

# CAMBODIA

## The War at the End of the Tunnel

**N**o one really cares about Cambodia," a Cabinet Member in the Lon Nol government told me bitterly in 1970. "The Americans, Thieu, the communists—all they care about is Vietnam." This remains true in 1973; to the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, and the Thais, Cambodia is just a domino not important for itself but for the influence it has on Asian power politics. And it is one of those ironies of history that Cambodia, which bloodlessly negotiated its independence from France and managed to escape much of the Vietnam War, now finds itself at the center of the next war in Indochina. Today the urgent questions about Southeast Asia do not involve the future of citadels like Saigon or Hue, but of Phnom Penh. Will the capital city fall? Will the Thais and the South Vietnamese be called upon to invade Cambodia? How will events there affect the rest of Indochina?

To anyone who has spent much time in Phnom Penh, it seems almost miraculous that the city has not already fallen. At different times over the last three years, guerrillas

have been only a few miles outside the town and have frequently managed to cut off highways connecting the city with the provincial capitals. Ships bringing supplies up the Mekong River from Saigon have been sunk; rice and gasoline are regularly rationed; rockets occasionally slam into the downtown areas; and the only airfield has been hit several times. In recent months air strikes have moved close enough to the city that people routinely spend afternoons sitting by the river and watching the pyrotechnics from explosions on the opposite bank. The black market flourishes; bordellos do an almost assembly-line business; and everywhere there is evidence of decadence and despair.

Diplomats with a flair for melodrama liken Phnom Penh to Shanghai before World War II. Politicians, however, are inevitably reminded of the last days of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in South Vietnam. The ailing Marshal Lon Nol, swayed by his younger brother Lon Non and a court appointed astrologer, has cracked down on political opposition by making widespread arrests, closing most newspapers, and placing cronies in lucrative military and cabinet posts. Plots and counterplots flourish, cabinets rise and fail, and the Khmer Rouge guerrillas keep closing in from all sides. Exasperated American officials, shirt-sleeved in the heat, rush to and fro from government offices with proposals for government reform and military offensives.

Seemingly, the situation could not be worse. Yet while Phnom Penh is riddled with strange astrologers and soothsayers of all kinds, prediction of the future is a risky business, especially for westerners who habitually take a far too apocalyptic and accelerated view of events in Indochina. A North Vietnamese diplomat once told me when I asked him when Hue would fall, "We are making history and history takes time." What is unfolding in Cambodia will take time too.

[AMERICA'S BOTTOMLESS PIT]

**T**o American journalists and officials in 1970, Cambodia seemed like an island in a sea of blood. Although right next door to Vietnam and Laos, it was miraculously free from the scars and bitterness of American occupation. Pentagon and CIA people, as well as White House hawks, had seen their long and patient intrigues rewarded by the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Now they were not only able to strike against

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*Ailing President Lon Nol at inauguration*



by Judith Coburn

the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh trail, but had a new proving ground to demonstrate that they had indeed learned from their mistakes in South Vietnam. Demoralized American GI's entered Cambodia like a conquering army. They were happy to be spending their time in search and destroy missions against enemy arms caches instead of in firefights with tough NLF troops.

Then the bottom fell out. "If Vietnam was America's quagmire, then Cambodia is her bottomless pit," an Asian diplomat told me late that year. The sideshow that the Pentagon started by its raids on the Cambodian sanctuaries in April 1970 soon engulfed the country. A communist fighting force the Americans imagined was comprised of several brigades of invading North Vietnamese turned out to be an indigenous Khmer Army with an efficient governing apparatus that managed 75 percent of Cambodia's total territory. Everything that had made American officials despair about Vietnam was present to a greater degree in Cambodia. Instead of a faltering economy, Cambodia's was in outright collapse; instead of the standard corruption in the military, Cambodia's top generals were selling their own Army's weapons to the enemy. And over all hung the whimsical otherworldly lethargy of the Cambodians themselves who cheerfully allowed to sink into paralysis everything the busy, perspiring Americans thought ought to be accomplished.

