, 1967.

Sangkum party of Cambodia, and other South Vietnamese “opposed to American hegemony.”²³ It was able to achieve very little, coming, as it did, immediately after the initiation of the intensive and regular bombardment of South and North Vietnam in early February, 1965.

As the Vietnam war expanded, tensions began to develop between Sihanouk and the Viet Cong. Sihanouk’s press began to speak of Viet Cong support for the small local guerrilla groups, the so-called “Red Khmer” or “Khmer Viet Minh.” T. D. Allman, reviewing these developments just a few months ago,²⁴ described the conflicts as more potential than real, if only because Sihanouk’s “enormous popularity continues undiminished in the countryside.”

Immediately after the March 18 coup, the leadership of the “Red Khmers” approached Sihanouk and offered to join him in opposition to American imperialism.²⁵ Sihanouk accepted this offer and called for guerrilla war. In his speech to the closing session of the April 1970 Summit Conference of Indochinese Peoples in Peking (see note 18), Sihanouk said that US imperialist aggression has created a new unity among the peoples of Indochina:

This process of union and cooperation is in the line of history, in the same way as decolonization and liberation of oppressed peoples in the Third World. Only yesterday the colonial powers divided these peoples in order to “rule” them, and they did not accept decolonization until forced to do so by armed resistance. Today the old colonialists have been replaced by imperialists and neo-colonialists, and there is no hope, through diplomacy, negotiations, conferences or even friendly neutrality,

²³ Lacouture, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Feb. 26.

²⁵ Lacouture, *op. cit.*

The March 18 coup reflects a split within the Cambodian elite, the exact nature of which is not entirely clear. However, two things do seem clear. First, the best known members of the Cambodian left are now aligned with Sihanouk. Second, the Cambodian left is now in a position to mobilize the peasantry, capitalizing on Sihanouk’s personal prestige and with the backing of the Vietnamese resistance forces; while the Lon Nol government, isolated from the peasantry, will increasingly be driven into an alliance with the extreme right-wing forces in Indochina, the Saigon authorities, and the Americans.

The bankruptcy of the elite that managed the coup is reflected clearly by its resort to terror against the Vietnamese minority, reported in ample detail in the press. The reports of Cambodian military operations fortify this impression of weakness and ineptitude. We know what to expect when we read the description of the commanding officer who sent Cambodian peasants, ethnically Vietnamese, who were described as “volunteers,” to be mowed down by a cross-fire, in a well-publicized story:⁴⁴

The Cambodian commandant, an elegant youngish man, shirtless and wearing a heavy gold necklace, lay like a sultan on an army bed in a clearing among the bamboo trees.... [He] lounged on his bed, coolly talking into the field telephone. Then he asked whether there was news in Phnom Penh of help from the Americans.⁴⁵

It is interesting to observe the Viet Cong strategy in the same incident. According to a detailed report by Allman⁴⁶ the Viet Cong captured the village of Saang, killed eight soldiers, and

⁴⁴ See *Le Monde*, April 23.

⁴⁵ Victoria Brittain, “Cambodia’s Grim Lesson,” *New Statesman*, May 1, 1970.

⁴⁶ *Washington Post*, April 22.

The average Cambodian wants most of all to live in peace, but already he is being urged to choose sides. On the government side are the army, most of the business class, the aristocracy, the intellectuals and government functionaries. Ranged against the new government are some 40,000 Vietnamese troops [i.e., NLF and North Vietnamese]—who so far have taken only a small role in the anti-government movement—the tiny Khmer Rouge guerrilla movement, and most importantly, a sizable but unknown proportion of Cambodia's six million peasants who still see Sihanouk as a god-king and the nation's only leader.⁴¹

Speculating a year ago about the prospects of the Cambodian rebels for success, Michael Leifer wrote that these prospects "will depend (discounting external factors) not only on the exploitation of genuine grievances but also on an ability to identify with the nationalist cause for which Prince Sihanouk has been the most ardent and passionate advocate. This would seem unlikely."⁴² Before March 18, this was a reasonable assessment. Now, however, Sihanouk, the "most ardent and passionate advocate" of the national cause, the person whom one American expert described as being "a significant expression of the Cambodian people's will,"⁴³ has identified himself with the rebels. It is doubtful that the right-wing Lon Nol government, with its narrow urban base, can counter this popular force or win it over.

