


Saturday Review



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Cambodia

Three statements offered by President Nixon to justify the decision to send American fighting forces to Cambodia call for close examination:

Statement No. 1: American policy since the Geneva Agreements of 1954 has been to respect scrupulously the neutrality of the Cambodian people. From 1965 to 1969 we did not have any diplomatic mission whatsoever in Cambodia, and for the past five years we have provided no military and no economic assistance to Cambodia.

The statement is misleading. The reason the United States did not have a diplomatic mission in Cambodia for four years was that the government of Cambodia in 1965 requested the United States to leave after uncovering evidence that the U.S. had been involved in the 1965 effort to subvert and overthrow the legitimate government of Cambodia. Similarly, the reason no military or economic assistance was given was that none had been requested or would have been welcome if offered.

The United States was permitted to re-establish its diplomatic station in August 1969. The Cambodian government under Prince Sihanouk reaffirmed its position of neutrality. Increasingly, however, the surrounding war pressed in on Cambodia. North Vietnam invaded Cambodian territory. South Vietnamese and U.S. forces conducted military operations inside Cambodia. Cambodian villages were shelled by the U.S. Prince Sihanouk ap-

pealed to all belligerents to respect Cambodian neutrality, then embarked on a trip to various capitals, including Moscow and Hanoi, to seek support for his neutralist position. While he was gone, the government of Cambodia was overthrown on March 18, 1970. Within twenty-four hours the new military government was recognized by the United States.

The government of Prince Sihanouk, elected in 1955, was the established constitutional government of Cambodia. The United States not only did nothing to help protect it or to restore it, but immediately recognized the military group that overthrew it. Nothing was said about the right of self-determination of the people of Cambodia.

Statement No. 2: Beginning in mid-April 1970, North Vietnam intensified and enlarged its military operations in Cambodia.

Correct but incomplete. After the military overthrow of his government, Prime Minister Sihanouk called upon Hanoi for help in restoring his government. The major North Vietnamese presence and a great deal of the current upheaval in Cambodia date, therefore, from the time of the military



coup. The slaughter of Vietnamese civilians inside Cambodia and the sporadic unorganized fighting within that country are manifestations of fast-mounting unrest and possibly oncoming civil war.

Statement No. 3: United States policy in Vietnam in particular and Indochina in general has been to uphold the right of self-determination of the people and to protect them against outside interference.

Historically inaccurate. The 1954 Geneva Agreements, cited by President Nixon, provided for free elections to ensure the right of self-determination. The United States supported the decision of the South Vietnam government to cancel the elections scheduled for August 1962, because, as President Eisenhower later said, the evidence was clear that the people would have voted against the existing government in South Vietnam. In 1963, the United States was an acquiescent partner in the overthrow and murder of President Diem of South Vietnam.

Earlier, in 1960, the United States had been involved in the attempted overthrow of the constitutional and neutral government of Prince Souvanna Phouma of Laos. Against the advice of Great Britain and France, which argued that a neutralist government was the best one possible under the circumstances, the United States underwrote a military coup led by General Phoumi Nosavan, son-in-law of the Prime Minister of Thailand. The coup touched off a civil war. The United States, officially and diplomatically, had pledged itself to support the legitimate Souvanna government; actually, it was financing and supplying Nosavan. Both sides wore American-made uniforms. Both sides fought with American guns and bullets. For a month or two, both armies received their pay from U.S. paymasters. Then the United States withdrew all support from Souvanna, who appealed to the Soviet Union for help. Moscow was glad to oblige.

More than 30,000 citizens of Laos were killed in the civil war. A specific result of the war was the strengthening of the Communist Pathet Lao, which then came before the people as the party of national independence.

President John F. Kennedy recognized the need to stop the bloodletting in Laos and to keep the fighting from spreading. He initiated steps to restore the government of Souvanna Phouma. In direct talks with Premier Nikita Khrushchev, he was able to obtain agreement on military withdrawal of both the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and

(Continued on page 91)

Cambodia

Continued from page 24

to have both nations respect the neutrality of Laos.

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The right to know is as basic to the protection of a free society as the maintenance of a defense establishment. Yet the evidence mounts that the United States government is more concerned with manipulating public opinion than informing it. The problem is not that the government does not attach sufficient importance to public opinion. The problem is that the government has insufficient respect for its obligation to make the facts known as they develop. It has freely used security cover in cases where the security of error-prone officials rather than the security of the nation is the prime consideration. Why is the government not providing a full and accurate account of its policies? Is it because the policies are inexplicable or because they are indefensible?

A great deal is said about the need to uphold the right to self-determination of the people of Vietnam and Cambodia. There is at least an equal need to protect the right of self-determination of the American people. Self-determination is not just a matter of going to the polls once a year. The act of voting should be the culmination of a long process of which access to adequate information is a major part.

Nothing is more ominous today than the increasing shift of the ultimate power in this society from the American people to political and military policy-makers in government. The best way to begin to stop the drift is to identify it for what it is.

—N.C.