As it worked out, Sihanouk's overthrow had thrown the life of the average Cambodian into disarray. For a relatively small group of students, civil servants, intellectuals and middle class professionals—most of them living in Phnom Penh—Sihanouk's ouster seemed to promise a new prosperity and an end to the corrupt, byzantine, state-run economy. Intellectuals who felt patronized by Sihanouk's court retinue and who had seen a depressing future inside the bloated government bureaucracy applauded the coup and rushed to join the Army.

But the majority of Cambodians—peasants farming the countryside who were against Sihanouk's overthrow—had their protests stilled by the Army, which fired into protesting crowds several times during the first week after the coup. That was the beginning of their suffering. Since

*Cambodian refugees with all their possessions*



*Cambodian refugees from American bombs*

March 1970, three million of Cambodia's peasants have become refugees. Some have joined the liberation forces, but most have fled to Phnom Penh to escape American bombing. Many refugees have become virtual nomads, moving several times in the last three years. (One family I talked to said they had always worked on one of the French rubber plantations until they had been forced to move in March 1970, by Vietnamese officials who airlifted them to South Vietnam. It was only after they had been shipped up the Mekong to Phnom Penh that it was explained they had been moved to get out of the way of the American/South Vietnamese invasion. Since that time, they have moved seven more times.)

There is no effective government aid program for these refugees, and no U.S. aid program as there was in Vietnam. Only 10,000 refugees are in any kind of camps. Most families flee to provincial capitals or to Phnom Penh, where they either move in with relatives or build squatters huts on the outskirts of town. Phnom Penh's population has tripled since the war began. But unlike Vietnam, there is no large American presence to provide jobs in income; and less than half of the male refugees can find work. Limited government food programs are ineffective because most of the food is siphoned off by corrupt officials and sold to the communists.

Wells Klein, an American social welfare expert who recently returned from Cambodia on a study mission for Senator Edward Kennedy's Subcommittee on Refugees, says the situation in Cambodia is characterized "by a level of mounting human suffering which may shortly surpass the worst we have seen in Vietnam." Malnutrition and starvation are imminent, Klein says. His report also details how medical care in Cambodia has deteriorated sharply since the war began. According to Klein, 45 percent of the hospitals and medical facilities in Cambodia have been destroyed. His report concludes that as many as 300,000 civilians have been killed or wounded in the last three years of fighting.

Those Cambodians, mostly more established city dwellers, who have not lost their families or possessions in the war are suffering the milder agony of wartime inflation. The Cambodian economy is, for all intents and purposes,

bankrupt and kept afloat only by infusions of American dollars. The *riel* is now worth about one fourth of what it was in March 1970, and the prices of some commodities have tripled. Cambodia's two major exports, rice and rubber, have fallen victim to a destroyed transport system. What limited manufacturing facilities that existed in Cambodia before the war have been destroyed, including the country's only oil refinery. Guerrillas control a major part of the countryside, sectioning Phnom Penh off from the rice-growing areas to the northwest and making it necessary for the U.S. and Japan to supply Cambodia with most of her rice. "The only economy that really works [now] is the constant flow of illicit goods and weapons from this side to the Khmer communists," says one Cambodian economic expert.

[GOING TO THE JUNGLE]

The best thing that's happened to the Khmer Rouge in ten years is this government—and the Americans," one of Phnom Penh's more cynical diplomats is fond of saying. "All they have to do is sit back and wait for the whole house of cards to come down." The Khmer Rouge, who now call themselves part of the *Gouvernement Royal D'Union Nationale du Cambodge* have been, in an incredible three years, transformed from a small, isolated band of guerrillas into the backbone of a fighting force which controls 75 percent of Cambodia's territory and 40 percent of her population. They have, in effect, telescoped two decades of the Vietnamese experience into three short years.

The apparent weakness of the Cambodian left at the time of the coup gave the Lon Nol group and their American supporters an exaggerated idea of how easy it would be to oust Sihanouk and drive the Vietnamese out of Cambodia. But support for Sihanouk among the peasantry—the water in which guerrilla fish would soon be swimming—was drastically underestimated by Cambodian generals and their U.S. sponsors alike. Soon Khmer Rouge cadre, which had been blocked in their attempts to organize when Sihanouk was in power, were recruiting thousands of troops

*Cambodian guerrillas welcome Prince Sihanouk*



ASIAN NEWS SERVICE

for their officers to lead against the Lon Nol Army.