⁴¹ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 9.

⁴² *Current History*, Feb., 1969.

⁴³ Roger Smith, "Prince Norodom Sihanouk," *Asian Survey*, June, 1967.

of avoiding the mortal danger that they represent. Wherever this danger appears, armed struggle alone is the only way to eliminate it.

His closing words were: "Long live the united peoples of Indochina."

Whether real unity among the Indochinese peoples will be achieved remains to be seen. Some of the best-informed observers are optimistic in this regard. Jean Chesneaux writes:

The history of Viet-Lao-Khmer relations has not bequeathed these peoples with a burden of colonial conflicts: the frontiers fixed by colonization have not been placed in question. The moral relations among them are also disentangled from the frictions of the past.... Cambodia today is plunged directly into the war by an external initiative, the promoters of which doubtless did not gauge all of the consequences: in particular, the development of solidarity among the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians.²⁶

In the past, Sihanouk hoped, with much reason, that China would, in the long run, be the guarantor of Cambodian neutrality against possible Vietnamese incursions. China has no reason to want a powerful bloc of unified states to its south controlled either from the outside or by one dominant member, any more than the USSR in the postwar world looked with favor on a Balkan alliance dominated by Tito.²⁷ Hence it is opposed to American domination of Indochina, as it would no

²⁶ Chesneaux, *op. cit.*

²⁷ As has been frequently observed, this was probably one reason why Stalin did not support the Greek Communist guerrillas in the 1940s, contrary to American propaganda claims which continue to this day.

doubt oppose Thai or Vietnamese domination were either to appear likely. American propaganda naturally insists that China hopes to rule the region itself, or to do so through its “puppet” in Hanoi, but these claims are supported by no evidence or serious argument. Sihanouk, though himself strongly anti-Communist in the past, appears to have had faith in China’s intentions, in part for the general reasons just mentioned, but in part also because of China’s attitude since his regime was established. Michael Field comments:

...as he [Sihanouk] frequently remarks, China has behaved in an exemplary fashion towards Cambodia; its independence and territorial integrity have been harassed, not by the Chinese colossus but by South Viet Nam and Thailand, camp-followers of the West.²⁸

Now, of course, Sihanouk has formed a direct alliance with the Cambodian left and with China. It remains to be seen how the situation will develop under these changed circumstances, though it would appear that China’s long-term goals should remain unaltered, even after Cambodia’s most popular political personality, the formerly anti-Communist spokesman for Cambodian nationalism, has been driven into an alliance with the Communists.

The immediate background for the Cambodian coup of March 18 is described as follows by the commentator for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*:

The underlying cause for Sihanouk’s fall probably lay in the fact that although he revolutionised

²⁸ Field, *op. cit.*

naïveté that led the leaders to put real faith in the possibility of help from the International Control Commission or the United Nations to drive out the Vietcong, and impatience with a cacophony of blustering and chauvinistic talk and empty mock-martial gestures such as putting high school girls in khaki shirts to cover an air of feckless irresolution.⁴⁰

He also notes that the US government seems to share this contempt, as one must conclude from the manner in which it has carried out the invasion, hardly bothering even to inform the Cambodians:

Whatever the reason, America seems clearly to have decided to make war in Cambodia without the Cambodians. And it is a measure of the low morale of Cambodia that she accepted this without immediate outcry as though, like the Vietnamese Communist incursion, it is a fact of life beyond her control.

A diplomat in Phnom Penh stated recently that “We probably shall look back on these days as the opening phases of the Cambodian civil war.” Citing this observation, T. D. Allman writes:

...for the first time since independence in 1953, Cambodians were killing Cambodians...the Phnom Penh government’s hold on the rural population was in doubt.

