

The Least Guilty

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By Anthony Lewis

LONDON—Cambodia was always regarded by well-traveled Westerners as the loveliest of countries, her people gentle and beautiful, her art remarkable, her countryside untouched by war. That was three years ago.

Today Cambodia is a smoldering wreck of that vision. American bombs are falling on the country in nearly the volume that once fell on all of Indochina. In desperate efforts to escape the bombs, nearly half of the population of 7 million have become refugees.

What was Cambodia's sin? How did she earn this fate? The answer is that she got in the way of a juggernaut, the United States. If Americans make an effort to see what happened, we may better understand the difference between the pretensions of our Government's foreign policy and the less lofty reality.

Before 1970 Norodom Sihanouk kept Cambodia afloat among the antagonisms on her borders. He moved toward the West, then away; he tacitly allowed the North Vietnamese to use Cambodian territory, then said no to them. It was all very untidy and irritating, but it happened to spare the Cambodian people their neighbors' horror.

Just what role the United States played in the coup that overthrew Sihanouk is not yet known, but at the least it welcomed the outcome: Cambodia was now on the anti-Communist team. Soon afterward, on April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced that he was sending American forces into Cambodia to sweep out the Communists. It was a limited and necessary extension of the Vietnam war, he said, adding:

"I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and to see this na-

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tion accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history."

The result of the coup and the invasion was to turn Cambodia into a continuing battleground. What had been a minor rebellion turned into a full-scale civil war. Since 1970 the Cambodian rebel forces have grown from 3,000 to between 35,000 and 45,000. How many North Vietnamese remain is uncertain, but official American sources in Phnom Penh say that there has been no documented evidence of any serving in a combatant role in the last three months.

The rebels now control three-quarters of the country. The inept and isolated Government of Lon Nol is preserved in Phnom Penh entirely by American aid, which is running to nearly \$one million a day—and by the bombing, which is described by those on the scene as indiscriminate and exceptionally savage even by recent standards.

It is all as if we had learned nothing from Vietnam. Once again the United States has committed its power and prestige to a country of the most marginal strategic interest to us, and one with a weak and unpopular Government. Once again an American President is leading his people down that road without deigning to tell them why.

Why is it all happening? There are evidently two basic reasons. The first is that Nixon and his advisers are concerned about the impact on Saigon if Cambodia falls entirely to Communist or Communist-leaning forces. And so, to save our surrogates in a contest from which we supposedly have withdrawn, we must make war in another country.

The second reason may be more important: the face of Richard Nixon. When we invaded Cambodia in 1970, he insisted that the American involve-

ment would be strictly limited. But the highly personalized language he used made clear how much he felt his own reputation at stake. How would it look if the Communist Kamers Rouges won now?

We cannot even say, as the American major said of a Vietnamese village in the 1968 Tet offensive, that we are destroying Cambodia in order to save it. Cambodia hardly comes into the reckoning. When was the last time American policy-makers actually thought about what the people of Cambodia might like?

The new American foreign policy is often described as realistic, not dogmatically anti-Communist, restrained in its use of power. Henry Kissinger is very persuasive when he builds those verbal structures. And there obviously has been a change in this direction in terms of relationships with the great powers, the Soviet Union and China.

But these American professions mean rather less in relation to the not-so-great. If they get in the way, they just may find themselves ground up by the most destructive power on earth. It is not the Soviet Union that is savaging Cambodia today, or China or North Vietnam; it is the United States.

The peace with honor that Nixon claimed in Indochina promised at least one thing to most Americans: an end to their destructive role. It is becoming clearer every day that Nixon and Kissinger had no real intention of getting out. They merely intend to enforce the *Pax Americana* by other means. That is, they hope to arrange it this time so that no Americans are killed, only Indochinese.

The Cambodians are the poignant example for a reason well expressed by a British correspondent, Gavin Young of *The Observer*. They are, he said, "the least guilty of all parties in Indochina. They are guilty only of a fatal innocence."