Since the attempted bombing of the Presidential Palace this March by the lover of one of Sihanouk's daughters, police round-ups, captained by Lon Non's secret police group (the Central Coordinating Committee), have increased. Over 300 students, intellectuals and journalists were swept up in the first week after the bombing and have not been heard from since. Lon Non's men have reportedly also been involved in a number of assassination attempts against opposition figures. Waves of defections to the guerrillas have commonly accompanied the series of arrests and when they are taking place, the capital's population stays glued to its radios to hear the latest reports on who has "gone to the jungles."

The Khmer Rouge political platform, drawn up in March 1970 after Sihanouk's arrival in Peking, is a broad statement of social reform within the same political and economic framework established by the Prince in the early '60s. Banks and foreign trade would again be nationalized, and the relatively small amount of land still held by large landowners would be redistributed. It also proposed that education be in Khmer instead of French and that Cambodia build up an independent national economy with diversified exports. But when Khmer cadre travel through liberated areas for political meetings, the most important issue is not the economy or educational system, but the American presence, the bombing, and the horrifying civilian casualty rate. "They use the Americans to wake up sleepy Khmer nationalism," jokes a Phnom Penh university professor. "The Americans—what great luck for the front."

[AMERICAN ADVISORS]

At the American Embassy in Phnom Penh there is much talk about "implementing what we learned in Vietnam." The American aid program to Cambodia is held up as the model for the Nixon doctrine's implicit policy of minimal funds for self-help against communism. In dollars and cents, the Cambodian aid program, which has crept up to around \$300 million a year for economic and military programs, is a real bargain. The savings have been achieved by the pursuit of a policy that could be described as guns without butter.

Judging from the American aid program in Cambodia, the American government seems to have learned three things from Vietnam: that bombing can be substituted for ground troops; that social welfare programs aren't worth the effort; and that if Congress opposes certain types of assistance, they can always be provided under another disguise. When Congress, in the summer of 1970, opposed U.S. involvement in advising the Cambodian military, the Pentagon came up with the Military Equipment Delivery Team (MEDT). MEDT officials, according to military men, do not dispense military advice, only assistance in using and maintaining the weaponry the Pentagon gives to the Cambodians. The distinction between military advice and combat advice seems lost on the Cambodians, however. On one visit to a battle area northwest of Phnom Penh in 1971 I was told by the local Cambodian commander in charge of operations, "Oh, too bad, you just missed my American advisor. He jumped in his helicopter when he saw you

coming.” When I asked what the American did when he visited the unit, the colonel replied, “He calls in air strikes, helps us direct artillery, read maps, that kind of thing.” American helicopters have also, on rare occasions, transported wounded from the battlefield, and ferried ammunition to surrounded Cambodian troops. Although there have been unconfirmed reports from Cambodian soldiers that Special Forces men are leading Cambodian troops behind the lines near the South Vietnamese border, so far the U.S. seems minimally involved, if at all, in this kind of direct combat role in Cambodia. But wherever the line between military advising and weapons delivery has been drawn in the past, it is becoming an increasingly fine line now.

Recently, when final withdrawal of U.S. 7th Air Force headquarters from Vietnam was completed, the American Embassy in Phnom Penh became directly involved in targeting for American air strikes in Cambodia. The set up is similar to the operations in Laos, where local officials make requests for bombing operations against certain targets, which are then cleared by a special bombing panel of Americans. (In Cambodia, Deputy Chief of Mission Thomas Enders is the chairman of the panel.) Embassy officials say the involvement of both American and local officers insures that fewer mistakes will be made. But investigators from Senator Kennedy’s office contend that the maps the Embassy is using to check location of villages are several years old, and that the huge number of refugees who have moved makes plotting targets by maps very dangerous.

Once while they were covering an operation by his troops, reporters were told by Gen. Sosthene Fernandez, now Lon Nol’s Chief of Staff, that he was about to liberate a village from communist hands. He admitted there were civilians in the town, but the way he outlined the operation it seemed that his troops had surrounded the town and would then move in cautiously to minimize casualties. “Now we move,” said Gen. Fernandez. There was a tremendous artillery barrage, completely leveling the town. Only then did the Cambodian troops advance. “See!” said the

Lon Nol troops near Phnom Penh



WIDE WORLD

general, “No more communists!”

