

The Vietnamization of Cambodia

by Peter A. Poole

The reason we have failed to understand Southeast Asian nationalism is that we have ignored it. We have tried to make the local political situation fit our own ideological beliefs. For the last three years, we have been so absorbed in our internal debate over the pace of military withdrawal that we have been less willing than ever to look at the actual situation in Southeast Asia, except through the distorting lens of American politics.

Much of what our officials say about either U. S. disengagement or Asian nationalism sounds either frightening or absurd to the new leaders of Asia. For example, President Nixon and Secretary Laird have indicated that American air power and ARVN troops in Cambodia are well

Peter A. Poole, a former Foreign Service Officer, teaches political science at Howard University. He is author of a recent book, The Vietnamese in Thailand.

nigh indispensable to the Lon Nol government's survival—though, of course, the main reason for moving the war into Cambodia is to “save American lives.” (Senator George McGovern almost topped this on “Meet the Press,” February 21, when he implied that North Vietnam was devoted to the cause of Khmer and Lao nationalism.)

Actually, the events of last spring, including the U.S.-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, have created enormous problems both for the Lon Nol government and for the country. By December, there were one million Cambodian refugees out of a total seven million population. During a two-week visit in January, I found that Phnom Penh, the capital, had doubled in size since March, from 700,000 to over 1.5 million. Other towns are also swollen with people

escaping the air strikes and the ground war. The number of refugees is increasing. And the figures leave out the 200,000 residents who were repatriated to Vietnam, after selling their property at a fraction of its real value.

The remaining Vietnamese and Chinese nationals recall with horror the April, 1970, massacres of Vietnamese (denied by the Cambodian government but affirmed by most foreign observers). The Chinese, who control so much of the economic life, are worried about their future status in the country—even those who assume the country will survive the war intact. Their schools and temples have been taken over as billets for troops and war refugees.

And what of casualties? We can add up military losses—reportedly 8,000 Cambodian troops, 50,000 Viet Cong—but calculations of civilian losses are not to be found anywhere. Apparently, the human cost of the invasion was not considered in last April's decision to expand the war into Cambodia. Civilian life is not a policy concern in any aspect of the Indochina war. At a recent background briefing, Henry Kissinger was asked if there had been any projection of how many Indochinese casualties would result from expanding the war into Cambodia. He said there were no such projections.

The political costs of moving the war to Cambodia have also been high. The Lon Nol government came to power largely because political groups ranging from students to the military felt that Prince Sihanouk had not done enough to control the Viet Cong in the country. The present government's program could be stated simply enough for any villager to understand—expel the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong from Khmer territory. Most Cambodians identify personally with this aim because fear of Vietnamese domination has long been their most commonly held political attitude. Their fear is nationalistic rather than ideological, based on a

long-standing hostility between Vietnamese and Khmer people.

From this hostility, Lon Nol gained support. There have been more than enough volunteers to expand the Cambodian army from 35,000 to nearly 200,000 during the past year. In some provinces, farmers have bought weapons to protect their villages from the Viet Cong.

The United States, however, has forced Lon Nol and Cambodia into accepting a policy of using Vietnamese to expel Vietnamese. Regardless of how convenient this is for South Vietnam—whose army seems to prefer fighting the war in Cambodia, and whose politicians, like Vice President Ky, would rather alienate Cambodians than Vietnamese—it is not good for Cambodia. While the people I talked to repeatedly said that their country was fighting a war of national liberation to expel Viet Cong, they stressed that American help should not come from Vietnamese intermediaries or American ground troops. The ARVN may have fine equipment, but everyone, including top-level officials, complained that they have raped Khmer girls and looted Khmer villages.

Shifting the Vietnam war to Cambodia and subjecting the people to B-52 sorties and gunship raids is likely to achieve for the Viet Cong and Khmer communists what they have not managed to do themselves—aid communist recruitment of disgruntled Khmer youths and create a Cambodian civil war where none existed before.

Not only among Cambodian and American officials, but also among well-placed Japanese and British observers, I have heard the view expressed that the war in Cambodia is an old-fashioned “military” war (as distinct from the political war in Vietnam). This implies that the anti-government forces are mostly foreign invaders; that both sides are fighting for reasonably clear objectives; and that victory will go to the side with the biggest and best equipped battal-

ions. There is certainly some truth to this view. But in order for it to become completely valid, the Khmer component of the anti-government forces must remain small. To achieve this the United States and South Vietnam must abstain from direct involvement in the war. If they maintain or increase their involvement, one can safely predict that Cambodian support for the anti-government forces will grow, and Cambodia will soon have a full-scale civil war like Vietnam.

It is only natural that many American officials I have talked with take pride in the fact that U. S. arms and training have aided the Cambodian government and people in their struggle against a (so far) predominantly foreign enemy. Unfortunately, it is all too easy for the same Americans to ignore the fact that Cambodia's nationalism is, at the same time, being undermined by our willingness to move the Vietnam war into Cambodia.

The effects of the invasion on the strength of the government are already being felt. Last December, the government imposed censorship on the domestic press after non-government publications ran a number of anti-ARVN stories and cartoons. The effort, however, was unsuccessful—after opposition from students and editors, a more lenient set of ground rules was adopted.

The fall of Sihanouk was interpreted in America as a dramatic ideological shift from left to right in Cambodia, leaving a large pro-Sihanouk, pro-communist portion of the population opposed to Lon Nol. Again, such notions are merely projections of our own ideological beliefs. Sihanouk's statements during the past year reveal that there is no love lost between any faction of the anti-government forces in Cambodia, although he claims that his front, Uni National du Kampuchea (FUNK) is leading the struggle against Lon Nol. Meanwhile new political stereotypes are replacing the old dogma that he could solve all prob-

lems. The new consensus begins by conceding that Sihanouk was good for Cambodia in the 1950s, but that he was corrupted during the 1960s by his wife Monique and by crooked pro-Vietnamese advisors. He gradually revealed his inability to cope with the problem of Vietnamese communist infiltration in the border areas, and was replaced in 1970 by an entirely constitutional process—a vote of the two branches of the legislature. The proclamation of a Khmer republic delighted students in Phnom Penh and made the chances of Sihanouk's restoration all the more remote.

