

"I can only tell you my emotional reaction, getting into that country. If I could have found the military or State Department leader who has been the architect of this policy, my instinct would be to string him up. . . . What they have done to the country is greater evil than we have done to any country in the world."

—Representative Paul McCloskey, testifying after his recent visit to Cambodia.

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, April 2—The images from Indochina assail us with their misery and horror. The ones from Phnom Penh are in a way the hardest to bear: Those children are starving because of an American blunder—recent, utterly avoidable and prolonged in the teeth of reason.

The American intervention in Vietnam may be explained in terms of the assumptions of another era. For Cambodia there is no excuse. It was wanton cruelty, reckless and useless.

Unlike Vietnam, it is relatively easy to trace the American involvement in Cambodia. The crucial decisions were made in 1970 by Richard Nixon, with the advice and support of Henry Kissinger. They led inexorably, predictably, to tragedy—death and destruction for Cambodia, moral and political disaster for the United States.

Until 1970 Prince Sihanouk had kept Cambodia relatively peaceful by an intricate neutralist game. He turned a blind eye to Vietnamese Communist use of his eastern provinces, then to American bombing of those areas. His policy was untidy, but it worked.

The idea of invading Cambodia had occasionally come up in the Pentagon, but it was never taken seriously. At one meeting in the 1960's the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Earle Wheeler, said: "Why the hell does Westy [Gen. William Westmoreland, U. S. Commander in Vietnam] need more battlefields to fight on?"

Then, in March 1970, Lon Nol took over in a coup. He abandoned neutralism, announcing that he would attack the Vietnamese Communist forces, and there was a slaughter of Vietnamese civilian residents around Phnom Penh. Not surprisingly, the North Vietnamese began moving on Lon Nol's weak army.

In this situation Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger revived the old idea of an American invasion. They overrode doubts within the Administration, from, among others, Secretary of Defense Laird and Secretary of State Rogers. Mr. Kissinger accused one

doubter of showing "the cowardice of the Eastern Establishment."

Five members of Mr. Kissinger's own staff warned that a Cambodian operation would enlarge the war without benefit to the U.S. Three resigned: Anthony Lake, Roger Morris, William Watts. They went quietly because, as Mr. Lake explained recently, "We were very concerned about damaging Kissinger. Then they put a tap on my telephone, which shows how much they were impressed by our scruples."

Mr. Nixon told the world it would be only a brief and limited "incursion," to clean out the Communist areas. Mr. Kissinger said the same thing to the White House staff. William Safire's book, "Before the Fall," describes a meeting at which the staff was given a National Security Council paper saying, "This is not a long-term 'quicksand' operation that would lead to a new 'Vietnam situation' in Cambodia."

But it did. Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger, having said they would not intervene on Lon Nol's behalf in the Cambodian dispute, soon did just that.

ABROAD AT HOME

Before long B-52's were bombing all of Cambodia. In five years, the United States sent \$2 billion in aid to Lon Nol.

The results were exactly as the dissenters on the Kissinger staff had predicted: a wider war, increasing Cambodian opposition to Lon Nol, destruction of the countryside, finally a Communist instead of a neutralist Cambodia.

The end has been inevitable for a long time, but the Administration preferred to have the Cambodians go on starving and dying rather than admit the bankruptcy of its policy. It kept the war going with the tattered argument, that more military aid would somehow lead to peace.

Now that Lon Nol has left, the United States could still help toward a humane transition. Most important, we should offer to continue our flights of food and medicine whoever rules in Phnom Penh, and ask Sihanouk's cooperation. We should do that for our sake as well as the desperate Cambodians. But there can be no easy expiation for one of the most terrible episodes in the history of American foreign policy.

What Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did cannot be undone or forgotten. All we can do is try to make certain that American leaders are never again able to make such decisions on their own, in secret, against advice—and then persist for years in a futile and destructive policy.