Cultural Arrogance

NYTimes MAY 12 1975

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, May 11—Journalism is by nature episodic and ephemeral. Most of what appears in newspapers fades as quickly as the context of events. But there was a piece of work the other day that I think will live, as writing and something more: the set of stories filed by Sydney Schanberg of The New York Times on his emergence from Cambodia.

Just as oldfashioned reporting, the stories were extraordinary. The reader felt the pity and the terror as the Khmer Rouge, within hours of taking Phnom Penh on April 17, suddenly ordered everyone out of the city. Schanberg described the scene without compromise, giving us both dramatic details and a larger view of that harrowing day.

ABROAD AT HOME

"... we think of options only in terms of U.S. interests, not of their effects on the country involved."

But there was another element in the pieces, one not so usual in journalism. Schanberg expressed a sense of his own fallibility, his uncertainty in the face of events so profound.

"Everyone," he wrote, Cambodians and foreigners alike, had "felt that when the Communists came and the war finally ended, at least the suffering would largely be over. All of us were wrong. . . ."

Then he asked questions about the meaning of the forced evacuation: Was it just brutality, the law of the jungle, or did the revolutionaries and their peasant army see a return to the countryside as the only way to start on their vision of a new society?

Schanberg gave no sure answers. What he was trying to do was to see events as other eyes might be seeing them—trying to take himself, and us, out of our Western assumptions for a moment. He even asked himself why the hundreds of Westerners inside the French Embassy compound in Phnom Penh, including Russians, were so acquisitive and selfish, quarreling over cigarettes and food, while the Khmer Rouge outside ignored available houses and slept on the ground.

For years in Cambodia, before the end, Sydney Schanberg worked to throw off the blinders of American ideology and see the reality of war as it affected the lives of Cambodians. His was an example of a wider phenomenon: the ability of correspondents in the Indochina war to perceive, and convey, other people's vision.

The American correspondents went out there with as little knowledge of Indochina as the rest of us, and with the inevitable cultural assumptions. At the beginning they almost all accepted the official American view of the war: that we were winning hearts and minds, building a nation in South Vietnam and so forth.

But the correspondents were able to break through illusion. They learned that the Vietnamese were not American in outlook and never would be. They saw that the Americanisms on the surface of life in Saigon could not abolish Vietnamese attitudes or history or culture.

Of course some U.S. officials on the ground understood that, too. But the top Americans in Saigon and Washington never learned—not from the beginning twenty years ago through April, 1975. There was a cultural arrogance, an imperial assumption that by superiority or sheer power our way of life must prevail. It played a significant part in America's disaster in Indochina.

Alexander Woodside, professor of Sino-Vietnamese history at Harvard, said recently:

"Vietnam is probably one of the contemporary world's purest examples of a history-dependent, history-obsessed society, in which even the most routine day-to-day political decision-making seems practically unimaginable without some reference to history. The United States is probably the contemporary world's purest example of a society which is perpetually trying to abolish history, to avoid thinking in historical terms, to associate dynamism with premedicated amnesia."

Professor Woodside suggested correctly that this tremendous difference in outlook was one reason for American folly in Vietnam. He said the "American pretense that other people's histories don't count is, unfortunately, one of the things which isolates America from the rest of the world." Thinking in more historical terms, he said, "might save lives and avoid foreign policy disasters."

The problem is broader than history. Washington suffers from a self-centered cultural outlook. A thoughtful State Department official remarked to a British correspondent recently that "foreign policy is made here in complete disregard of foreign societies. The State Department has not produced a single paper of merit on Portugal. Even now we think of options only in terms of U.S. interests, not of their effects on the country involved."

There is one more lesson to be learned: to see others as they see themselves. Or at least to struggle for that difficult perception, as Sydney Schanberg and the other correspondents in Indochina have done.