

SPECTATOR'S JOURNAL



TOWARD A NEW CAMBODIA POLICY

by Michael J. Horowitz

"China has not changed and will not change its approach. The stance of China and the stance of the Khmer Rouge—they are the same."

—Norodom Sihanouk,
as quoted in the *New York Times*,
March 28, 1990

No American can fail to be haunted by what the Khmer Rouge did to Cambodia, and the world may not be a decent place until Cambodians can feel secure that the phrase "never again" has meaning for them. Yet, to say the least, America is not doing right by Cambodia, and our policy toward that country is serving neither moral ends nor American interests.

This policy centers on official U.S. support for Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the former Cambodian ruler who, as part of an alliance dominated by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, is waging war on the current Cambodian government headed by Hun Sen. Justifications for this policy include alleged human rights abuses committed by Hun Sen's government, the ties he and other officials once had with the Khmer Rouge, and the government's friendly relations with Vietnam.

I recently returned from an extraordinary visit to Cambodia—among the most extensive by an American during the past ten years. While I found the Hun Sen government generally deserving of U.S. support, I readily concede that disagreement over the merits of that government is possible. Indeed, were the Hun Sen regime fixed on retaining power at all costs, it might be possible (especially from the point of view of *Realpolitik*) to justify America's \$30 million in annual support for a coalition dominated by Pol Pot.

But this is hardly the case, and what is hard to accept is the refusal of American policy-makers to acknowledge and act on two recent developments:

First, the Cambodian government is

prepared to accept the monitoring of its human rights practices by Western delegations with full access to its prisons and POW camps. Second, and even more important, it is prepared to permit free elections, conducted on terms set by the United States and supervised by the United Nations or any other international body acceptable to the U.S.

Despite recent events in Eastern Europe and Nicaragua, our current policy is marked by efforts to block rapid, internationally supervised Cambodian elections—and to support a war effort dominated by Pol Pot in place of such elections.

Incredibly, the State Department has taken the position of Sihanouk and his supporters that Cambodians cannot be trusted to vote freely in internationally supervised elections until all members of the Hun Sen government have been displaced for an indeterminate number of years—by hordes of U.N. bureaucrats unable to speak Khmer.

Never mind that such a development would reverse the progress recently

made by Cambodia's still fragile economy. Never mind that U.N. administration would cost billions—and that the United Nations is not competent to handle such an assignment, as U.N. officials privately make clear. U.N. administration of Cambodia would almost certainly turn into a replay of the organization's debacle in the Congo—heretofore, the U.N.'s only venture in running a sovereign country.

Schemes involving the U.N. in any activity other than election supervision obscure the real obstacle to any resolution of the Cambodian question: the continuing activity of the Khmer Rouge and the continuing Chinese military and political aid to Pol Pot. To argue for long-term U.N. administration of Cambodia makes it possible to avoid dealing with the real question: Why have we not publicly condemned China for its support of the Khmer Rouge?

One reason for our silence is that the State Department believes the Khmer Rouge now play a *useful* role in Cambodian affairs—this because, as State Department officials quietly concede, only the Khmer Rouge are militarily strong enough to dislodge the Hun Sen

government. But even if it were true that this government was imposing itself militarily on Cambodia, our position no longer makes sense, because the government is willing to risk its immediate, *peaceful* overthrow at the hands of the Cambodian people through internationally supervised elections.

The State Department's claim that any lingering effects of Hun Sen's tenure will prevent Cambodians from voting freely at polling booths administered by outsiders chosen by the U.S. is tragic nonsense. The recent experience of Nicaragua—where an *unfair* election conducted by an unpopular government still resulted in that government's defeat—strips U.S. opposition to rapid, internationally supervised elections of any credibility.

In the end, our Cambodia policy can only be explained by China's unyielding hostility toward Hun Sen and fear that he might win in a free election. In urgent representations to the State Department, Deng Xiaoping's minions have let it be known that China would feel humiliated were Hun Sen to remain in power, whether through elections or otherwise. Thus, at the expense of Cambodian lives, we act against our better instincts to help China save face.

It would be ironic if Americans who were critical of the Scowcroft mission and who condemned China for Tiananmen Square gave China a free pass for its unconscionable support for the Khmer Rouge. Silence over China's Cambodia policy may well be the act of appeasement Peking expects from us.

To be sure, there is reason to be troubled by the current links between Cambodia and Vietnam—and many people have expressed concern that a U.S. relationship with the Hun Sen government would create pressures to "normalize" relations with Vietnam well before its hard-line regime has instituted appropriate reforms. But the reverse is true. The basis on which the U.S. would deal with the Cambodian government—its acceptance of elections supervised



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and conducted by others—establishes a formula that the current, unpopular and anti-democratic government in Hanoi can never accept.

In any event, any discussion of the Vietnamese-Cambodian relationship must recognize that Cambodians have not seen other countries lining up to protect them from Pol Pot. On the contrary, America's support for Sihanouk—whose forces now openly engage in joint operations with the Khmer Rouge—has understandably led many Cambodians to conclude that America is allied with Pol Pot. It was Cambodia's misfortune to have been rescued by Vietnam eleven years ago, but no country in Cambodia's situation would have rejected Vietnamese assistance—when no other help was forthcoming, from anyone.

