

CHAPTER 24

Cambodia: A Failed Attempt
to End the War

On a flight to Thailand via Moscow, the real facts about the secret war in Cambodia are purchased from a source who cannot print them himself, and they are published in The New York Times in a failed effort to end the war.

In September 1989, while on a trip to an arms control school being organized in Moscow by the Committee of Soviet Scientists for Peace and Against the Nuclear Threat, I decided to go to Bangkok to see what was happening on the Thai border.

Aeroflot flies from Moscow to Bangkok—but only barely. In the first place, the plane seemed to find it necessary to stop almost every two hours for refueling: Tashkent, Bombay, Karachi, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), and Bangkok. The monotony of this interminable flight was mercifully broken when I was taken off the plane and was received, in a private room at the airport, by Nguyen Van Hieu, Vietnam's leading scientist. (I had advised the Vietnamese embassy in Moscow that I would be passing through Hanoi.)

In Thailand I had talks with the Australians, and especially the ambassador, Richard Butler, who was also accredited to Cambodia, now in charge of the UN arms control effort in Iraq. He had seen an article by Colby and me reprinted in *The International Herald Tribune*, and he was very sympathetic. I began to realize what an important diplomatic and moral force Australia was in Asia. Thailand seemed to be governed entirely by generals; the prime minister was almost invariably a military man (at the time, only two of six-

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teen had been civilians), and the attitude toward corruption seemed traditionally indulgent.^[430]

The Thais tried to persuade me that Pol Pot and Ta Mok (his most ruthless lieutenant) had changed their ideas lately; the West worried too much about past atrocities. One foreign ministry hard-liner was appalled to read, in the various intelligence reports on the FAS visit, that I had “expressed his opinion to everyone, absolutely everyone,” and he called me “inflexible.”

But my big find in Thailand was journalist Nate Thayer, an expert on the Khmer Rouge, who spent much of his time on the Thai-Cambodian border, making forays into Cambodia. Nate was young, rough, ready, courageous, and experienced in the field. Even a mine that put him in the hospital had not slowed him down. (He is now famous for his scoop in being the first to interview Pol Pot before Pol Pot’s death.)

His report was alarming. In the current struggle, the Khmer Rouge had always won, he said, when they had attacked. And in the few cases when they had been attacked and lost, it was only with the help of Vietnamese forces that were assisting Hun Sen’s military. Hence the withdrawal of the Vietnamese forces, then under way, was serious.

Nate thought the real question for the Khmer Rouge was when to shift from guerrilla war to large-scale operations. But they would still need a political solution because they could no more win militarily than could the United States in Vietnam. Nate knew a great deal, it was evident, but he could not publish it, he said, without being thrown out of Thailand. I asked him if I could retain him to send us dispatches that we would publish anonymously in our newsletter or use as material in our reports. He agreed.

On my return, I learned that Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon had testified that the department would not accuse the Khmer Rouge of genocide because it might give the Vietnamese justification for their invasion; it would force the United States to take action under the genocide convention to bring them to justice;

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and it would make it hard for us to support Prince Sihanouk in his desire to deal with the Khmer Rouge as part of a new Cambodian government. In brief, the U.S. government would not allow the truth to interfere with its policy.⁴³¹

The Indochina Project, a group run by William Herod that spread information about Indochina problems to Washington policy analysts, was coming under attack by Nina K. Solarz, the director of its umbrella group, Fund for Peace. I therefore offered Herod space in one of our buildings. An FAS town house already housed Chang Song, a former minister of the Lon Nol government and a Cambodian who was widely respected on Capitol Hill. Chang, who was always broke, sometimes even lived in the FAS room he rented (shades of Ed Lazansky, the Russian émigré who had slept on one of our couches for three months). In the same building we also housed CORKR, the Campaign to Oppose the Return of the Khmer Rouge, which I had helped establish on return from my first trip to Cambodia.⁴³²

In addition to these people, the only other main actors on our side of this struggle were Colby (whom I had brought into the fray), Muskie (who had responded, it seemed, to my letter), and Michael Horowitz, a Reagan administration official. Muskie was particularly helpful because the Senate majority leader then was Senator George Mitchell (D, Maine), Muskie's successor and protégé. Muskie interested Mitchell in the issue, and this intervention was very important in rounding up the sixty-six senators who later urged the administration to "open direct contacts" with the Hun Sen government.⁴³³ Horowitz, who was useful as our only Republican, was Chang's lawyer. He became passionately committed to preserving the Hun Sen government as a bulwark against the Khmer Rouge only when Chang did. And Chang did so only because I offered him the money to go back and see Cambodia for the first time in about fifteen years. He came back completely turned on to the Hun Sen government.