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, May 3. A former American teacher in Cambodia informs me that such “mock-martial gestures” involving students were common practice under Sihanouk.

until his exile, to Paris, in 1967, during the early stages of preparation for the takeover by the right.

On departing from Paris to join Sihanouk, Chau Seng said that the coup has advanced the revolutionary cause by five years. Commenting, Lacouture writes:

Has anyone ever seen such incompetent sorcerer's apprentices as the plotters of Phnom Penh who, in less than a month, have thrown their country into a civil war and brought it to the edge of an international war, and who have made the most important and prestigious personality of their country the unconditional ally of the revolutionary movement?³⁹

Lacouture, who sees the hand of the Americans behind the coup, describes it as “a suicide operation for the American party, who have offered their enemies an opportunity to deploy themselves, with a popular base, over the whole Indochina theatre.”

As already noted, the view that the perpetrators of the coup “may have ensured their own doom” is shared by Allman. Henry Kamm of *The New York Times* notes further that, among foreign observers in Phnom Penh, disenchantment with the new regime “has set in with a vengeance”:

The uncharitable feelings of most observers toward the Lon Nol government are compounded of evidence of their military futility, revulsion over atrocities and callousness toward the large Vietnamese minority, scorn for the political

³⁹ Lacouture, *le Nouvel Observateur*, 20 April, 1970.

Cambodia's foreign policy, and his own relations with the peasants and workers, he left the traditional Khmer elite free to occupy office and eventually use their traditional power against him.²⁹

The report notes that “the common people continued to revere Sihanouk,” but a “tiny minority...brought Sihanouk down.” However,

The new rulers, as they busy themselves taking back in power and financial opportunities what Sihanouk took away from them, doubtlessly will have a much harder time retaining the loyalty of the countryside—where all real Asian revolutions begin and are won. By biting off the hand which fed them, the tiny group of aristocrats, army officers and businessmen which toppled Sihanouk may have insured its own doom.

The coup, Allman writes elsewhere,³⁰ was not only short-sighted, in that it upset the delicate balance that Sihanouk had maintained, but also selfish. The main complaint of the tiny elite that staged the coup is that Sihanouk “had deprived the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the army of their traditional slice of the financial action and of their accustomed place in the sun. It was an upper-class coup, not a revolution.”

This fact must be appreciated. It goes a long way toward explaining the American invasion of Cambodia.

The March 18 coup was the culmination of a carefully prepared series of actions taken over the past several years that

²⁹ T. D. Allman, April 2.

³⁰ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 9.

slowly eroded the position of the Cambodian left—tenuous at best—within the government. In the elections of 1966, Sihanouk departed from his usual practice of endorsing candidates. Under the conditions of Cambodian society, the result was a general victory for the most corrupt and the wealthiest candidates, those who could freely distribute bribes, patronage, and promises. As Jean Lacouture put it: “Khmer society received the kind of representation, manipulated by money and feudal conditions, which was natural to it in this period of its history.”

The only exceptions were three left-wing delegates—Hu Nim, Hu Yuon, and Khieu Samphan—who won easily. At the time, Sihanouk was warned by the leftist minister Chau Seng that a right-wing coup led by Lon Nol might be in preparation, but he apparently felt that he could keep the right under control, relying on the loyalty and support of the people. Step by step, he succumbed to right-wing pressures that were directed as much against his economic reforms as against his personal power, with its extensive and unique popular base among the peasantry and the small urban proletariat. By the end of 1969, much of Sihanouk’s “Khmer socialism” had been dismantled,³¹ and the few left-wing members of the government had been removed. To a large extent, these developments must be seen as an internal struggle for power among the Cambodian elite.

