

All of Cambodia is a Sanctuary

Frank Joyce

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The capacity of the white male for nearly unlimited self-delusion is well known in U.S. history. Colonel George A. Custer is perhaps its most famous symbol. Following in his tradition, the U.S. military has consistently underestimated the ability of Third World people to resist U.S. aggression. We have been seeing “the light at the end of the South East Asian tunnel” now for 15 years.

But there is something especially ominous about Richard Milhaus Nixon’s continuing insistence that the Cambodia invasion was a huge success. What can possibly be going through the head of this man who watched his own private print of the movie “Patton” for the third time before deciding to undertake the invasion to show the COMMUNISTS that he couldn’t be pushed around? The irrationalities of the white male personality loom larger than ever before as an element in foreign and domestic policy.

But much more important is the fact that years of effort by the U.S. in Indo-China—from aid to the French in the 1950s through military advisors, 600,000 troops, the war of destruction against the North, “Vietnamization” and the Cambodian invasion—have produced an entirely new stage in the continuing crisis of imperialism in South-East Asia and elsewhere.

A war of aggression by the U.S. as barbarous as any in history has done nothing to reduce the will and capacity of the people to resist.

The Cambodian invasion was the biggest setback yet for U.S. policy and achieved absolutely none of the things which Nixon’s 7,000 word statement of July 1, says it did.

Nixon says: “We have eliminated an immediate threat to our forces and to the security of South Vietnam—and produced the prospect of fewer American casualties in the future.”

In fact, U.S. casualties went to very high levels before and during the invasion. While attention was focused on Cambodia during May and June, the Washington Post of June 19 reports that the Pacification program suffered serious setbacks in South Vietnam. NLF, Pathet Lao, Patriotic United Front of Cambodia troops retained sufficient initiative to inflict or not inflict U.S. or ARVN casualties as a matter of policy.

Nixon says: “We have inflicted extensive casualties and very heavy losses in material on the enemy—losses which can now be replaced only from the North during a monsoon season and in the face of counteraction by South Vietnamese ground and U.S. air forces.”

Actually, the losses in both material and men have been grossly exaggerated. While substantial, even the U.S. only claims that 30 to 40% of what was there was found. Of the material captured, little was of the high quality which the Patriotic and Liberation forces of Indo-China rely on for serious fighting. The high casualty figures actually reveal more about the huge number of civilian Cambodians killed and wounded than NLF or other troops, especially since throughout the invasion there were the usual complaints about how the enemy was being elusive and following “Maoist” retreat tactics.

More importantly, the expansion of the war into all of Cambodia means that a water supply route down the Mekong river through Laos, Cambodia and into South Vietnam is now available.

As for counteraction by U.S. Air Force and South Vietnamese ground forces, the counteraction of the U.S. Air Force and the Laotian air forces and the Royal Laotian troops has not stopped supplies from moving down the so-called Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos any more than the bombing of North Vietnam stopped the flow of supplies.

Nixon says: "We have ended the concept of Cambodian sanctuaries..."

Nonsense, all of Cambodia is a sanctuary. The Cambodian economy based on rubber and tourism is destroyed and no one claims that more than one-half of the country is controlled by the Lon Nol government. The entire nation is engulfed in civil war as well as the conflict between Cambodians and South Vietnamese invaders.

Nixon says: "We have dislocated supply lines and disrupted Hanoi's strategy in the Saigon area and the Mekong Delta. The enemy capacity-to mount a major offensive in this vital populated region of the South has been greatly diminished."

The Washington Post of June 19, six weeks after the invasion had begun says: "... the current (South Vietnamese Communist offensive has sent pacification scores—the elaborate accounting system used here for measuring government security—tumbling in numerous South Vietnamese provinces since the onset of Spring.

"It has also exposed gaping weaknesses in the ability of South Vietnamese territorial forces to defend civilian populations in the so-called pacified areas from Communist attack."

The successful attack on Dalai was only the most obvious symbol of the fact that the Peoples' Liberation Armed Forces retain the ability to strike where-ever and whenever they wish in South Vietnam.

Nixon says: "We have effectively cut off the enemy from resupply by the sea. In 1969 well over half of the munitions being delivered to the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in Cambodia came by sea."

What cut off the port of Sihanoukville was the fall of Sihanouk, not the Cambodian invasion. Its importance as a port of supply to the liberation forces is exaggerated.

Nixon says: "We have, for the time being, separated the Communist main force units—regular troops organized in formal units similar to conventional armies—from the guerillas in the southern part of Vietnam. This should provide a boost to pacification efforts."

This is silly on its face and reflects the mythical and fantastic conception held by the U.S. of who is the enemy and how they are organized. The June 9 *New York Times* reported that "American Commanders have nearly doubled their estimate of enemy strength in... the sector of South Vietnam immediately north of Saigon."