I felt, with some justice, that I had mustered and organized nearly

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all the anti-Khmer Rouge forces—and was sheltering most of them to boot. This accomplishment was confirmed, in an unhappy way, when a *New Republic* article attacking our campaign mentioned only Muskie, Colby, Horowitz, CORKR, and me—the last characterized as “the American campaign’s most active publicist.”⁴³⁴

From October 9 to October 16, I was preoccupied with hosting the men who had hosted me in Vietnam: Nguyen Van Hieu and Ho Si Thoang, the president and vice president, respectively, of the Center for Scientific Research of Vietnam. They had a very successful visit during which they saw Senator Edward Kennedy, Congressman Lee Hamilton, Congressman Jim Leach, and the president of the National Academy of Sciences.

I thought that the State Department had tried, behind the scenes, to discourage Frank Press, the NAS president, from receiving Nguyen Van Hieu. But it was clear that we would loudly cry “foul” if the NAS knuckled under to the State Department in matters of scientific exchange. And so we had a good meeting with Frank. This was my major effort to organize scientific exchange with Vietnam. Nothing could be done until relations were much nearer normalization. But I pointed out to Frank that the Vietnamese had much scientific ability, that their population needed science, and that we all had an obligation, under such circumstances, to bring them into the scientific community. I am sure Frank Press knew all this, but the reality of seeing a particle physicist from a developing country seemed to sharpen his awareness.

On October 17 I held a very poorly attended but nonetheless quite successful press conference to complain that the Bush administration was violating the law by providing military supplies and advisers to allies of the Khmer Rouge. The press conference was successful because it was attended by Barry Schweid, the AP diplomatic writer, and his dispatch was soon winging its way around the world, provoking a response from Prince Sihanouk. I also released a six-page paper entitled “A Dozen Anomalies in U.S. Policy Toward Cambodia,” in which I pointed out that Cambodian policy was so

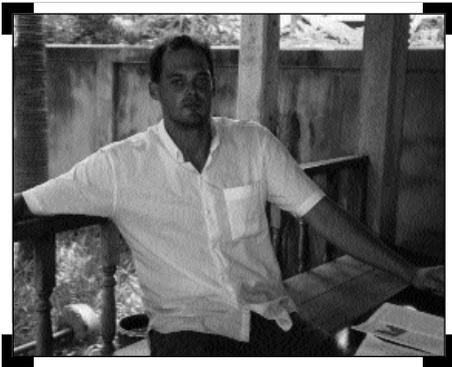
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complicated that anomalies abounded: for example, Congress had already passed legislation prohibiting aid that would have “the effect of promoting . . . directly or indirectly the capacity of the Khmer Rouge to conduct military operations.”^[435] Was it not “indirect” help to one member of a coalition to help the other two?

The State Department’s response was the irrelevant assertion that the armies did not fight in coordination. But even this claim was regularly denied in newspaper reports, with Sihanouk saying, on October 11, that all three factions “assist one another in every circumstance and cooperate with one another on the battlefield.”⁴³⁶

On October 23 Bill Colby and I published an article in *The Los Angeles Times* entitled “Thailand Can Become the Key to Restraining the Khmer Rouge.” We argued that power-sharing was impossible and that there was no choice but to back Hun Sen and help the Thais disengage from the forces of Pol Pot. A response quickly followed from Congressman Solarz in *The Washington Post*; Solarz also convened a hearing designed to refute our line—but we were not invited to participate.

I had been prodding Nate for information, and he came through with a very important document detailing the nature of the Cambodian operation. The two noncommunist groups in the resistance (Sihanouk’s forces and those of Son Sann) had a joint military com-



Nate Thayer in Aranyaprathet before becoming, temporarily, an anonymous EAS stringer

mand that made requests for weapons, matériel, and aid through Thai operatives and agents of the CIA on the Thai border. They reported to a Cambodian working group that coordinated their actions and was composed of CIA operatives from the U.S. embassy in Bangkok and officials from the highest levels of the Thai, Malaysian, and Singaporean governments. The working group’s activities were extensive (re-

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viewing battle plans, approving specific weapons, disbursing direct cash payments, and so on), and the United States paid for nearly everything. It was even suggested that the CIA was providing intelligence information from U.S. reconnaissance satellites to the noncommunist resistance. Thayer's work revealed the heavy reliance of the operation on Thai infrastructure (including an elite Thai intelligence entity called 838) and the fact that Khmer Rouge weapons flowed through Thailand. From what I knew about the situation from my own trips to Cambodia and Thailand, from Washington reports, and from newspapers, Thayer's report sounded very plausible, indeed.

In fact, I now felt a bit like Daniel Ellsberg with the Pentagon Papers. I felt that this information might expose U.S. secret involvement and lead to an end to the war. It was too important to be published in our newsletter over the name "anonymous"—it ought to be in *The New York Times*. But an effort to get them to publish a piece over the name "anonymous" seemed too difficult, and the resultant major uproar after such a piece was published might have led the Thais to Nate. There were not that many muzzled experts. Moreover, in the case of publication by an anonymous person, there would be no focal point to answer questions about it or pursue it.