While this shift to the right was taking place within the government, the radical left took on a more activist policy in the cities, with demonstrations and popular agitation, and rebel groups were formed in rural areas. The intensification of the

³¹ On the actual character of “Khmer socialism,” see Field, *op. cit.* Some observers see the conflict between the “socialists” and those in favor of “liberalization of the economy” as essentially a struggle between elements of the Cambodian elite. Others regard “Khmer socialism” as being a step toward an egalitarian and modern society, within the specific context of Cambodian history and culture. I do not have enough information to attempt a judgment.

authorities.” Then they might well announce the return of Prince Sihanouk to one of these zones—armed with a powerful radio transmitter.

Le Monde comments editorially that “the ‘Red Khmer’ movement is led by able men, and now that it has some support in the countryside, it can no longer be dismissed—as Washington tends to do—as a mere appendage of the North Vietnamese Communist Party.” The new government in exile announced by Sihanouk from Peking will probably include the three delegates to the Cambodian parliament mentioned earlier, who were elected with “overwhelming majorities” in the last (1966) elections and “can hardly be considered ‘Vietnamese agents.’”³⁸ They are generally regarded as the only delegates elected who represented something other than the feudal and wealthy elements in Cambodian society (see Roy, *op. cit.*), and they appear to have a reputation for honesty and integrity that is rare among Cambodian politicians.

Among those who have joined Sihanouk in China are Huot Sambath, Cambodian delegate to the United Nations, Penn Nouth, one of his long-term associates and advisers. (Field describes him as “a close collaborator of Sihanouk and with him an architect of Cambodian neutrality”), and Chau Seng, formerly Minister of Education and Minister of National Economy and editor of the leading left-wing journal, one of the outstanding personalities and political figures of Cambodia

³⁸ *Ibid.* Assuming, that is, that they are alive. After their disappearance, during the general purge of the left several years ago, they were rumored to have been assassinated. Recently, the Cambodian and French press have stated that they are alive and with the guerrillas, and I was given the same information in Hanoi a few weeks ago, but I do not know how firm the evidence is. Added in proof: the new government has since been formed and the three are listed with major ministerial posts (national defense, information and propaganda, and interior communal reforms and cooperatives). Tillman Durdin, *New York Times*, May 6.

Repression of pro-Sihanouk demonstrations among the peasants toward the end of March in the wake of the coup could only have served to swell the small bands of insurgents generally referred to, rightly or wrongly, as “Red Khmers.” Many peasants, fearful of arrest after the demonstrations, took to the jungle rather than return to their homes. And today the Red Khmers are in a position to exploit the discontent in the country areas where the army opened fire on the peasants. The conditions for an active rebellion have been fulfilled one by one.³⁷

Pomonti continues:

Information coming in from the provinces early last week seems to confirm that Khmer peasants in Viet Cong areas are now armed and trained. The nucleus of a “liberation army” is very probably being constituted, and the Phnom Penh government could find itself in a more precarious position before long, particularly if it fails to reassert its authority in the areas abandoned for more than two weeks by the central government.

He quotes a diplomat who says:

It did not surprise me in the least to hear announcements of liberated zones being established...or of a “liberation army” being formed. It would not surprise me either if the Viet Cong say they are pulling out of certain zones and that from now on dealings should be with the “new Khmer

³⁷ *Le Monde Weekly Selection*, April 22, 1970. Pomonti is one of the very few correspondents to have reported in depth from Cambodia.

Vietnam war, with the spill-over into Cambodia, also served to increase the polarization within Cambodia that was held in check by Sihanouk’s personal popular strength.

Several months before the coup, members of the Khmer Serei began crossing into Cambodia and “rallying” to the Cambodian army with their arms and equipment. In retrospect, it appears that the Khmer Serei may have been a “trojan horse” infiltrated into the Cambodian forces, perhaps by the CIA, to stiffen the right-wing elements that were readying the anti-Sihanouk coup.³²

On March 4, General Lon Nol, then President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Defense, took on in addition the post of Minister of Information, thereby gaining control of the press, radio, and television. A few days later the army organized anti-Vietnamese demonstrations in Svay Rieng province, and staged a demonstration in Phnom Penh, where soldiers in civilian dress sacked the PRG and DRV embassies. Sihanouk, who was then visiting Paris, noted the rising threat to his rule, and commented:

If I do not obtain satisfaction that the Communists will respect Cambodia’s neutrality, then I will resign. A showdown between the extreme right wing and myself is most probable.