It is easy to exaggerate the "strategic" importance—to Cambodia or to anyone else—of the various roads and other objectives which have been fought over in Cambodia during the past year. Most of the Cambodian people can survive on the food they raise. Phnom Penh can be supplied by armed convoys on the Mekong River, which are easier to protect than road convoys. Yet the world press has portrayed a long series of battles during the past year (including those which involved ARVN and U. S. support) as "crucial" to Cambodia's survival. This has, probably inadvertently, created a rationale for further U. S. and South Vietnamese intervention.

Route 4 connecting Phnom Penh to the sea was cut by communist guerrillas last November. In January, Cambodian forces, supported by a large ARVN contingent and some U. S. air power, fought a long battle to reopen it. The day they did so, a small guerrilla band raised havoc at the military airport near the northern end of the road, showing how easily they can cut it again, whenever they choose to.

Since Route 4 was repeatedly described in the world press as Phnom Penh's "life-line," it follows that Phnom Penh would have collapsed if it were not reopened. (Never mind the fact that the city got along for hundreds of years until the U. S. aid mission built Route 4 in the 1950s.) Since ARVN and U. S. air power

took part in the battle to reopen it, they must have been essential to whatever it was that was accomplished. One thing that was achieved was that Phnom Penh regained its surface link with the country's only brewery at Kompong Som, just when the black market price for U. S. beer hit \$1 a can in Phnom Penh.

Despite the impressions some press reports give that Phnom Penh is completely cut off from the provinces, this is strictly true only of the four northeastern provinces, which are not contested by the government. (Their total population was about 225,000 in the 1962 census, but the most common estimate of the number of people who have not fled the area is 150,000.)

The government controls all towns of any size outside the Northeast—though civil and military flights are the only safe way to reach many of these towns. Most Cambodian villagers were subjected to only occasional harassment by Vietnamese or Cambodian communist bands during the past year; few villages were under continuous communist control. Newspapers and government bulletins published in Phnom Penh gradually circulate to provincial towns and villages. And word-of-mouth communication probably remains a vital force linking most of the seven million Khmer people together; Cambodians still travel around their country a great deal, in spite of the danger of ambush on all but a few roads.

The best informed guesses (and they are no more than that) place the number of Cambodians supporting the communist cause at 10,000 in early 1971. The few people from the western provinces whom I talked with, and who claimed to have encountered members of the Khmers Rouges believed this force was still opposed to Sihanouk, as well as Lon Nol; they are said to be as much interested in banditry as in politics.

If these rather meager impressions

are at all correct, the Vietnamese and Cambodian communists have gained far less support among the Khmer people than most observers expected in the summer of 1970. Although its performance is still unsure in some respects, Cambodia's present government appears to be a much more popular national government than President Thieu's regime in South Vietnam. The crux of Cambodia's current problem is that all of the parties to the Vietnam war seek short-term gains by moving their struggle onto Cambodian territory. Consequently, the Cambodians will probably not achieve their goal of expelling the Vietnamese communists until the latter decide they no longer need Khmer territory for their military operations.

Cambodia needs limited aid in order to hold on until the parties to the Vietnam war stop abusing her territory and mauling her people. She needs small arms, ammunition and a great deal of support in organizing her medical services. But what Cambodia does not need is ARVN troops and American "air power." Both have a time-tested ability to turn people against the regime that employs them.

But the only indispensable ingredients in Cambodia's formula for survival are nationalism and human will, which her people have shown they possess. Asian nationalism has consistently been undervalued by American governments since World War II. We have taken an unduly militaristic approach and have assumed that somehow American military forces can replace national governments. The Nixon doctrine records our disenchantment with this idea. But during the past year, the Administration has often violated its own principles by its actions in Cambodia. To insure the Vietnamization program, the President has sent American air power over that country and killed large numbers of civilians. This action may have temporarily reduced casualties in Vietnam, but it may also Vietnamize Cambodia. ■

No Victory Parades

by Murray Polner

Steve Harper

He had noticed the hand-painted posters in the windows of the stores along the street. "Akron Rally In Support of Our Boys." It had also been on the radio and in the local papers. He knew where he stood and political rallies were hardly his style, but that evening he found himself drifting toward the meeting.

The hall was draped in patriotic colors, the streamers running across the ceiling and tied onto the rafters. A local politician had hired four pretty girls, all dressed in colonial clothing, to hand out leaflets and pins and greet the guests. Down front, children from

Murray Polner teaches history at Suffolk Community College, Long Island. This article is excerpted from his book, No Victory Parades, to be published this spring by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. The names of the three veterans have been changed.

the Saint Aloysius School Drum and Bugle Corps were playing. A woman of 60, constantly smiling and wearing a red, white, and blue sash on her dress, swept down the aisle and pinned an "Honor America" button on the flap of his field jacket. Then a stillness. The audience rose. The children of the band struck up the national anthem.

Steve Harper, 20, a recent husband, a veteran of 11 months' fighting in the war, had been back home for almost six months when he went to the rally. Sitting there, on a wooden folding chair, he remembered the last time he had been with a similar group, in Vietnam, on Christmas Eve, 1967.

"We had this chaplain, a Protestant. I never cared for him and a lot of the guys shared this feelin' with me. He was always smiling and happy-like. And drinkin'. I never liked those kinds. They're like frauds. You