If Nate had been in Washington, we could have discussed it. But he was normally in the farthest reaches of Thailand, and, in any case, we could not discuss this by phone since his phone was likely tapped. I reworked the article very slightly and I submitted the material, which FAS had purchased, as an op-ed over my own name to *The New York Times*.

The op-ed page editor, Leslie Gelb, called and said that he had checked with his sources in the State Department and that he believed the piece was right. On the other hand, it was *too* good; the op-ed page had a rule that precluded its publishing "hard" news (i.e., new stuff) unless there was an accompanying article in the news section. Accordingly, they would have to generate a news story.

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I sweated blood waiting for this article to appear; I had high hopes. When the day, November 16, 1989, approached, an op-ed page editor said to me ominously, "What they are doing to you!" But I had no idea what until the following morning, November 16, 1989. Instead of a front-page news story that would showcase the op-ed piece, the foreign news desk had put out a story on page A16 with the thrilling title "Aid to Cambodia Non-Communists Is Detailed." This suggestion of "nothing new but details" undercut my op-ed, which was entitled "Secret U.S. War in Cambodia."

It turned out that the foreign desk of the *Times* had called their regional reporter, Steven Erlanger, to check out the veracity of the facts in my op-ed essay. He turned to—guess who—Nate Thayer. Nate, who was as much inclined to oppose the Hun Sen government as I was to support it, played down the significance of the information, so Erlanger and the *Times* did as well. The *Times* had also given my piece to Robert Pear, a Washington reporter, and he ran a piece, one day in advance of mine, saying that the intelligence committees were trying to limit the CIA's ability to fund the war.

Thus the scoop—really Nate's scoop—had been chopped up and played down. Ironically, the same day my op-ed piece ran, *The Washington Post* ran an article showing that the State Department had a standard practice of deflating Soviet peace initiatives by leaking them to the press before the Soviets could announce them. I felt that I had been similarly victimized.

It may be that my mistake was in not giving this information to a *New York Times* reporter in the first place. The reporter could have persuaded his or her editors that a new accretion of detail of this kind was a front-page scoop, and that might have moved Washington. Or maybe I should have tried to run it signed by "anonymous"—perhaps that would have been more newsworthy.

As things stood, *one* reporter at the State Department press briefing asked the penetrating question, "Got anything on those two stories this morning on Cambodia?" When the briefer said, "No," the reporter just went away. I had been warned. In a conver-

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sation with Les Gelb, I revealed my high hopes. But Les said, “Nothing will happen because Washington is brain-dead,” and he was right. Still, I was devastated, and I did not feel much better when I learned that the article had produced angry and anguished cables from State to Bangkok asking where I got the material and requesting an investigation.⁴³⁷

Desperate, I played the moral card. On November 21 I prepared a “Memorandum on the Culpability of Persons Implementing the U.S. Policy on Cambodia.” It observed that the United States was a signatory to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and that “complicity in genocide” was a crime under Article III. If the Khmer Rouge returned, would American officials like to make their defense that they did not “intend” genocide even though they had done nothing to “prevent” it?

I had something even stronger, which arrived by accident. After the October 18 press conference, one evening I turned on the television and realized that it was showing a documentary on the Holocaust. I was about to turn it off when I heard the narrator summarize a document that Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau had sent to President Roosevelt during World War II. The document had denounced the Department of State for what amounted to an amalgam of racism, bureaucratic inertia, and geopolitics.

I instantly realized its great significance and relevance to the State Department attitude toward Cambodia. I sent away to the Roosevelt library for this document, “Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of the Jews.”

On reading it, I was struck by the raw power of its talmudic style of combining sins of omission with sins of commission; this consisted of indictments that were always of the form: “The Department of State has not done [this good thing], and has done [this bad thing].” I had no difficulty transposing this format to Cambodian affairs and wrote a searing nine-point indictment. I was determined to shock the conscience of the higher-ups at State and to

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make clear, as Morgenthau had made clear to Roosevelt, that the department's actions contained the seeds of a newsworthy scandal. But underlying this was my feeling that if the Khmer Rouge did come back, history would at least record that someone had walked the halls of the State Department and put this charge of genocide on everyone's desk. I felt myself the embodiment of all those frustrated Jews who had walked the same halls during World War II to no avail as Jews died in the Nazi camps.

I put about seven personalized cover letters on the essay and, moving about the building, left a letter and an attached copy with the secretaries of each of the seven highest State Department officials.⁴³⁸ And then I left. I realized that calls were already moving down the building toward the Cambodian desk as I dropped the last letter there.

I received an answer—but only, I think, because I published the essay in *The Los Angeles Times* on December 3, 1989, under the title "Accomplices to a New Genocide."^{439]} The department's response, on behalf of all who got the letters, came from the lowest level, the director of the Office of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia Affairs, and said, "Unfortunately, the Khmer Rouge are a fact of life in Cambodia and they must be dealt with effectively."⁴⁴⁰

I continued to press the issue with letters to the chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence.⁴⁴¹ Clearly nothing much was happening. I decided to return to Cambodia for a second trip to get more information.