³² Cf. Roy, *op. cit.*, for this and other details. Among the current American allies in Cambodia are also several thousand “semi-pirates, semi-mercenaries” of the Khmer minority in South Vietnam, organized in the “National Liberation Front of the Khmers of Kampuchea Khrom” (K.K.K.). Their history is interesting. They were “formed under the Japanese occupation, then mercenaries for the French during the first Indochina war, and of the Americans during the second...” The leader, Kim Keth, formerly a French parachutist, explained that they “like to eat the flesh of Vietnamese, particularly the liver, which is the best.” See Pomonti, *Le Monde*, April 25, 1970.

He went on to speak of the possibility of a *coup d'état*, led perhaps by General Lon Nol. He observed that many army officers are naturally right wing and “are nostalgic about American aid, which would enable them to lead an easy life.” “The Americans are inside the castle walls—that is, inside our homes.” He expressed certainty that right-wing leaders in the government were in contact with the United States, “whether through the embassy, the CIA or any such like organization, I do not know.”³³

On March 18, the coup took place, led by General Lon Nol and Sirik Matak. A tiny Cambodian elite, hoping to win for itself a larger share of control in the economy and political life and resentful of Sihanouk’s personal authority and prestige, plunged the country into civil war and set the stage for the American invasion that now threatens to turn Cambodia into another Laos or Vietnam.

The role of outside governments in the March 18 coup can only be guessed, and will probably never be known in any detail. Most observers take for granted that the Americans played a role. Chesneaux, for example, states that “the taking of power by the Lon Nol group is the result of a long series of attempts by the Cambodian right, supported by the United States.”³⁴ As already noted, the actions of the Khmer Serei provide evidence for this view. The role of the French government is also open to some speculation. There are those who feel that the French gov-

³³ John L. Hess, *New York Times*, March 13.

³⁴ Chesneaux, *op. cit.* In the same issue of *Le Monde diplomatique* François Honti comments that “It is now certain that those who took it upon themselves to abandon [Sihanouk’s policy of neutralism] received serious encouragement from American military circles hopeful of being able to count on Phnom Penh for a friendly government and to cut off the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops from their ‘Cambodian sanctuary.’... One might ask whether the United States, unable to win the war in Vietnam, is making a wise calculation in enlarging the field of battle...”

ernment may have been directly implicated in the coup. Certainly, it gave little support to Sihanouk when the coup took place. Jean Lacouture describes the behavior of the French government as follows:

It now seems established that Prince Sihanouk, upon learning of the Lon Nol coup, telephoned directly to the Elysée—where, six days earlier, he had been the guest of M. Pompidou—to determine whether Paris would support him: if assurance would have been given him, he would have attempted, come what may, to land the next day in Phnom Penh. The response was so evasive, we have been told, that the prince set off for Moscow and Peking. One might judge that this was one of the moments when the elimination of General de Gaulle has played a role in international politics.³⁵

Elsewhere, Lacouture notes that “in private circles, many Vietnamese and Khmers who support Prince Sihanouk are asking if one must not see, in this ‘neutrality’ of France face to face with the destruction of the policy of neutrality, one of the results of M. Pompidou’s trip to the United States.”³⁶ An interesting speculation indeed.

Immediately after the coup pro-Sihanouk demonstrations broke out in many places. About eighty to one hundred Cambodians, all unarmed, were killed in the repression of these demonstrations. (“Significantly,” notes Allman, “no Vietnamese was killed”). Jean-Claude Pomonti of *Le Monde* reports:

³⁵ Lacouture, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Lacouture, *Le Monde diplomatique*, May, 1970.