

Get Out of Town

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By William Safire

WASHINGTON—What if every man, woman and child who lived on Manhattan Island were told: "Get out of town. Today, on pain of death. No excuses. Start walking and don't stop until you get to farmland upstate or in Pennsylvania. When you get there, if you do, you're on your own."

Manhattan mothers would give their babies to strangers who had some chance of escape or survival; Manhattan doctors, at gunpoint, would put down scalpels in mid-operation and begin the long march to nowhere; occupants of nursing homes would push wheelchairs in the direction of the Lincoln Tunnel; proud and law-abiding Manhattanites would learn to steal and beg to get the towers of the city far behind them.

That is roughly what is happening to the three million people of Phnom Penh, capital of the newly Communist Cambodia. In all human history nothing has taken place quite like the emptying of Phnom Penh.

Sennacherib destroyed Babylon, the Romans sacked Carthage, and Hitler's bombers leveled Guernica, but in every case the attacker was destroying a particular city, not the idea of a city itself.

The new rulers of Cambodia are doing something original. They have taken the "classless society" of Marx and put it together with the "natural selection" of Darwin. Cities breed civilization, they are saying; civilization differentiates between people, creating classes; therefore, we will drive the populace out of the corrupting cities, back to the purifying land, where only the fittest will survive.

This is social engineering on a scale that would make a Stalin blush: creating a society of equals by making everybody a refugee.

Since you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs, the Cambodian leaders wish to conduct their experiment in private, which is why foreign newsmen have been deported. In the United States, that leaves us to a fruitless debate about how many thousand executions make a bloodbath.

Many commentators have long been saying that the Cambodians are a gentle people who would return to peaceful ways if only we were not there; and they have been deriding predictions of mass executions as merely scare tactics to justify our propping-up of corrupt dictatorships. These voices will now be saying that the reports we hear of killings are probably exaggerated: What kind of bloodbath is it, after all, that goes on unrecorded by videotape?

Contrariwise, a great many other Americans, myself included, will be tempted to ask: What happened to all

that moral outrage about "stopping the killing"? And how come the Jane Fondas and Ramsey Clarks are not focusing our attention on the shortcomings of those who brought this bloody kind of peace to Indochina?

Such justification of past positions may be satisfying—we all like to insist we were right all along—but there is a reality to the emptying of Phnom Penh that should cause us to agree on a fundamental: that the difference between "freedom" and "slavery" is not a relic of cold-war rhetoric. Communists in every region are serious about remaking the world, and we must stop pretending that the death sentence pronounced even temporarily on city life in Cambodia is some form of "agrarian reform."

To the Khmer Rouge, the elimination of classes requires that tens of thousands, perhaps many more, die by the wayside; this is no Cambodian aberration,

ESSAY

tion, but the path always taken by new Communist parties as they take power. As they become sophisticated, later generations act more subtly, in civilized trappings from great cities, but the mental set of the ideology sees the individual soul as a building block and not a citadel.

People try to fight Communism, or to run away from it, because they do not want to be absolutely controlled by the most modern tyrants. They fight or run not because democracy has won their "hearts and minds," but because they sense that only Communism is capable of driving a population of two million out of their homes and into the countryside so as to indoctrinate those hearts and minds.

How do some of use receive the people running from death? A trendy cartoonist here portrayed a shocked statue of liberty looking at a parade of slant-eyed pimps, prostitutes and politicians, which fairly well sums up the view of those—like Senator McGovern—who came to hate our Southeast Asian allies.

Most Americans will recoil from this prairie-populist cruelty, as the decapitation of a capital city sinks in. A city is civilization; civilization is diversity and creativity, which needs personal freedom; Communism is by its nature anti-city, anti-civilization, anti-freedom.

The Khmer Rouge understand this; too many Americans do not. If we are unwilling to help people fight for their freedom, if we pretend that the victories of Communism are local options of little concern to us, then the order to "get out of town" may be repeated. And someday it could cause quite a traffic jam in the Lincoln Tunnel.