Which leads to the ultimate point that needs to be made over and over in any debate on Cambodia. For all the reading one may do about the Khmer Rouge, a visit leaves one totally unprepared for the extent of their horrors. People stopped at random in the street tell stories of 13-year-old boys armed with AK-47 rifles killing all the people in their villages who spoke a word of French or English, or who had gone to high school—or who wore eyeglasses. One hears of “experimental” villages in which all the men were killed as part of a test to see how a community of a few thousand women would fare under Pol Pot work quotas.

Two sights in Phnom Penh remain most vivid. First was the Tuol Sleng interrogation center, at which the Khmer Rouge murdered all but a handful of its 20,000 prisoners. Evidence of the nature of Tuol Sleng remains fully preserved, including torture instruments, bloodstained jail cells, and thousands of pre- and post-torture photographs and confessions.¹ Tuol Sleng, and the newly uncovered killing fields at such places as Choeng Ekh, document a record of inhumanity equalled only by the Nazi camps. American policy-makers might ask themselves: Is Sihanouk committed, should he achieve the power we seek for him, to preserving these records of the Cambodian holocaust? Last year there was widespread condemnation of an attempt to convert a portion of Auschwitz even for so laudable a use as a convent. The need to preserve Auschwitz intact, it was said, had less to do with the needs of the Jewish community than with those of the rest of the world—Auschwitz needed to stand as a re-

minder that there should “never again” be such a place. But Tuol Sleng is such a place, and Choeng Ekh is such a place, and the world needs them no less than it needs Auschwitz, to remind man of his darkest capacities.

Sihanouk is hardly on record saying he would preserve the evidence of Pol Pot's rule; the reason for his silence is not only that the Khmer Rouge dominate his anti-Hun Sen coalition. Of

greater importance here is Sihanouk's close and long-standing relationship with China, Pol Pot's unyielding patron. (Sihanouk lives in Peking when not staying at his other residence—a palace in Pyongyang.)

A second recollection of Phnom Penh is happier. The visitor will find hundreds of private English-language schools in the city, and he will provoke spontaneous laughter by asking why

there are no Russian or Vietnamese language schools. Subject only to the condition that Pol Pot never return, Cambodia is looking to America and the West for its future.

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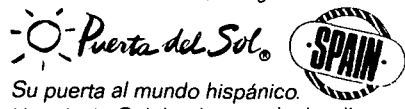
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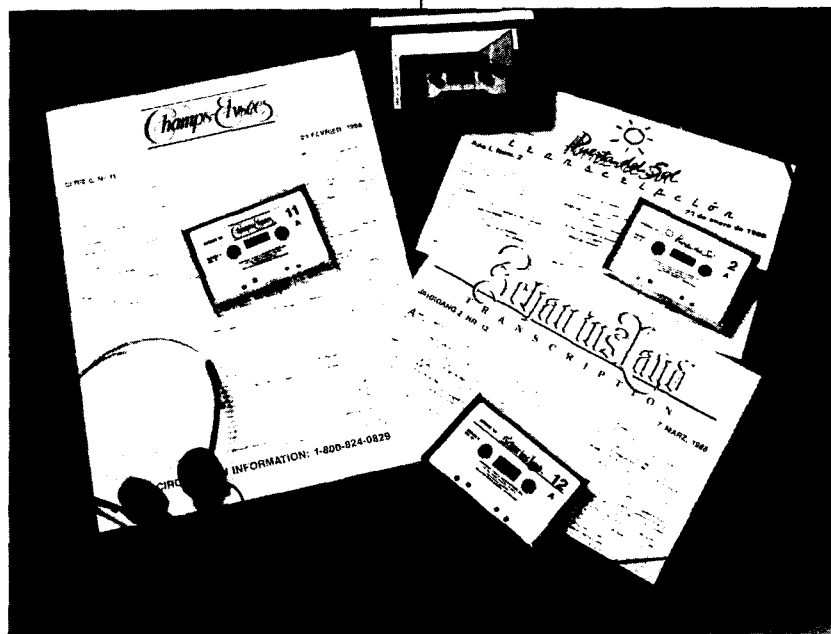
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¹For a fuller account of the Tuol Sleng facility, see Arch Puddington, “The Khmer Rouge File,” *TAS*, July 1987.

and Cambodians in the street, I have come to these generally favorable views about the Hun Sen government:

- It is increasingly made up of Western-educated survivors of the Pol Pot years who had no links with the Khmer Rouge.

- Those officials with past links to the Khmer Rouge are the strongest proponents of private, Western investment and of free markets. Unlike Pol Pot and company, they were non-ideological fighters who joined the Khmer Rouge (mostly at Sihanouk's urging) to oppose the corrupt and inefficient regime then in power.

