The CIA Role in Cambodia

By Richard A. Fineberg
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The CIA played a crucial role in encouraging the coup that toppled Prince Norodom Sihanouk and plunged Cambodia into the Indochina war, according to Cambodia's recently named prime minister, Sen. Nguyen Thanh. Describing Sihanouk's overthrow in a series of interviews last year with Oxford University scholar T.D. Allman, Thanh said that CIA did "everything possible" to help if the Cambodian plotters successfully mounted a coup and then found themselves under attack by pro-Sihanouk and antigovernment forces.

Shortly after the March 1970 coup, Thanh's own forces trained by U.S. special forces in Vietnam were dispatched by plane to Phnom Penh where they played a vital role in defending the Cambodian capital for General Lon Nol, who emerged from the coup as Cambodia's strong-man.

KNOWLEDGE

The White House maintained that the U.S. had no prior knowledge of the coup and that "no American military or civilian officers were ever involved officially or unofficially with the plotters. Sihanouk's ouster surprised us nation more than the United States," Mr. Nixon said after the coup.

Senator Mike Gravel (Alaska) said this week that White House denials of U.S. involvement in the 1970 coup are "incredible" and called for full disclosure of the U.S. role in Cambodia prior to the coup.

According to Thanh, CIA agents assigned to Thanh's staff were kept informed of developments concerning the coup including secret meetings between Thanh and aides of General Lon Nol. At that time, Lon Nol was Sihanouk's prime minister, while Thanh, who had been sentenced to death by Sihanouk, avoided jail by establishing a rebel sect known as the Khmer Seret ("Free Cambodia") from a jungle post near the Vietnam-Cambodia border.

Thanh also told Allman, who was in southeast Asia on assignment for the Manchester Guardian, that in 1969 a U.S. agent assigned to Thanh's staff gave assurances that the U.S. would support a two-pronged invasion of Cambodia by Thanh's partisans. The pledge, Thanh said, came from a CIA operative identified only as Fred. "They have three names a month," Thanh told Allman, the U.S. paid "millions of dollars" to train, arm and support his forces, most of whom were recruited from the Cambodian minority living in South Vietnam's delta region.

The 63-year-old Thanh was named prime minister by the ruling Lon Nol on March 21. A devout Buddhist and an early Cambodian nationalist leader, Thanh was prime minister for a brief period in 1945 when he staged a coup prior to the Japanese surrender. He was quickly arrested by British occupying forces, however, and exiled to France.

Thanh returned to Cambodia in 1951 and joined the leftist Khmer Serei (Independence) movement. At that time he allied with the Communist Vietnamese to oppose Sihanouk, whose strategy of cooperation with the French to achieve independence was too moderate for the militant nationalists.

In July 1970, Thanh returned to Phnom Penh to become an advisor to Lon Nol. By that time, Cambodian leftist allies had allied with Sithanouk and Vietnamese Communist forces to fight Lon Nol. The combined U.S.-Saigon forces had swept into Cambodia, and the war that had raged on its borders for two decades finally engulfed Cambodia.

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