

# And There Was Darkness

## ABROAD AT HOME

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, Dec. 26—It is a sea-son to think not only of the troubled in our midst but of the earth's afflicted peoples. Of all those whose unhappi-ness cries out to the conscience of mankind, the most desolate may be the people of Cambodia.

We have no current information on Cambodia from first-hand observation by Western diplomats or journalists; they have been excluded since the Khmer Rouge took control of the coun-try in April 1975. But refugees, ques-tioned by experienced correspondents, repeatedly and convincingly paint the same picture: of a crushed society liv-ing under conditions of terrifying brutality.

The reports tell of whole populations marched great distances, forced to work endless hours in the field, cruelly punished, some clubbed to death. And all of this happens at the orders of an unseen, unknown, Kafkaesque leader-ship.

Americans have particular reason to look on Cambodia and despair. For American policy and American bombs played a large part in bringing Cam-bodia to its present pathetic state. To say that is not to excuse the cruelties of the Khmer Rouge; nothing can do that. It is only to recognize the heavy United States responsibility in the

events that led to control of Cambodia by the faceless men of terror.

The American role in Cambodia has mostly faded from our memory, if in-deed it was ever understood. But it has just been re-investigated and de-scribed in a way that compels under-standing. Two weeks ago the Sunday Times of London published a detailed account of United States policy in Cambodia, 1969-75, by William Shaw-cross. It is a remarkable piece of contemporary history — and painful reading for Americans who believe in their country's ideals.

Cambodia lived in a state of inglori-ous but relatively peaceful political compromise under Sihanouk until 1969. Only a few thousand Com-munist insurgents fought, ineffectually against the Government. Then Richard Nixon began secretly bombing the eastern border areas used by the North Vietnamese. The Vietnamese forces responded by moving deeper into Cambodia. The country's deli-cate internal political balance was up-set.

In March 1970, Sihanouk left for Moscow and Peking, to see if they would hold the Vietnamese back. While away, he was overthrown by Lon Nol. (Mr. Shawcross does not sug-gest any United States part in the coup.) Opposition to the Lon Nol regime moved the country quickly toward full-scale civil war.

The crucial question was whether the polarization could be stopped then — and Cambodia saved from the

suffering of Vietnam and Laos. The Chinese Prime Minister, Chou En-lai, believed a settlement was possible, bringing Sihanouk back. According to Mr. Shawcross, Chou warned that the longer a civil war went on, the harsher would be the policy of the Khmer Rouge. China even delayed breaking relations with Phnom Penh after the Lon Nol coup—until May 6, a week after the United States had effectively ended the chance of political settle-ment then by invading Cambodia.

The United States invasion was planned by Mr. Nixon and his assistant for national security, Henry Kissinger, against the overwhelming judgment of their own experts. Mr. Kissinger told one member of his staff who objected, William Watts: "Your views represent the cowardice of the Eastern establish-ment."

At that stage there was still a ques-tion whether the United States would become involved in Cambodian civil war. Mr. Nixon and his aides promised that it would not—that the American role would end after the North Viet-namese "sanctuaries" were cleaned out. The promises were immediately broken. Within a week, Mr. Kissinger's deputy, Alexander Haig, was in Phnom Penh to plan military liaison.

Over the next three years the United States virtually took over the war against the Khmer Rouge. A United States diplomat in Phnom Penh, Thomas Enders, in knowing violation of law, secretly targeted American bombers. The heaviest bombing came in 1973, after the truce in Vietnam had ended

any legal authority for it. A State De-partment official, William Sullivan, testified that "the justification is the re-election of the President."

All together, in the Nixon-Kissinger years, American planes dropped 500,000 tons of bombs on a peasant country without a single anti-aircraft weapon. The country was decimated. A Senate committee estimated that 500,000 Cambodians died in the war—the equivalent, in proportion to population, of 15 million American deaths.

Through those years Mr. Kissinger rejected one proposal after another for negotiation. The Khmer Rouge grew in numbers and ferocity. But then United States policy was essen-tially uninterested in the fate of the Cambodians. Its purpose was to pre-serve American "credibility" by not being seen to "lose."

Our culture, unlike some others, be-lieves in individual moral responsi-bility. And so one wonders what has happened to Americans responsible for an interventionist Cambodia policy so indifferent to Cambodian suffering.

Thomas Enders, who guided the bombers in, is now the United States Ambassador to Canada. William Sulli-van, who cited politics as legal au-thority for the bombing, is Ambassa-dor to the Philippines. Gen. Alexander Haig is NATO commander. And Henry Kissinger is about to retire as a cele-brated Secretary of State. Asked re-cently about his role in the Cambodian tragedy, he said: "I may have a lack of imagination, but I fail to see the moral issue involved."