- It is strongly committed to a market economy, to the abolition of cooperatives, to the privatization of property, to a significant measure of free press, and to an unprecedented degree of freedom of religion, including for minority Moslems.

- It has demonstrated, public rhetoric aside, a remarkable capacity to separate its interests and assert its independence from Vietnam—even though Vietnam is the only country willing to take up arms against Pol Pot.

Contrary to the State Department, I also think it true that:

- Our man Sihanouk is a corrupt relic with limited and diminishing support inside Cambodia, if only for his collaboration with the Khmer Rouge; he has always parroted China's demands while showing indifference if not hostility to American interests. (Over the past five years his closest allies have been Deng Xiaoping, North Korea's Kim Il Sung, and—Nicolae Ceausescu.)

- Following the increasingly pronounced lead of Thailand, much of Asia views our Cambodia policy as being either captive to China or so blind-

ed by hatred of Vietnam as to ignore our national interests.

- The governments of France, Great Britain, Japan, Canada, Italy, and Australia, among others, have moved toward closer relations with the Hun Sen government, which they see as Western oriented even if still allied with Vietnam and the Soviet Union. In short, the U.S. risks isolation in its Cambodia policy.

The above views are controversial. But the place for challenging them is a supervised polling booth in Cambodia, not a Washington salon or a U.N. session or big power conference. The views of Cambodians are the ones that deserve attention—particularly when they can be expressed in elections over which the current government will have less control than ruling

regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America (and Chicago, for that matter) had over their most recent elections.

More than any time since 1945, America today enjoys the esteem of the world—because of our championship of freedom, free markets, and free elections. Yet we support a war, on Pol Pot's side no less, in order to block internationally supervised free elections and to please China.

Perhaps, just perhaps, China needs us more than we need its good will; insistence that China no longer arm or back Pol Pot would have dramatic consequences.

In April, the Bush Administration for the first time let on that its go-easy policy toward Peking may not be working; it's not too late for the administration to reconsider its views on Cambodia. □

THE NATION'S PULSE



LOOK BACK IN ANGER

by Benjamin J. Stein

A normal Sunday. I was sitting in a chair reading the financial statements of a very large insurance company, trying to see if the management had taken a correct reserve on certain defaulted bonds. As usual, they had not. Trixie, my pointer, slept.

Across the back yard, through the palm trees, I could see the Santa Monica Bay, covered by a light haze, but still reflecting the sun in dazzling sprinkles of light. Offshore here in Malibu, a large sailboat was just barely visible through the disappearing fog.

Suddenly, through the door burst my neighbor, my pal, my Doppelgänger, my friend Lenny who is so much like me that he might as well be me, except that he is a fitness buff, and is always running somewhere. He had clearly just been running on Point Dume. He was in his sweats, with a headband. Without any preamble, he plopped himself into a chair, then jumped up, ran to the refrigerator to grab bottled water, and sat himself down again.

"I have to talk to you," he said. "You know that sometimes I play myself in commercials, right? I mean, I play a

middle-aged guy who's sort of worried looking."

"I know that," I said.

"It doesn't really interfere with my writing, and it gets me out of the house, and it's fun, and it pays pretty well."

"Lenny, of course I know all that. I do it myself," I said.



"Right. Well, a few days ago, I was in town at a casting agency, and there were a few of us middle-aged guys there, waiting to read, and there were also some middle-aged women there, and they were well-dressed, attractive, intelligent-looking women.

"We were all getting along pretty well until some girls started to show up for another call. I mean girls. Late teens. Early twenties. Really sexy. Really built. Like out of a magazine. Skin glowing. Looking great."

"I'm hip," I said.

"So, those girls come in, and all the men start to stare at them, and the girls sort of giggle back, and suddenly I sneaked a look at the middle-aged women who had been in the room. They looked angry. No, not just angry. Furious. Upset. Crazy. Defeated. I started to talk to one of them I had been talking to before the girls came in, and she just wouldn't even talk to me. That's how upset seeing those young girls come in made them."

"Can you blame them?"

"Yeah, I can blame them," Lenny said with a vigorous nod of his head. "I can definitely blame them. I didn't do anything bad to those women. It's not unnatural to stare at a beautiful

young woman. I think that's why there are art galleries with paintings of beautiful young women in them, Ben-jy, boy. It's considered kind of natural to stare at them."

"That's a point."

"But I wasn't doing anything mean to the other women. And so meanwhile, when the young women saw how the middle-aged women were acting, they got mad at us men, too. They talked among themselves and wouldn't even talk to us anymore. Now, it was just three warring camps in that little room, and when we were all called in for our lines, the men said good luck to the other men, and the young women to the young women, and the middle-aged women to themselves. That's how we said good-bye, too."

"Well, it's sad. I agree."

"It's more than sad," Lenny said. "The whole little episode is a sign of the way things are with women today."

"How are things with women today?" I asked, since I spend most of my time with defaulted bonds.

"That's my point. They are so bad that I can't even start to tell you about it. I mean, they are terrible. Absolute-

Benjamin J. Stein is a writer and producer living in Malibu, California.