This anecdote may sound apocryphal, but it is unfortunately typical—not only of the absurdities in the situation but of the Cambodian military’s reliance on air power or artillery to do their fighting for them. U.S. military advisors despair in private about the refusal of Cambodian troops to patrol, attack offensively, or to move off roads while on operations. The traditional pattern in a clearing operation is that when the first contact with Front troops is made, government forces pull back and call in air support. Meanwhile, the communists, unless they are caught in open ground, either melt into the jungle or take cover.

[EXERCISE IN FUTILITY]

**B**ut if Cambodia is a military disaster, it is also an exercise in economic futility as well. American Embassy officials stress that their Cambodia program is designed to deal with the failures and inefficiencies of the larger aid programs in Vietnam and Laos. Rather than agreeing to underwrite deficit spending, for example, AID decided to provide just an import program to give the government cheap goods during wartime. A second purpose to the Cambodian program, according to AID officials, is to avoid having Cambodia get too dependent on the U.S. Thus there is no “project aid” as there was in Vietnam to build roads, industries or bridges.

American aid is funneled through two economic programs: a commodities import program and an Economic Support Fund. Sihanouk had originally opposed Cambodia’s membership in the International Monetary Fund because he saw it as a U.S. front that was too politically oriented. The IMF was only too happy to become involved with the new government since it had always opposed Sihanouk’s socialist economic programs. As the new regime moved ahead with the proposals to open Cambodia to foreign banks and business, the IMF, working hand-in-hand with U.S. AID officials, set up a series of requirements that the new government had to meet before U.S. or IMF aid could be given. A major stabilization program designed by the IMF was put in effect in 1971, calling particularly for a devaluation of the *riel* and the establishment of an Exchange Support Fund to provide the government with foreign exchange. The IMF then sponsored the meetings to encourage contributors to contribute to the fund.

The commodity import program (CIP) provides necessary commodities to the Cambodian government, which sells them to Cambodian importers for local retail. In spite of AID restrictions designed to prevent CIP funds from being used to import luxury goods, as they were in Vietnam, Congressional investigators have discovered that the Cambodians are getting air conditioners, soft drinks and televisions along with their fuel oil and other necessities. As for the claim that the economic aid program is designed to avoid undue Cambodian dependency on the U.S., the most interesting aspect of the CIP program is that the *riels* generated by sale of the U.S. commodities to importers go to pay the salaries of the Lon Nol army. Without the CIP program’s subsidy to the defense budget, the government could not afford the war.

Politically, the American Embassy in Phnom Penh keeps

a "low profile" by keeping down the number of its staff. But recently top U.S. officials have openly been involved in the day-to-day political decisions of the ailing president, Marshal Lon Nol. The chief benefactor of American lobbying efforts has been the arrogant but capable distant cousin of Sihanouk, Sirik Matak. Embassy officials have been trying to persuade Lon Nol to let Sirik Matak back in the government ever since he was toppled a year ago by student protests and the manipulations of the President's younger brother Lon Non. (I once asked a Western Ambassador in Phnom Penh why the Americans like Sirik Matak so much. "Oh, you know," he said, "he's more like them than the other Cambodians. When you go to his house the conversation is about travels abroad, international cuisine, that sort of thing. But at the Marshal's, all he wants to talk about is astrology and Buddhist philosophy.")

These efforts echo Vietnam, despite all the disclaimers about having learned from past mistakes. The Americans believe Sirik Matak is a "can-do" politician who will accomplish things their way. Sirik Matak can take over running the government while the ailing Lon Nol retreats further into mysticism and astrology. They seem to be unaware of—or discount—the public antipathy to Sirik Matak, feelings strong enough, most Cambodian journalists believe, to prevent him from ever being able to run the government.

