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The Cambodian 'People's War'

By accident, I witnessed the beginning of the Cambodian insurgency that gradually took over the countryside, slowly strangled Phnom Penh and finally has taken control of the entire country.

This brief inside view of the start of a Communist-led revolutionary army was made possible when I was captured by guerrillas when trying to drive from the South Vietnamese border to the Cambodian capital on May 7, 1970, on assignment for the Post-Dispatch. With two colleagues, I was held 40 days before being released.

Our narrow but almost unique look at the other side of the developing civil war showed the strengths of the insurgent movement and the weaknesses of U.S. power and strategy in dealing with it.

To anyone who had the dangerous opportunity to observe the other side of the conflict, even at its start, the later unfolding disaster could come as no surprise. The constant indiscriminate bombing, an estimated 450,000 dead and wounded civilians to say nothing of military casualties, and the estimated 4,000,000 refugees were almost inevitable results of the short U.S. invasion of Cambodia and the subsequent proxy war that ended in defeat for the United States as well as for its client regime in Phnom Penh.

From our vantage point in the jungles of Eastern Cambodia in the weeks immediately after the beginning of the U.S. invasion, we could see that the strategy of President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger was accomplishing just the opposite of its intended purpose.

Instead of wiping out the frontier-area "privileged sanctuaries" from which Vietnamese Communists were able to attack South Vietnam, the U.S. invasion spread the Communist-led guerrillas through most of Cambodia.

Instead of isolating the Vietnamese Communists from the Cambodian population, it drove them into an alliance as comrades in arms against a common enemy—American tanks and bombs. It set in motion a Communist-controlled "people's war" along the classic lines of the best Chinese and North Vietnamese theoreticians.

Instead of safeguarding Cambodian

neutrality, an ostensible objective of the Nixon administration, it opened the way for eventual victory by a greatly expanded Communist-led Cambodian insurgency and the transformation of neutral Cambodia into a Communist state with close ties to Peking and Hanoi.

American bombs and tanks were a catalyst. Cambodians and Vietnamese are traditional enemies, but we could see Cambodian peasants turning to a friend in need in the form of the military forces of the Vietnamese Communists.

All were fleeing together, and we watched Vietcong guerrilla soldiers pack Cambodian women with their babies and chickens into a military truck. Later, when the Vietcong truck ran off the road into a rice paddy, we watched a gang of young Cambodian men help shove it out of the mud and get it on its way.

In the massive movement of Cambodians

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dians trekking westward to avoid the spreading war, we could see the new alliance taking form. Travel was mostly at night, and during daytime rest stops the Cambodians and their newfound friends learned each other's languages and talked common strategy and tactics.

Young Cambodian men and women, apparently voluntarily, were being armed with a collection of makeshift weapons, including captured American rifles, and were drilled in the rudiments of military training.

What we were witnessing, ironically, turned out to be a military assistance program that was far more successful than the costly and elaborate programs operated through the years by U.S. military advisers on the anti-Communist side of the various civil wars in Indochina.

Our on-the-spot observation showed, too, that Prince Norodom Sihanouk, whose overthrow helped the United States expand the war into Cambodia, was immensely popular in every village and hamlet we visited in rural Cambodia. This indicated that U.S. pol-

icy was wrong in disdaining the importance of Sihanouk as a national leader and that the Communist side was adroit in making him nominal head of the insurgency.

U.S. forces went in and, after two months, came out again. They continued bombing and long-distance artillery bombardment, while the U.S.-supplied army of President Lon Nol did the fighting. As a result, the U.S. was seen at a distance in safety while letting Asians fight Asians to serve U.S. rather than Cambodian interests.

Nixon told the American people, "Cambodia is the Nixon doctrine in its purest form." His strategy of supplying money and weapons and letting others do the fighting may have had a certain domestic appeal in the U.S., but to many Asians it sounded like a new form of colonialism.

On a strictly military level, there were similar Communist advantages and American liabilities, despite the fact that the firepower ratio was out of sight in the opposite direction, at least until Congress forced a halt in the U.S. bombing in mid-1973.

The Pentagon supplied tremendous firepower, but the young insurgency, weak as it was, offered a poor target. The old French notion that a regular army needed to outnumber guerrillas 5-to-1 seemed badly out of date. Hunting guerrillas in the jungle with B-52s, Phantoms and helicopters was like trying to kill mosquitoes with cannon.

One of our captors, a middle-aged North Vietnamese who had fought the Japanese and French before he took on the Americans, told us that even the B-52s, with their thunderous bomb loads, were no match for a guerrilla force dispersed across the countryside. Taking a long, impersonal view of the struggle, this man told us that of bombs would kill a guerrilla fighter here and there, but he said most of them would survive and their movement would carry on.

For the individual, he said, fear of the B-52 is part of the danger—a part that can be overcome. Crouching forward on his hands and feet, he rocked back and forth and then troops just started to ride out the bounding of the huge raids. He said he had been through three B-52 raids. Our strategy is not to hold any area for the tanks. We retreat and strike where the other side is weak.

Another of our Vietnamese Communist captors once told us about the Vietnamese guerrillas' cooperation with the Cambodians. We had observed that the Vietnamese always were careful to pay Cambodian peasants for food supplies and deferred to Cambodian customs—for example, by taking off their hats when passing a Buddhist pagoda even though they had no use for any religion.

I told him I supposed he was familiar with Mao Tse-tung's analogy of fish swimming in the sea. The fish are the guerrillas, and the sea is the sympathetic population that provides food, shelter and information to the fighting force.

"Yes, the fish must have the sea," he replied, "but without the fish the sea is useless."

His point was that the Cambodians were ripe for revolution but needed the Vietnamese Communist military aid program to become effective.

The aid program worked. All authorities agree that by the end of the five-year war the new Cambodian insurgent force was doing the fighting. The final result came with the fall of Phnom Penh.