But much more important than the fluctuating estimates of troop strength is the fact that the very concept of pacification, or strategic hamlets, is doomed to failure. This is simply because the Vietnamese cannot be de-Vietnamized. They will never stop resisting foreign domination.

Nixon says: "We have guaranteed the continuance of our troop withdrawal program. On June 3, I reaffirmed that 150,000 more Americans would return home within a year and announced that 50,000 would leave Vietnam by October 15."

The fact that troop withdrawals were "guaranteed" by the Cambodian invasion merely confirms how much jeopardy they were in beforehand. In fact, the April 20 speech by Nixon in which he announced troop withdrawals of 150,000 within one year was actually a concession to General Creighton Abrams to delay troop withdrawals for 60 days. What is obvious, is that had the Vietnamization program been working as well as expected, it never would have been necessary to invade Cambodia in the first place. The NLF and the Pathet Lao after all have been able to defeat the U.S. without ever invading any of their outside "sanctuaries" in Thailand, Okinawa or elsewhere.

Nixon says: "We have bought time for the South Vietnamese to strengthen themselves against the enemy."

Time for what? How much more time do they need than the 15 years they have already had? How has the expansion of the war into Cambodia involving 40,000 ARVN troops on a semi-permanent basis bought them time? In reality, the situation in South Vietnam and Saigon in particular is more turbulent than at any point in the Theui-Ky regime. The economy is the most inflationary in the world. Unrest by disabled veterans, students and anti-government, peace oriented Buddhists is increasing. Emergency economic aid has been requested and new repressive measures instituted, but just as in the U.S., unrest can only mount, not diminish as the war and its effects continue.

Nixon says: "We have witnessed visible proof of the success of Vietnamization as the South Vietnamese performed with skill and valor and competence far beyond the expectation of our commanders or American advisors. The morale and self-confidence of the Army of South Vietnam is higher than ever before."

Aside from the obvious admission about the previous low expectations by the Americans of their “gook” allies and their “Vietnamization” capability, this is really the most insidious confusion of all. In the first place, the fact that ARVN’s best “Vietnamized” troops are in Cambodia is of little direct value in South Vietnam, although it is clearly essential to the survival of the Lon Nol government in Cambodia. If there is a war in your own country, what good is it to have your best troops off in another country?

More importantly, it should never have come as any surprise that the Vietnamese would fight better in Cambodia than at home. For one thing, they are not so likely to be killing their own relatives and destroying their own villages. “A young lieutenant said recently in a Saigon coffee shop in a blasé tone, ‘If we’re going to have to fight this war, why fight it in our country when we can fight it in someone else’s’” (NYT, May 31, 1970).

The Cambodians and the Vietnamese hate each other. Cambodia once dominated all of Indo-China and has been squeezed by the Vietnamese on the one side and the Thais on the other over the last 500 years. The first thing the Cambodians did after Lan Nol took power was; at government urging, to massacre at least 2,000 Vietnamese nationals. The ARVN troops have retaliated through indiscriminate slaughter of Cambodian civilians and by systematically looting every town and village that they have “captured.”

It is perhaps one of the great ironies of the war that we find after all these years that now Vietnamization really means Americanization at yet another level; namely turning the South Vietnamese into a mini-imperial power policing Cambodia apparently on the theory that if “we stop ‘em in Pnom Penh, we won’t have to fight ‘em in Saigon.”

Lastly, Nixon is deluding himself through the appointment of David Bruce to the Paris talks which he would have us believe is some sort of concession to the Vietnamese. Bruce’s appointment merely brings U.S. involvement in the talks back to where it was some months ago before Henry Cabot Lodge left.

It ignores, for example, the violation of the very foundation of the talks which occurred when the U.S. resumed massive bombing of the North for four days at the beginning of April. It also ignores the entirely new Indo-Chinese political reality which has been created with the overthrow of Sihanouk and the U.S. invasion of Cambodia.

What Nixon did not discuss was the destruction of Cambodia which took place in the last two months. He may wish to forget, but the Cambodians and the people of the world will not. Whatever barbarism was visited on the innocents of South and North Vietnam has been qualitatively surpassed by what has been done to the innocent civilians in Cambodia including the ethnic Vietnamese who live there. It is one of the reasons why the indigenous patriotic and liberation forces in Cambodia are growing every day.

Nor did Nixon mention the new political reality which resulted from the Indo-China summit conference and the struggle by those loyal to Prince Sihanouk to regain power. Nixon and the generals cannot understand that the achievement of Indo-Chinese unity strengthens every component part of the struggle rather than weakening them because they are fighting on “three fronts” as the U.S. Military naively believes.

Nixon will be surprised in Indo-China in the weeks and months to come. We who profess to understand the inevitable victory of the Indo-Chinese people over U.S. Imperialism should not be.

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