

Cambodia: Watergate East

COMMENT

By T. D. Allman

OXFORD, England—Nearly five disastrous years ago, as he invaded Cambodia, Richard M. Nixon exulted that "time is no longer on the side of the Communists."

As Cambodian events continue to demonstrate, Mr. Nixon's Cambodia "incursion" in fact was a strategic Watergate. His secret bombings, support for the Lon Nol coup, and subsequent invasion were not merely based on deceit, violations of the law, and abuse of executive powers.

Like the Watergate break-in itself, they were also pointless and inept: The sanctuaries were not destroyed, but expanded; the Communists' Central Office of South Vietnam was never found. Saddled with a corrupt, unpopular client state, the United States has been pumping military hush money into Cambodia ever since, hoping one of America's greatest foreign policy scandals would go away.

It has not. And even though the Administration continues to react to each new Cambodia failure the way the former President reacted to each new Watergate revelation, the effort to brazen it out militarily in Cambodia has failed.

Blaming Congress for not voting new funds every time Lon Nol runs through an entire year's appropriation in a few months may successfully diffuse political responsibility for the failure. But it only obscures the real problem: While the United States may be able to perpetuate the Cambodian war a few more months or dry seasons, American policy has no long-term possibility of success. If the United States-run administration in Phnom Penh does not fall this year, it is likely to collapse in 1976.

President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger keep calling for more aid for Cambodia. Congress is increasingly tempted to abandon Cambodia altogether.

Fortunately, another possible course exists. By following it, the United States could not merely achieve peace in Cambodia, it could also erase one of the darkest stains of the Watergate era. It consists of negotiating an honorable settlement with Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Prince Sihanouk was not in his Cambodian capital when the coup, backed by the Central Intelligence Agency, occurred. Since then, with difficulty and compromise, he has kept alive the possibility of re-establishing in Cambodia a popular government, open to wide political participation, and committed to a peace of reconciliation with the objective of restoring Cambodia's neutrality.

Whatever its divisions and deficiencies, Prince Sihanouk's Royal Government of National Union, after five years of war, is far more competent to govern Cambodia and has a far better chance of restoring her independence than Lon Nol's discredited regime. It governs 85 per cent of Cambodia's territory and three-quarters of its population; it knows how to fight for what it wants; it enjoys wide international support.

Whatever the United States does or wants, Lon Nol eventually will lose not just most of Cambodia, but all of it. America no longer faces an either-or choice, but the option of either continuing to plunge toward final humiliation in Cambodia or trying to find some way around it.

The State Department has consistently disguised the fact that Prince Sihanouk has repeatedly offered the United States a way around that humiliation—through a settlement negotiated between his government and Washington.

Only one obstacle impedes the speedy negotiation of peace. The United States continues to insist that Prince Sihanouk and his allies negotiate not with Washington but with Lon Nol—that is, that they accept

President Lon Nol as the legitimate leader of a legitimate government.

Such pretensions are mocked not merely by the C.I.A.'s initial encouragement of Lon Nol's coup and by his subsequent, manifest failures as a national leader, but by the Ford Administration's own admission that without large-scale, open-ended United States aid his regime is sure to collapse.

In contrast, Prince Sihanouk's forces have lacked direct Communist aid since 1972. The Khmer Rouge—the Communist-led insurgents—shell Phnom Penh with captured United States artillery. Not even the United States Embassy in Phnom Penh any more pretends that it is the North Vietnamese, not the Cambodians, who are driving back Lon Nol's forces.

Under the circumstances, the United States should recognize Prince Sihanouk's Royal Government of National Union, and immediately begin bilateral negotiations leading to a Cambodia settlement like the one that already has given Laos two years of peace.

Such a settlement should include mutual agreements on no reprisals, continued United States-Cambodian relations at the ambassadorial level, and free elections under international supervision. The settlement should be followed by an international conference, in which the United States would join other nations in pledging recognition of Cambodia's present frontiers and respect for her neutrality.

Proponents of the present, failed policy no doubt would point out that such a settlement would not merely mean relinquishing a client, but leaving North Vietnam in control of the sanctuaries. They would also argue that Prince Sihanouk's ability to moderate events inside Cambodia has been greatly eroded by his long absence in Peking.

Both criticisms would be completely valid. But those so concerned now about both Khmer Rouge influence and North Vietnamese involvement in Cambodia should have considered their

actions more carefully in 1970. Perpetuating United States intervention in Cambodia will only further diminish what chances still exist for Cambodia's nationalists to reassert their nation's independence and begin reconstructing her neutrality.

The Administration should recognize not just Prince Sihanouk, but the inevitable, without further delay—and begin negotiating while it still has something left in Cambodia to negotiate. Meanwhile, Congress should appropriate the funds the Administration has requested, on condition they be used only after a settlement is reached, and only for peaceful reconstruction.

As with Watergate, what really keeps the Cambodia crisis going is not a threat to national security, but only the refusal to admit a mistake.

T. D. Allman, an American journalist based in England, reports international news for The Guardian and other newspapers. He has written a history of Cambodia.