

The Patient Died

"This operation in Cambodia has been a tremendous military success . . . successful far beyond the expectations of any of those who planned it."

—Gerald R. Ford,
House minority leader,
June 22, 1970.

By Anthony Lewis

On April 30, 1970, six years ago tomorrow, President Nixon ordered United States forces into Cambodia. It is a day that will live in the shame of Americans who know the good in their country and suffer when evil is done in its name.

Mr. Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, gave assurance that the Cambodian operation would be limited in purpose and means and time. It was none of those things. It began five years of wanton, cruel, useless destruction: the destruction of a civilization. If there is a reckoning, in this life or another, some Americans will bear a heavy burden for what they did to Cambodia.

This is a time of remembrance generally for the tragedy of American intervention in Indochina. It all came to an end just one year ago: April 30, 1975, when the American-supported Government in Saigon surrendered. How much farther away it seems. How quickly we blot the unpleasant from memory.

A small, moving new book brilliantly evokes the reality of America in Vietnam. It is "The Last Day," a Vintage paperback by John Pilger, who was in Saigon for The London Daily Mirror at the close. He intersperses scenes of the disordered American evacuation, marked by illusions, inhumanities, lies. It is a difficult book to read without tears.

But Cambodia was worse. Very little of what goes wrong in the world de-

serves to be called evil; most is mere mistake. But Congressman Paul McCloskey, Republican of California, was right when he saw Cambodia in early 1975 and said that what American policy-makers had done there was "greater evil than we have done to any country in the world."

In Vietnam, the American intervention could be ascribed to ignorance. And the original mistake was hard to undo. Once in, U.S. officials found it hard to get out while preserving intact the image of strength that they regarded as vital to world order.

But there were no such excuses in Cambodia. In 1970 no rational American official could believe that more would mean less war in Indochina. None could plead ignorance or inadvertence.

Indeed, the very way the invasion was announced suggested that its well-spring was not reason but obsession. "We will not be humiliated," Mr. Nixon said: We would not act like "a pitiful, helpless giant." Mr. Kissinger said his own assistants who opposed the invasion were insufficiently "manly" and showed "the cowardice of the Eastern Establishment."

The President and his men said their aim was only to clean out sanctuaries of the Vietnamese Communists. They promised that the U.S. would not get involved in Cambodia's emerging civil war, would not supply military advisers to the Lon Nol regime just installed in Phnom Penh by a coup, would not fly any air missions in Cambodia except against the Vietnamese. The promises were quickly broken.

In the next three years and three months American planes dropped 400,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia. The U.S. sent \$2 billion in aid to Lon Nol—and kept the civil war going for five terrible years.

A country that had once been a demi-paradise, where the poorest never went hungry, became a charred wasteland of starving refugees. A tenth of Cambodia's population, 600,000 people, were killed. Half the population was made homeless.

The evil of 1970 was mercilessly repeated. When the Vietnam "peace" was signed in 1973, Mr. Nixon shifted the B-52's to Cambodia, using them there without a shred of authority in any law or resolution or treaty—very likely the most flagrant Presidential violation of the Constitution in our history. When the end became inevitable, in 1974, Mr. Kissinger still refused to work for a settlement that would mitigate the damage. His policy was to fight to the last Cambodian.

In 1970 many foresaw that the sending of American forces into Cambodia would enlarge the war, but few could imagine the extent of the human and political disaster. The end result has been not only to decimate Cambodia but to give it one of the most xenophobic governments on earth, hating outsiders and reportedly imposing terrible cruelties on its own people.

One wonders about the American officials responsible. Apart from external accountability, does any one of those men ever think of Cambodia, look into himself and despair?

ABROAD AT HOME

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