

# NYTimes Cambodian Disaster

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By Tom Wicker

Why doesn't Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger go on television and try to sell the Brooklyn Bridge? That would be easier and far more honest than trying to sell the shabby proposition that if Cambodia goes Communist, it will be both a disaster for the United States and the fault of the Democratic Congress.

Mr. Schlesinger said on ABC's "Issues and Answers" that if Congress did not provide \$222 million requested by the Ford Administration for military aid to the Lon Nol Government, Cambodia would "absolutely" fall to the Communists.

Maybe so, although scaretalk out of the Pentagon is cheaper than the dollar. What Mr. Schlesinger did not say, although he knows it perfectly well, is that if Congress does put up the \$222-million, Mr. Schlesinger and the Administration will be back next year for more, probably much more, since a hundred times \$222 million will not bring an anti-Communist victory in Cambodia, anymore than such sums brought an anti-Communist victory in South Vietnam.

There is a great deal more that Mr. Schlesinger did not say, although he probably knows most of that, too. He did not say, for the most egregious example, that the real disaster is that of the gentle and unwarlike Cambodian people, whose country and civilization are being savagely blown apart by a war that the Ford Administration, like the Nixon Administration before it, seems to see only as an instrument of policy. But those are—or were—real Cambodians bleeding and dying and watching their homes and children destroyed.

Mr. Schlesinger did not say that if Cambodia is really about to fall to the Communists, two successive Administrations—which in foreign policy and national security affairs are really the same—have no one to blame but themselves. While it is not as yet clear to what extent the Nixon Administration participated in the overthrow of the Sihanouk Government, there is no doubt that the Lon Nol coup was at least encouraged from Washington. And it was the American invasion of Cambodia from South Vietnam in May, 1970, that brought full-scale war to a country that had been at peace, however uneasy.

That war, and the continuing American backing for Lon Nol, has not rescued Cambodia from the Communists but made it far more likely—if Mr. Schlesinger's warnings have any validity—that Cambodia will be taken over by the Communists. Nor did the Cambodian war have any useful effect

on the war in Vietnam, despite the inflated claims made for it by Richard Nixon and other such statesmen. That war has done little but ruin Cambodia, slaughter Cambodians, absorb American resources, and blacken this country's once-good name in a way not even South Vietnam could quite accomplish.

Fortunately, there are numerous members of Congress who know all this and more and who are not likely to be frightened off by the implication that they will be held responsible by an outraged America if Cambodia goes Communist—for example, Vice President Rockefeller's recent warning that "we know where the responsibility will lie" if Congress does not honor what he called a "moral commitment" to further military aid for South Vietnam. (In fact, no one should be surprised, if Congress refuses the aid request, to find that the Pentagon has enough money and material in its pipelines

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and hiding places and gobbledegook accounts to keep the war going right along in both Cambodia and South Vietnam.)

But even if the Schlesinger-Rockefeller scare tactics don't work, the military-aid struggle discloses a sad and rather ominous state of mind at the top of the Ford Administration—an unwillingness to admit error, a dogmatic anti-Communism, an affinity for military force, a mindless persistence in outmoded or discredited slogans, an inverted sense of priority, a myopic perception of domestic political reality, and an utter callousness to the human consequences of lofty policy decisions.

Thus, Indochina policy still seems to be controlled by the single, overriding policy concern that has controlled it at least since the Kennedy Administration—the high-level belief that no American Government can afford to let a country it has undertaken to assist go Communist, for fear of the political reaction of the American people. To prevent that dread reaction, billions of dollars, 50,000 American lives, and untold numbers of Vietnamese and Cambodians have been sacrificed. To stave off that feared accounting, the credibility of the Presidency and the integrity of the Government have been repeatedly breached.

If there ever was any validity to that fear of an outraged and vengeful public, it was when a huge American army was committed to battle and the national honor was loudly proclaimed at stake. No such army is now engaged, and so little American honor can be found amid the wreckage and corpses of Indochina that to invoke it now mocks history and the dead.