

Royce Brier Belgium, 1914, Cambodia 1970

NINETEEN-FOURTEEN, the Berlin chancellor, and German soldiers have just invaded Belgium. The British Ambassador, Sir Edward Goschen, visited Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, August 8, and found him storming about his office. Sir Edward quotes him: "He said just for a word—'neutrality', just for a scrap of paper, Great Britain is going to make war on a kindred nation."

You remember that famous, or infamous, phrase, so one wonders if Cambodian neutrality for 16 years has rested on a scrap of paper.

It was 1954 when the United States signed the SEATO treaty (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). There are seven other nations: Britain, France, Pakistan, Thailand, Philippines, Australia, New Zealand.

Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam are not signatories, but the treaty itself declares a sort of protectorate over the three, to fend off Communist aggression.

Over nine years ago there was a Communist crisis in Laos—it reads like last week, and it convened SEATO. Secretary Rusk for both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, legally rested American intervention in South Vietnam on SEATO.

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UNDER IT, Americans have stationed thousands of reserve troops in Thailand. Under it, Washington officials have repeatedly celebrated Laotian and Cambodian neutrality, but this did not avert bombing in Laos, or now, American ground troops in Cambodia.

This was violative of Cambodian neutrality, because even if the Cambodian government asked for help, it was not informed when President Nixon last Thursday ordered American troops on Cambodian soil. Just so, the Germans in 1914 and 1940 did not inform the Belgians they were invading Belgian soil. They just lunged, as did Mr. Nixon's soldiers while he was addressing the nation. Phnom Penh had the advantage over Brussels, 1914—it got the news by radio.

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THE CAMBODIAN chief of state who supplanted Prince Sihanouk in a coup last month was plaintive about the invasion. We need not pity him too much, as he is only a junta dictator. In fact, he will understand the kind of strike Mr. Nixon initiated. His capital is in danger from Communist troops, and the Americans may save him, to become one more of the military oligarchs Washington loves to collect and nurse.

But if they understand in Asia, it may be a little harder for the American people to understand.

Our tradition is to deal honestly, rather than cunningly, with small peoples who can't in truth injure so colossal a world power. Democracies deal forthrightly even with big powers with whom they are not at war. We leave it to the Russians to barge into Budapest and Prague, and we are indignant when they do.

Sure, they piously say in Washington we had to move secretly, not to alert the enemy. But the North Vietnamese seem to have got wind of it anyway. This obsessive secrecy for secrecy's sake — which usually unravels — is not becoming in a great Nation. And the "scrap of paper" way of international living has been considered universally unbecoming in the 56 years since Bethmann-Hollweg contemptuously enunciated it.

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