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An Offering Of Bullets

By Russell Baker

While President Ford and Professor Kissinger were whooping it up for more war in Cambodia the other day, Sydney Schanberg was writing for The New York Times from Phnom Penh. If we juxtapose excerpts from Schanberg, Ford and Kissinger, we begin to understand how American policy relates to Cambodian reality.

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Thus, Schanberg: Cambodia before the war was a country so rich in her food produce that even the very poor were never hungry. Everyone had a piece of land and there were always bananas and other fruit growing wild and a river or stream nearby where fish could be easily caught.

"I wish to convey to the House of Representatives my deep concern over the present critical situation in Cambodia. An independent Cambodia cannot survive unless the Congress acts very soon to provide supplemental military and economic assistance."—President Ford.

Now it is a country of landless

OBSERVER

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nomads with empty stomachs—human flotsam living amid damp and filth in the flimsiest of shanties, thatch shacks and sidewalk lean-to's. The countryside is charred wasteland that either belongs to the Cambodian insurgents or is insecure, so the population huddles in the cities and towns, doing marginal work that never pays enough to feed a family adequately. Growing numbers of children and adults are taking to begging.

"Unless such assistance is provided [by the Congress] the Cambodian Army will run out of ammunition in less than a month."—President Ford.

In a World Vision clinic, Ah Srey, a 2-month-old girl, grossly dehydrated from starvation, has just been brought in by her grandmother. Ten days before, they were caught in the maelstrom of a battle a few miles from Phnom Penh. In the panic, the family became separated and the grandmother found herself alone with the child. For ten days they had been surviving on handouts and scraps of garbage. The child had been malnourished before. Now she is a skeletal horror, little more than bulging eyes and a protruding rib cage. Every few seconds she produces a wail that racks her body. In three hours she is dead.

"If a supplemental is not voted within the next few weeks, it is certain that Cambodia must fall because it will run out of ammunition."—Professor Kissinger.

Waves of mothers carrying gravely ill children — swollen children, children with stick-like concentration-camp bodies, children with parchment skin hanging in flaccid folds, coughing children, weeping children, silent children too weak to respond anymore—press forward every day against the doors of the relief agency clinics, desperate to get in. But there are not enough doctors or nurses or medicine or food for them all, so for every 500 who come, only 200 or so can be treated.

"Therefore, the decision before us is whether the United States will withhold ammunition from a country which has been associated with us and which, clearly, wishes to defend itself."—Professor Kissinger.

On the table next to Ah Srey is an older child—19 months—who is dying right now. His name is Nuth Saroeun. From his mouth comes a steady whimper and rattle. His father was killed by a rocket three months ago. His 25-year-old mother, also suffering from malnutrition (she has beri-beri and her feet are going numb), stands at his side sobbing. A doctor tries to force a tube down the child's throat to get out the mucus that is blocking his breathing. Suddenly the child utters a tiny cry that sounds like "Mak" ("Mother") and then his head slumps and he is gone.

"If the Congress does not provide for continued deliveries of rice and other essential supplies, millions of innocent people will suffer—people who depend on us for their bare survival."—President Ford.

Americans have stepped up an emergency airlift of supplies from Thailand because the insurgents have blockaded Cambodia's main supply line, the Mekong River, but until now the cargo these planes have brought is all military aid, mostly ammunition. There has been no food.

"Our national security and the integrity of our alliances depend upon our reputation as a reliable partner. Countries around the world who depend on us for support—as well as our foes—will judge our performance."—President Ford.

At least every other person in this country of seven million is a refugee from war.