Besides hoping to return Sirik Matak to a central position in the government, the Embassy has been lobbying heavily in recent months for Lon Nol to bring what the Embassy calls other members of the "opposition" into the government. Embassy officials say that broadening the government might push Cambodia closer to a ceasefire. In recent weeks, American efforts seem to have been temporarily successful as Lon Nol has formed a new ruling group which includes two of his bitterest opponents. But Cambodian politics has always had an ebb and flow quality about it with opposition members brought into the cabinet only to quit or be expelled six months later. But more important, few observers in Phnom Penh believe that the so called "opposition" figures the Americans have been pushing are any more likely to make a lasting compromise with the communists than Lon Nol. Like him, they are hardline anti-communists and participated in the coup against Sihanouk.

#### [THE TEETERING DOMINO]

The prospects for peace in Cambodia seem only to have receded with the signing of ceasefires in Vietnam and Laos. The Marshal rather fatuously proposes from time to time that the Khmer Rouge are welcome to come join his government as a way of stopping the fighting. For his part, Prince Sihanouk still regards himself as the legitimate head of state, and is working hard to smooth over differences with Khmer Rouge leaders in the field. Sihanouk, in fact, is the unknown in the current Cambodian equation. Most diplomats in Phnom Penh believe it is only a matter of time before the Lon Nol regime disintegrates completely, clearing the way for Sihanouk's return. Regardless of past Khmer Rouge hostilities toward Sihanouk, and the Russians' reservations because of his Peking sojourn, it seems

likely that Moscow, Peking and Hanoi would support a new government dominated by the Khmer Rouge with Sihanouk as titular head. (Sihanouk himself has recently alluded to just such an arrangement to journalists in Peking). Among Cambodians there is increasing nostalgia for the past—even among intellectuals who welcomed the Lon Nol bandwagon at first. Things have reached such a state in Phnom Penh that even some American officials have been heard in private to speak wistfully of the good old days under Sihanouk.

It is remotely a possibility that America might acquiesce to Sihanouk's return, even though—ironically—any new government he forms will be considerably to the left of the earlier government the Americans found so inimical to their interests. But it is far more likely that the Nixon Administration will assume that because the Cambodian situation has not yet managed to awaken America's interest and outrage, this means that it has discovered a level of involvement that is politically acceptable to the public and which it can therefore maintain indefinitely.

But there are also signs that the Nixon Administration is digging itself even deeper into the type of situation LBJ discovered in Vietnam. The purpose of the original Cambodian incursion and the subsequent aid program, we were told in 1970, was "to protect our men who are in Vietnam, and to guarantee the continued success of our withdrawal and Vietnamization plan." Later, as U.S. troop strength declined, the Administration said we were conducting bombing raids at the request of the Cambodian government. With this statement, the U.S. appeared committed not just to Vietnamization, but to the survival of the Lon Nol regime. More ominous, however, was the recent statement by Defense Secretary Elliot Richardson which defined the bombing in Cambodia as a way of inducing the North Vietnamese to live up to the Paris accords.

Richardson's statement raises the possibility that Cambodia may continue to be a victim of Vietnam-style domino politics, and in an ironic double twist, that the future of the Vietnam peace accord may be affected by continued conflict in Cambodia. It was ominous in the face of repeated reports from the American Embassy in Phnom Penh that few North Vietnamese are still fighting with Khmer liberation forces. His later adamant reassertion that Cambodia is facing North Vietnamese aggressors raises the possibility that the Administration might use the continued conflict in Cambodia as an excuse to scrap the Paris accords. What might then be on the agenda for Cambodia, which has become the domino in-between? U.S.-bankrolled raids by Thai and South Vietnamese soldiers, as in Laos? Stepped up American military aid to save Lon Nol? Increasing civilian casualties, refugees and starvation?

As for the Cambodian liberation forces, they have little to lose by continuing to tighten the noose around Phnom Penh. While most observers in the Cambodian capital think the Cambodian communists have the strength to take the capital by force they believe they will not choose to do so because of the threat of U.S. bombing. Slow strangulation is more effective, especially if it also leads to the death of the Lon Nol government. "Phnom Penh is like a ripe fruit, waiting to fall," says Sihanouk in Peking. Like a teetering domino, is more like it. ■

# Reviews

## IS JERUSALEM BURNING?

by Paul Jacobs

**The Fall of Jerusalem**, by Abdullah Schleifer, Monthly Review Press, \$7.50 (cloth) and \$3.45 (paper).

The history of Jerusalem is a continuous chronicle of bloodshed, for no other city in the world has been fought over so bitterly by Jews, Christians and Moslems.

"The fall of Jerusalem took three days; the siege had been under way since 1917," writes Abdullah Schleifer in *The Fall of Jerusalem*, in this valuable but bound-to-be-considered "controversial" book.

Schleifer, born into a middle-class Jewish family in a Long Island suburb, was a New Left activist who converted in 1964 to Islam, changing his name from Marc to Abdullah. Now a devout Moslem, he has spent the years since then living and working within the Arab world, in East Jerusalem, Cairo, Amman and Beirut. Schleifer's book reflects his background, combining a Marxist approach with an Islamic cultural and religious view.

The book deals with a number of inextricably intertwined themes, each of them equally controversial, each of them equally laden with emotional distress. Almost half of the amply foot-noted volume describes and analyzes the history and ultimate success of Zionism in achieving state power.

But Schleifer's historical analysis differs not only from the theses advanced by Zionist scholars, but also from those promulgated by traditional Arab historians: the principal focus of his attention is the emergence of the Palestinian Arabs and their relationships to the colonial powers, the Arab states, the Zionist forces and, finally, to Israel. The Palestinians have been victims, maintains Schleifer, either because of their own errors or because,

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until after the 1967 war, their real interests had been obscured by the rise of Pan-Arab nationalism.

Schleifer is sharply critical of Pan-Arabism's "limited moral perspective," its "narrow emotion, so easily spilling over into cruel and self-aggrandizing ambition," which made the Palestinian cause sound "more like a tasteless vendetta or personal grudge (or even a property squabble over some obscure orange groves) than a liberation struggle." But Schleifer is equally critical of those Palestinians who, today, present themselves "without any apparent program or alternative beyond 'revenge' (a neotribal Arab affectation as repugnant to the classic Islamic sensibility of the region as to Western humanism)." He insists that "The beginning of any genuine national revival rests upon the ability of men to honor relatively objective criteria, whether it involves immediate political profit or not. The inability of the Arabs to comprehend this concept has been one of the great self-defeating psychological facts of Middle Eastern life and has been mercilessly exploited by Israel."

The constant ability of the Zionist movement to utilize, for its own purposes, all kinds of political developments, especially active anti-Semitism, is a basic theme in *The Fall of Jerusalem*, beginning with the Balfour Declaration in 1917, and ending with the easy Israeli military victory over the Arab forces in 1967.

That victory took place because the Arab military organization was incredibly disorganized and totally unprepared for battle, except in its anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rhetoric. In recent months, a sharp debate has developed within Israel as a result of statements by a number of Israeli generals who insist that, since 1948, Israel has not faced the threat of annihilation by any single Arab state or combination of states. And if Schleifer's detailed on-the-scene description of the battle for East Jerusalem is correct, the Israeli generals are accurate in their assessment.

The intellectual strength of Schleifer's book rests on the cogent analysis he makes of the political

weaknesses of the Arab forces and the long range capabilities of the Israelis. In his conclusion, he points out that even—and perhaps especially—the regionalism advocated by the Israelis means the ultimate domination by Israel over much of the Arab world. And he is realistic in his pessimistic appraisal of the proposal, advanced by some Palestinian Arabs, for the creation of a "democratic Palestinian society open to all the Jews of Israel prepared to live with the Palestinian Muslims and Christians in a non-sectarian, nonracialist state that is in turn an integral part of the Arab nation."

If it is true, as Schleifer argues, that the struggle for Jerusalem is a "microcosm" of the entire Middle East conflict, then the future does not hold in it such a state: all of Jerusalem is now an Israeli Jewish city and it will remain so throughout the foreseeable future, especially if Palestinian Arab groups continue on their present course of self-destructive actions, substituting politics of the instant deed for the development of an integrated ideology and the tedious development of a constituency. The value of Schleifer's book is that it makes clear how and why both these realities came to be. ■

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*Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem*



PHOTO COURTESY PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION