

Insurgency: The Cambodian Civil War, 1970-1975

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Insurgency: The Cambodian Civil War, 1970-1975, by CW5 Jesse W, Lee, US Army, 40 Pages.

From 1970 to 1975, a series of incidents occurred throughout Southeast Asia that led to Civil War in Cambodia. A precipitous economic crisis, the resulting class conflict, and regional instability from the war in Vietnam contributed to setting the conditions for a successful insurgency. International support to opposition groups throughout Cambodia by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the United States also had a significant effect on the situation. Research suggests the Lon Nol led Khmer Republic's support of US bombing, growing resentment by the rural farmers, and repressive tactics used by the Khmer Republic played a role in the proliferation of the Khmer Rouge. The sum of factors that occurred between 1970 and 1975 set a perfect storm of conditions leading to rapid growth of the Khmer Rouge and a successful insurgency that allowed the Pol Pot led Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) to seize control in Cambodia. This monograph investigates which conditions or combination thereof contributed to the proliferation of the Khmer Rouge and contributed to the successful insurgency by the CPK over the Khmer Republic.

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Acronyms

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COIN	Counterinsurgency
COSVN	Central Office of South Vietnam
CPK	Communist Party of Kampuchea
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FANK	Forces Armées Nationales Khmères
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MACV	Military Advisory Command-Vietnam
NLF	National Liberation Front
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PRC	Peoples Republic of China
SF	Special Forces
VC	Viet Cong

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Introduction

Background of the Study

On April 17, 1975 Pol Pot and his army, the Khmer Rouge, or Red Cambodians, seized Phnom Penh and took control of the government in Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge deposed Prime Minister Lon Nol and evacuated two million citizens from the capital city into forced labor camps throughout the surrounding countryside.¹ The successful conduct of this insurgency led to the establishment of one of the most brutal totalitarian nation states the world has ever known, the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea. This event was the culmination of a five-year civil war between the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), and the US backed Cambodian government under Lon Nol, the Khmer Republic. It was also the beginning of a four-year genocide that would result in the death of as many as three million ethnic Cambodians between 1975 and 1979.²

From 1970 to 1975, a series of incidents occurred throughout Southeast Asia that led to the Civil War in Cambodia. A precipitous economic crisis, the resulting class conflict, and regional instability from the war in Vietnam contributed to the depredation of the incumbent Cambodian government. International support to opposition groups throughout Cambodia by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the United States also had a significant effect on the situation. Research suggests the Lon Nol led Cambodian Government's support of US bombing, growing resentment by the rural farmers, and repressive tactics used by the Khmer Rouge led to the proliferation of the Khmer Rouge.³ The sum of factors that occurred between 1970 and 1975 set a perfect storm of conditions leading to the rapid growth of the Khmer Rouge, and a

¹ Wilfred P. Deac, *Road to the Killing Fields: The Cambodian War of 1970-1975* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 256.

² Russell R. Ross, *Cambodia: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 51, 75; David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution Since 1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 236.

³ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 209-215, 233; Thu-Huong Nguyen-vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1992), 57-66; Ross, 149-151.

successful insurgency that allowed the Pol Pot led CPK to seize control in Cambodia. The World Peace Foundation suggests that the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia “aggravated and radicalized internal Cambodian political disputes.”⁴ These disputes eventually became an armed conflict as the opposition groups vied for regional dominance. This conflict resulted in devastating conditions for Cambodian civilians.

The CPK had existed under the leadership of Pol Pot and his inner circle since 1963, but was primarily a communist ideological movement with little ability to project military power. Estimates of the size of the untrained and poorly equipped Khmer Rouge range from just 400 to 2,000 as late as 1970.⁵ Indeed, much of the Khmer Rouge’s military success early in the insurgency was due to the efforts of the well-trained and experienced soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).⁶ CPK influence was isolated to the rural populace, which consisted mainly of uneducated farmers, and although Khmer Rouge presence was pervasive throughout the country, its grip was most prevalent in the northeast where Pol Pot established his headquarters.

Early in the campaign, the Khmer Rouge experienced small isolated tactical victories, usually to seize weapons which they lacked. It was hardly a force capable of toppling the government of a sovereign country. By the time the Khmer Rouge stormed Phnom Penh in 1975, their numbers had grown to an estimated 68,000 battle hardened ethnic Cambodians, devoid of any NVA soldiers.⁷ The Khmer Rouge was able to increase their numbers and gain the momentum necessary to achieve victory in just five years. This research will examine and

⁴ World Peace Foundation, “Cambodia: U.S. Bombing, Civil War, and Khmer Rouge,” Mass Atrocity Endings, 7 August 2015, accessed 15 October 2018, <https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/cambodia-u-s-bombing-civil-war-khmer-rouge/>

⁵ Ross, 255.

⁶ Nguyen-vo, 69.

⁷ Ross, 256-261.

compare how changes in internal and external conditions contributed to the success of this insurgency.

Statement of the Problem

Misagh Parsa, in his comparative analysis of insurgencies in developing countries, theorizes that examination of structural conditions such as economic instability, class struggle, and international influence all help to explain why revolutions take place. He further asserts that although these structural conditions may contribute to conflict, they cannot determine the outcome.⁸ Authors and historians of the Cambodian insurgency, such as Ben Kiernan, David Chandler, and William Shawcross speculate that US interference, primarily from the extensive bombing campaign, led to the CPK's successful insurgency. This monograph will show that it was not the US bombs, but a combination of factors that facilitated the Khmer Rouge's rapid expansion and the CPK's eventual victory over the Khmer Republic.

This monograph accomplishes its examination through a case study that compares data sets from a range of variables such as Gross Domestic Product and bombing sorties. Data are generally collected from 1968 to 1975, but varies slightly in some instances based on relevance and availability. It then compares the data to determine how their interaction contributed to the growth of the Khmer Rouge's overall numerical strength. The purpose of this study is to understand how the interaction of certain internal and external conditions present in Cambodia from 1970 to 1975 enabled Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge to gather the strength necessary to conduct a successful insurgency.

Significance of the Study

Knowing the conditions leading to this tumultuous time in Cambodia's history is a crucial step in understanding how insurgencies grow in developing countries. The Cambodian

⁸ Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7.

civil war vividly displays many of the conditions common to insurgencies and revolutions—many of the researchers that attempt to explain why the events occurred lack historical and theoretical backing to support their hypotheses. This research will examine the events using relevant theories from multiple theorists, and analyze and compare data from a variety of sources to support its findings.

Theoretical Framework

Strategists and theorists have written on the topic of insurgency and revolution for millennia. However, especially in the twentieth and the twenty-first century, authors such as B. H. Liddell Hart, David Galula, and David Kilcullen have given us a greater understanding of how and why insurgencies develop. Conducting a successful insurgency may be based on an ambiguous combination of circumstances that surround an event or region; however, many have commonalities researchers can analyze to understand better the conditions leading to the development of an insurgency.

In *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, Galula paraphrases Carl von Clausewitz's theory that "Insurgency is the pursuit of the policy of a party, inside a country, by every means."⁹ Galula touts the power of ideology, and the necessity of propaganda in winning the people's support through a "well-grounded" cause, in conducting a successful insurgency.¹⁰ Parsa suggests the roles of state structure, social classes, and ideologies are crucial to understanding when a society is ripe for rebellion. Additionally, combinations of these factors must be studied and compared to grasp the nuances of a situation fully.¹¹ This monograph uses these theories to construct a framework for its case study.

⁹ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964), 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

¹¹ Parsa, 6-8.

Hypothesis

The study tests three hypotheses to determine what combination of conditions were present and contributing to the conduct of the CPK's successful insurgency in Cambodia. The cross-border incursions of the United States and the South Vietnamese military, and the US bombing campaign in Cambodia contributed to the Khmer Rouge's rapid increase in troop strength between 1970 and 1975. The economic crisis caused by the Cambodian government's abuse of the rice and rubber crop prices was vital in inciting the rural agrarian population and driving them into the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Political and military assistance from the DRV was instrumental in the Khmer Rouge's ability to achieve its strategic objectives of overthrowing the incumbent Prime Minister and emplacing their government.

Research Question

Three research questions guide this study. How did foreign influence, the Cambodian economy, and regional instability contribute to the proliferation of the Khmer Rouge? How did the United States and DRV use elements of national power to influence the situation in Cambodia? Did any single variable or combination of variables appear to be more significant to the CPK's success or the Khmer Republic's demise?

Limitations

Due to the sensitive nature of the operations conducted by the United States in Cambodia, many of the official transcripts are inaccessible. Additionally, the secretive nature of Pol Pot, the CPK, and the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea makes accurate information on Khmer Rouge strength difficult or impossible to obtain. This study relies on analysis from Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports, and reports from local accounts. The likelihood of biased information from a collecting agent is high since it is often only available from politically motivated government reports and emotional firsthand accounts. This research relies heavily on secondary source compilations of interviews conducted by Shawcross and Kiernan. In Shawcross's

exhaustive investigation of the events played out in the Cambodian Civil War, particularly from 1969 to 1973 led him to state, “Departmental files are almost boundless. Every cable or memorandum refers to previous messages: one, ten, even fifty cables do not necessarily complete a story. The costs of pursuing every single relevant paper are prohibitive.”¹² He also alleges the US government agencies he petitioned for information using the United States Freedom of Information Act denied or in some cases deleted documents after receiving his request.¹³

Organization of the Study

This study is composed of five sections. The introduction section includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, theoretical framework, hypotheses, research questions, and limitations used in the study. Section two is a review of the literature used to conduct this study. Section three describes the research methodology. Section four is a case study which addresses the individual factors contributing to the proliferation of the Khmer Rouge. Finally, section five discusses the findings, provides a final analysis of the study, addresses the hypotheses, and answers the research questions.

Literature Review

The literature review section is organized into four subsections to address the most researched and disputed elements leading to the CPK’s success; US military intervention, the Cambodian economy and foreign assistance, and the influence Prince Norodom Sihanouk had on the Cambodian population. The rise of the CPK, and downfall of the Khmer Republic was not likely caused by any one of the elements listed; however, there is much dispute as to which element played the greatest role in the outcome of the civil war. The Cambodian civil war is a

¹² William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

polarizing subject for many historians and academics, and there are strong opinions amongst them as to why it occurred and who was responsible. The resulting genocide of the CPK's ascendancy is an unarguably moving subject.

The US military intervention

There is little doubt the extensive US bombing campaign in Cambodia affected the rural population, and the North Vietnamese soldiers operating in eastern Cambodia along the Ho Chi Minh trail. However, researchers dispute how much the bombing campaign contributed to the proliferation of the Khmer Rouge and the outcome of the civil war. While Shawcross, whose work concentrates on the US political aspects of the war, takes a more neutral stance stating "the immediate and lasting effects of the massive, concentrated bombardment will probably never accurately be known,"¹⁴ Kiernan claims "the US bombing campaign was probably the most important single factor in Pol Pot's rise." Both authors generally agree with the result of the bombing and its overall contribution to the insurgency.

Kiernan's conclusion is backed by first-hand accounts of Cambodians on the ground during the campaign. One source interviewed stated that following the bombing, the Khmer Rouge would bring the peasants to see the craters and devastation the bombs caused. Shell-shocked and angry, they were easily recruited or would send their children off to fight for the Khmer Rouge.¹⁵ Similar statements from Cambodian civilians regarding the effects of the bombing abound in Kiernan's works. Kiernan also cites a congressional report by the US General Accounting Office in 1971 showing that 60 percent of Khmer refugees give US bombing as their reason for displacement.¹⁶

¹⁴ Shawcross, 297.

¹⁵ Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 16, 23.

¹⁶ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 19.

Wilfred Deac asserts it was not the bombing campaign that led to the civil war, but a combination of factors including peasant dissatisfaction, government repression, and increasing communist presence that led to large-scale conflict, and ultimately led to the infamous killing fields.¹⁷ Deac's theory is dissenting among the chief historians who put more weight on the bombing than internal factors. However, it agrees with Parsa's theory which places greater emphasis on internal factors that lead to domestic instability, like the declining economy, than external ones. Craig Etcheson agrees it is unlikely that the actions of the United States led to the Khmer Rouge's success, but believes it may have played a role in pushing peasants toward the Khmer Rouge cause.¹⁸

Another factor that contributed to regional instability and Cambodian enmity towards Lon Nol's administration was border operations by US and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) forces. On April 29, 1970, US President Richard M. Nixon expanded the Vietnam conflict into Cambodia. Ground operations increased dramatically in number and scope. The aptly named "Operation Cambodian Incursion," was a series of search and destroy missions that consisted of approximately 32,000 US and 40,000 ARVN soldiers. Nixon characterized this action as a necessary extension of the Vietnam conflict to promote the success of his Vietnamization policy, not an invasion of Cambodia.¹⁹ Whatever the President's intent, the destructive effects of the operations and the actions of US and ARVN soldiers and commanders during those operations further antagonized the civilian population. R.A. Burgler gives the overall

¹⁷ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 52-53.

¹⁸ Craig Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 97.

¹⁹ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 304.

regional instability caused by military destruction as the main factor that allowed the CPK to seize control of Cambodia.²⁰

The operational goal of the Cambodian incursion was to destroy North Vietnamese communists and buy time for the Khmer Republic's armed forces, also known as Forces Armées Nationales Khmères (FANK), to prepare for the expected war.²¹ Its main objectives were to find and destroy the NVA headquarters for operations in South Vietnam, the Central Office in South Vietnam (COSVN), and to clear out communist sanctuaries. The operation was unsuccessful in this objective.

Moreover, it had the unintended consequence of pushing the communists west into provinces they had not previously occupied. Once there, the Khmer Republic did not have the military capability to take them back. George Herring notes that the "results were disastrous," and by displacing the NVA from their sanctuaries into the heartland of Cambodia, the mission helped spark a full-scale civil war.²² Straying from his hard line on the bombing, Kiernan posits the actions of the ARVN forces which remained in Cambodia for two years following the US withdrawal did more to destabilize the country and add to pro-communist sentiment than any other single factor.²³

The Cambodian economy and foreign assistance

Russell R. Ross cites in *Cambodia: A Country Study* that US State Department sources estimated the Khmer Rouge controlled as much as 60 percent of Cambodia and 25 percent of the

²⁰ R.A. Burgler, *The Eyes of the Pineapple: Revolutionary Intellectuals and Terror in Democratic Kampuchea* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Verlag Breitenbach, 1990), 26.

²¹ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 306-07; Chandler, *Tragedy*, 204; Donald P. Whitaker, Judith M. Heimann, John E. MacDonald, Kenneth W. Martindale, Rinn-Sup Shinn, and Charles Townsend, *Area Handbook for the Khmer Republic* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1973), 220.

²² George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 769; Boraden Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge: Ideology, Militarism, and the Revolution that Consumed a Generation* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 24.

²³ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 306-07.

population by 1973.²⁴ As the Khmer Rouge controlled larger percentages of the countryside, refugees poured into Phnom Penh. Food was increasingly scarce, and the number of displaced civilians in Phnom Penh exacerbated the situation exponentially. The combination of these two factors made foreign assistance from the United States more important every passing day. Elizabeth Becker's work on the Cambodian crisis, *When the War Was Over*, gives an emotional account of the rapidly degrading situation in Phnom Penh. Becker describes Phnom Penh as a city of refugees wrought with criminal neglect in its policies toward the poor.²⁵

Starvation was commonplace throughout the city. Becker references the extreme choice peasants were left with, stating they could "run away from the forced collectivization in the countryside so their child could starve to death in Phnom Penh."²⁶ To ease the suffering of Cambodian civilians trapped in the capital, the US State Department provided \$40 million in economic aid in July of 1970. On August 19th of the same year, the United States signed a military aid agreement with Cambodia promising \$185 million for fiscal year (FY) 1971, followed by \$200 million for FY 1972.²⁷ Government corruption was rampant, and much of the monetary aid went to the upper class and government officials, doing little to help the peasants.²⁸

Cambodia also received \$8.9 million in military aid from US contingency funds. Shawcross claims military equipment, mostly automatic rifles, began to arrive in Phnom Penh as early as April of 1970 in secret shipments from South Vietnam.²⁹ United States staff consultants, James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose corroborate Shawcross's claim in their

²⁴ Ross, 260.

²⁵ Elizabeth Becker, *When The War Was Over: The Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and Its People* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 166-67.

²⁶ Ibid., 167.

²⁷ Deac, 82

²⁸ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 347.

²⁹ Shawcross, 162.

congressional report stating they witnessed an estimated 6,000 AK-47s and 7,200 M-2 Carbines and ammunition arrive in Cambodia prior to May of 1970. Lowenstein and Moose were unable to discover the origin of the weapons in any greater detail than the AK-47s came from an unknown source in Saigon, and that Military Advisory Command Vietnam (MACV) had no authority to brief them on the matter.³⁰

No amount of foreign aid at this point would allow the struggling Cambodian economy to recover in the face of such corruption and poor leadership. In the end, Leslie Fielding claims that it was “egregious errors in US foreign policy” alongside Pol Pot’s leadership that was most responsible for the CPK’s victory.³¹ Wilfred Deac cites economic decline and nationalization of certain parts of the economy as a major cause of political instability leading to the downfall of the Lon Nol regime.³²

Sihanouk’s influence

The influence of Cambodia’s former leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, on the rural population, cannot be neglected. Sihanouk was loved by the peasant population who Becker says saw him as an almost god-like figure.³³ When ousted by Lon Nol in 1970, the former ruler of Cambodia fled to China. From there, he used his influence to support his previous enemy, the Khmer Rouge. Tea Sabun, a CPK central party member, stated in an interview “Sihanouk arrived in Beijing . . . he called on the people to rise against Lon Nol. Everyone joined the resistance.”³⁴ Etcheson hypothesizes that it was Sihanouk's influence more than any other variable that caused

³⁰ Deac, 161-62; Committee on Foreign Relations, Cambodia: May 1970, 91st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1970, 10-11.

³¹ Leslie Fielding, *Before the Killing Fields: Witness to Cambodia and the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2008) vii.

³² Deac, 54.

³³ Becker, 154.

³⁴ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 311.

the peasant population to back the Khmer Rouge.³⁵ Kaing Guek Eav, a Khmer Rouge torturer, and commander of the infamous S-21 Tuol Sleng prison, corroborate this theory in a 2009 Reuters article. Kaing, or “Duch” as he was known stated “Prince Sihanouk called on the Cambodian people to go and join the communist Khmer Rouge in the jungle, and that allowed the Khmer Rouge to build up their troops from 1970 to 1975. Without these events, I think the Khmer Rouge would have been demolished.”³⁶

Compounding Sihanouk’s influence was the lack of education outside of the cities. In *Beyond the Killing Fields*, Usha Welaratna tells the story of a Buddhist monk, Look Tha. Tha reflects on his experience during the civil war stating that the two biggest reasons that Cambodia fell to the communists were ignorance amongst the rural population and Sihanouk’s manipulation of them.³⁷ The lack of education also allowed the Khmer Rouge soldiers to manipulate the peasants into joining their cause easily.

Conversely, Chileng Pa, a Cambodian intelligence officer for the Khmer Republic, describes Lon Nol as senile and confused.³⁸ Due to a stroke that robbed Nol of as much as 20 percent of his intellectual capacity³⁹ in 1971, he was ever more taken advantage by the senior military officers who embezzled the money that the United States gave Nol’s government as aid. John Tully and Pa agree that the actions of the corrupt senior officials, resulting in intermittent

³⁵ Craig Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields: Lessons from the Cambodian Genocide* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005).

³⁶ Ek Madra, “Khmer Rouge Jailer Says U.S. Contributed to Pol Pot Rise,” *Reuters*, 10 April 2009, accessed 1 December 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-rouge/khmer-rouge-jailer-says-u-s-contributed-to-pol-pot-rise-idUSTRE5351VF20090406>.

³⁷ Usha Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 58-59.

³⁸ Chileng Pa and Carol Mortland, *Escaping the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Memoir* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008) 49.

³⁹ John Tully, *A Short history of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival* (Crows Nest NSW, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2005) 159.

pay, shoddy equipment, and shortages of food to lower ranking soldiers of the Khmer Republic and the largest contributing factor to the Khmer Republic's loss.⁴⁰

The numerous divergent theories may all play a part in the proliferation of the Khmer Rouge, either as the single most important factor or synergistically. The following section shows the methodology of this monograph. This section discusses the criteria selected for analysis and comparison in more detail. It also defines how the case study section of this monograph is structured, analyzed, and cross-referenced to show their effect on the Khmer Rouge insurgency.

Methodology

In Parsa's comparative analysis of revolutions in developing countries, he cites economic instability, international influence, and regional instability as three major contributing factors in the development of revolutions.⁴¹ This research uses comparative analysis to examine three categories of factors about the Cambodian civil war; external influences, the Cambodian economy, and regime strategies. The criteria used to evaluate the data found in each section are insurgency/counter-insurgency theory and doctrine. The primary resources used to accomplish this evaluation are Misagh Parsa's *States, Ideologies, and Revolutions*, US *Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Planning*, and *Joint Publication 3-24, Counterinsurgency*.⁴² The results of the research found in this monograph are used to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions.

Ground operations into Cambodia by the US and ARVN forces, foreign aid to Cambodia in US dollars, and the US bombing campaign are the external factors chosen in this study to show instability in Cambodia. The US bombing campaign data comes from estimates Holly High and her team of experts published in their work "Electronic Records of the Air War Over Southeast

⁴⁰ Tully, 61; Pa, 49.

⁴¹ Parsa, 7.

⁴² US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, *Joint Publication (JP) 3-24, Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2018).

Asia: A Database Analysis.”⁴³ Kiernan and Taylor Owen have also analyzed the compiled data in great detail. There is general agreement concerning the accuracy of the tonnage dropped by US aircraft, the number of sorties flown, and the locations of impact, as well as the overall effect on the Cambodian and Vietnamese on the ground. However, the numbers cannot be a proven definitively.

A glaring issue with using Holly High’s analysis of US bombing data to determine its relevance to the insurgency stems from the inaccuracies of the database used to record the data. The Pentagon’s Southeast Asia bombing databases are described by Owen, who has collaborated on multiple works with Kiernan, as “enormous but antiquated.”⁴⁴ In an email to Kiernan in 2010, High explains the reason for the wide variations in data. “The database is wildly inaccurate itself if only because it was based on all-too-human data entry and was also subjected to falsification . . . database probably underestimates the scale of the bombing, but the database itself cannot tell us by how much or how to account for this.”⁴⁵ Due to the amount of time and analysis High and her colleagues have put into the analysis of this data, as well as their reputation and expertise, researchers of bombing in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era cite their work routinely. Estimates of ordnance dropped on Cambodia by the United States from 1969 to 1973 range from a high of 2.7 million tons, to the most recent figure of around 500,000 tons published in 2010.⁴⁶

The Area Handbook for the Khmer Republic published in 1973 by Donald P. Whitaker, Judith M. Heimann, John E. MacDonald, Kenneth W. Martindale, Rinn-Sup Shinn, and Charles

⁴³ Holly High, James R. Curran and Gareth Robinson, “Electronic Records of the Air War Over Southeast Asia: A Database Analysis,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 86-124, accessed 13 November 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/vs.2014.8.4.86>.

⁴⁴ Ben Kiernan and Taylor Owen, “Making More Enemies than We Kill? Calculating U.S. Bomb Tonnes Dropped on Laos and Cambodia, and Weighing Their Implications,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 13, no. 17 (April 2015): 2; High, Curran, and Robinson, 86-124.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁶ Kiernan and Owen, “Enemies,” 3.

Townsend provided the information for the economic data tables used in this study. Four major crops are used to show trends in the economy from 1968 to 1974. This range is chosen to give context to the years of the civil war. Since the insurgency succeeded early in 1975, certain economic data does not exist for that year. Rice and rubber are the two most important crops to the Cambodian economy. Corn and sugar are included to show that the results were not limited to the two main crops. Crop data numbers are estimated for 1974, and no crop data are available for 1975 due to the security concerns for the agencies that gathered those data. The Cambodian annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is also analyzed between 1966 and 1975 to show the effect of the decline in crop production and exports, and the resulting price increase in key commodities.⁴⁷ This economic data is used to determine the strength or weakness of the economy.

The perceived support and safety of the civilian population are central to whether an insurgency will succeed or fail.⁴⁸ The strategies that were used by the Khmer Rouge and the Khmer Republic in their conduct of information operations are very different. The actual handling of civilians by the regimes is also extremely different, as are the intended and unintended results. This monograph uses occurrences cited in CIA reports and interviews, as well as, reports and interviews of Cambodian citizens compiled by Kiernan, Chandler, and Shawcross to provide the details used in its analysis of regime strategies.

A comparison of data derived from government reports, and a country study of Cambodia published in 1990 is used to determine approximate Khmer Rouge troop numbers. These estimates are cross-referenced with numbers taken from numerous reputable secondary sources to gauge accuracy. There is no way to know exactly how many soldiers the Khmer Rouge had at any point in their rise to power. Eyewitness accounts and interviews of CPK party leaders and US and

⁴⁷ Whitaker et al., 7, 288.

⁴⁸ Parsa, 162-63.

Cambodian government reports provide the most accurate information, though these reports vary widely.

Once compiled and analyzed, the factors were cross-referenced to determine if there was a relationship between them. The author also compared the findings to insurgency theories and historical examples to identify similarities with like situations. This study hopes to identify if any or all of the factors analyzed contributed to the rise in Khmer Rouge numbers and how important each of the factors was.

Case Study

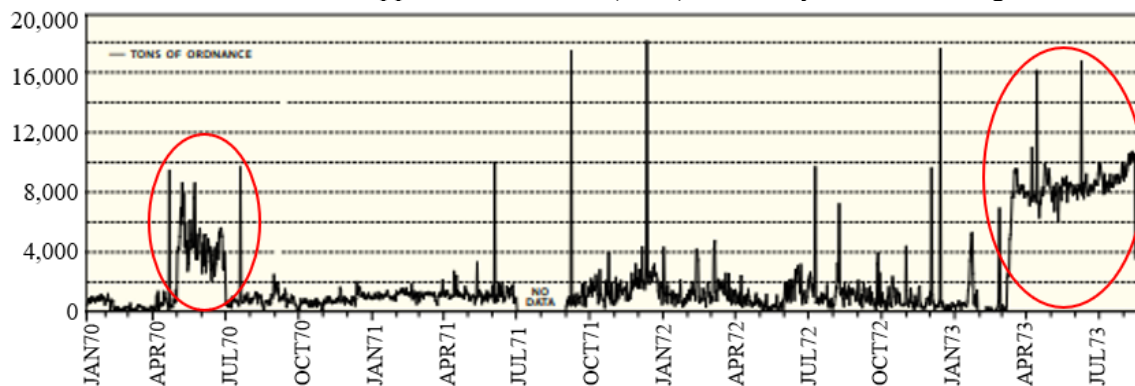
The case study for this monograph consists of seven sections subdivided by individual contributing factors. Section one through three focuses on external factors, specifically the effects of foreign influence from the United States, and the DRV. Section one addresses the US bombing campaign; section two, the cross-border military operations by US and ARVN Special Forces (SF) through South Vietnam; section three, foreign assistance to the Khmer Rouge and the Khmer Republic. Section four examines the Cambodian economic crisis using crop data and an examination of government economic policies. Section five studies the effects of the opposing strategies used by the Pol Pot regime to recruit Cambodian citizens into the Khmer Rouge, and those used by Lon Nol's Khmer Republic to suppress the insurgency. Section six addresses the proliferation of the Khmer Rouge by numerical strength throughout the five years of the civil war. Section seven is the final analysis of the study; it addresses the hypotheses and answers the research questions.

The US bombing campaign

The severity of the American B-52 bombing campaign on the insurgency is the most ardently contested and researched factor used in the study of the Khmer Rouges proliferation. From March 1969 to August 1973, the US military dropped an estimated 539,129 tons of

ordnance on 113,000 sites in Cambodia through 227,000 sorties.⁴⁹ The enormous tonnage of ordnance dropped on Cambodia between January 1970 and August 1973 when the campaign ceased is displayed in Table 1. Of note, is the significant increase of ordnance dropped between April and July of 1970 during Operation Cambodian Incursion, then again from January to August of 1973. These periods are highlighted with red circles. This first increase corresponds with the combined US and ARVN ground campaign, and the second increase corresponds with the rapid rise in Khmer Rouge's numbers during the same period. The short duration spikes in the bombing, such as in October 1971, and again in January 1972, are indicative of US response to Khmer Rouge offensive operations. Whether the increase in the bombing and the extent of its effect is due to, or a result of the Khmer Rouge's growth is a matter of some debate amongst scholars. However, none deny there is a relationship between the two.

Table 1. Total US ordnance dropped on Cambodia (Tons), 1 January 1970 to 15 August 1973.



Source: Ben Kiernan and Taylor Owen, "Bombs Over Cambodia," *The Walrus* (October 2006): 62-69, accessed 15 November 2018, https://gsp.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Walrus_CambodiaBombing_OCT06.pdf.

More important than the tonnage dropped are the targets themselves, and the devastation caused by the carpet bombing. Joseph S. Nye, in his study of the use of power, posits "actions often have powerful and unintended consequences, but from a policy point of view we are

⁴⁹ Ben Kiernan, "The US Bombardment of Cambodia," *Vietnam Generation* (Winter 1989): 6; Shawcross, 297.

interested in the ability to produce outcomes. . . . An airstrike that kills one insurgent and many civilians demonstrate general power to destroy, but it may prove counterproductive to a counter-insurgency strategy.”⁵⁰ This theory is particularly relevant to the US bombing campaign in Cambodia, and the results United States President Richard M. Nixon thought the increased bombing would produce. On 9 December 1970, Nixon ordered through US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, “They [US Air Force] have got to go in there, and I mean really go in. . . . I want everything that can fly to go in there and crack the hell out of them. There is no limitation on mileage, and there is no limitation on budget. Is that clear?”⁵¹ Using this type of strategy to suppress an insurgency is contradictory to the recommendations of many air power theorists since the rise of air power. It had a predictable and extremely volatile opposite effect in this instance.

The same Pentagon database used to calculate tonnage also has several entries where the data about the targets themselves are missing. High et al., calculated that approximately 10 percent of the bombing sorties were indiscriminate, 3,850 the targets were not known, and 8,238 did not have targets listed at all.⁵² Since there is no way to conduct battle damage assessments, reports from the survivors of the bombings suggested the death toll was between 50,000 to 150,000 deaths.⁵³ The Southeast Asian bombing database labels many of the targets as unknown, and it seems highly unlikely that all of these targets were legitimate military targets.

⁵⁰ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *The Future of Power* (Philadelphia, PA: PublicAffairs, 2011), 6.

⁵¹ Ben Kiernan and Taylor Owen, “Bombs Over Cambodia,” *The Walrus* (October 2006): 66, accessed 15 November 2018, https://gsp.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Walrus_Cambodia Bombing_OCT06.pdf.

⁵² High, Curran, and Robinson, 86-124.

⁵³ Kiernan and Owen, “Enemies,” 6.

The saturation of ordnance displayed in Figure 1 shows the heavy concentration of bomb strikes throughout the southeast portion of Cambodia. The areas are known as the dog's head, parrot's beak, and fish hook, where the Ho Chi Minh trail was located, and US and ARVN ground forces were concentrated, were especially heavily saturated with munitions. As the Khmer Rouge moved west, and closed in on Phnom Penh, the strikes also spread west well into the interior of Cambodia.

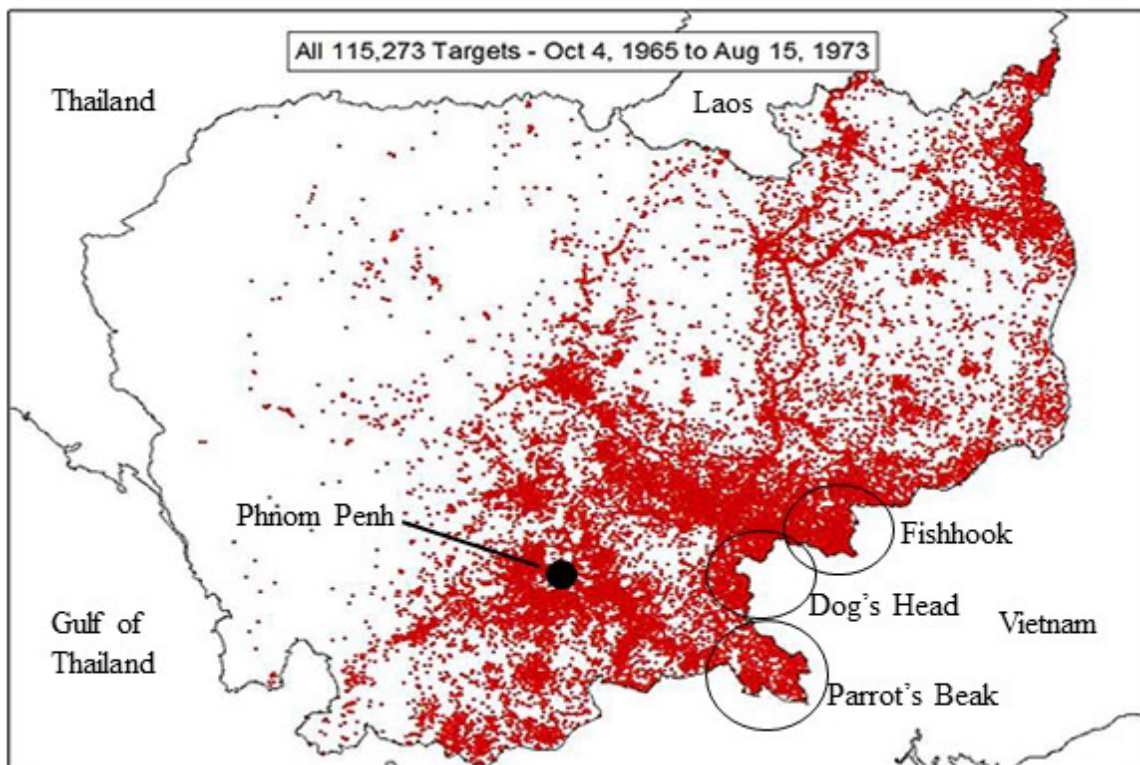


Figure 1. US bombing sites in Cambodia 1965-1973. Taylor Owen, "Cambodia Bombing Redux," 14 May 2007, accessed 30 October 2018, <http://taylorowen.com/cambodia-bombing-redux/>.

The bombing was successful in destroying Khmer Rouge forces. Indeed, it was able to keep them from taking Phnom Penh in 1973 during the Khmer Rouge's first major offensive against the country's capital city. When the United States ended its bombing campaign in August of 1973, that threat disappeared, and Khmer Rouge forces were able to grow and mature almost unabated. The lack of support also forced the Khmer Republic into a defensive posture in Phnom

Penh, and the Khmer Rouge was able to dominate most of the country unopposed.⁵⁴ Chandler provided a US Defense Department estimate that the Khmer Republic controlled only 25 percent of its territory while it was responsible for 60 percent of its population. They base this estimate in part on a report of 750,000 refugees driven into Phnom Penh to escape the US bombing and ARVN attacks.⁵⁵ Deac estimated the percent of the population the Khmer Rouge controlled during that same time at 80 percent.⁵⁶

The bombing also had unexpected second and third order effects. With most of the bombing concentrated along Cambodia's eastern border with Vietnam, it forced the North Vietnamese soldiers already operating in Cambodia to move west, further into Cambodia. The DRV soldiers now had the opportunity to influence a greater number of Cambodian peasants and Khmer Rouge soldiers. The enmity generated by the bombing made the rural Cambodians easy recruits by Khmer Rouge propaganda teams who used the bombing as leverage against the US-backed Khmer Republic.⁵⁷ The bombing also displaced millions of rural Cambodians who either fled into the jungle and the hands of the Khmer Rouge or fled to the urban centers like Phnom Penh that was already overpopulated and starving.⁵⁸ The account by three American journalists captured in Cambodia by the Vietcong (VC) and held for forty days emphasized the effect of the US military efforts on the rural population of Cambodia. In a book written by one of the captured journalists, Richard Dudman claims "the bombing, and the shooting was radicalizing the people of rural Cambodia and turning the countryside into a massive, dedicated and effective rural base .

⁵⁴ Nhem, 28-29.

⁵⁵ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 229.

⁵⁶ Deac, 166.

⁵⁷ Kiernan and Owen, "Bombs," 2-6.

⁵⁸ Deac, 279-80; Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 350.

. . proving to Cambodians that the United States is waging unprovoked colonialist war against the Cambodian people.”⁵⁹

Cross-border ground operations

The NVA and National Liberation Front (NLF) pejoratively called the Viet Cong, or VC used Cambodia as a sanctuary from US forces in Vietnam. Prior to the US incursion into Cambodia, they operated out of touch by US forces, freely moving supplies and troops from north to south via the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Cambodian government, led by neutralist Prince Sihanouk, denied US military officials permission to conduct operations in Cambodia multiple times while in power. In 1970 when the pro-US Defense Minister Lon Nol deposed Sihanouk, Nol authorized the United States to conduct non-clandestine operations in earnest.⁶⁰

Although US and ARVN Special Forces teams had executed approximately 800 clandestine cross-border missions, code-named “Daniel Boone” and later “Salem House” throughout 1967 and 1968, they were small in scale and scope. Their intended purpose was to conduct reconnaissance and lay mines on suspected North Vietnamese routes and troop concentrations. The large-scale operation “Cambodian Incursion” lasted from 29 April 1970 to 22 July 1970 began along the eastern border of Cambodia. The operation initially concentrated on objectives along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but soon expanded westward. These operations were primarily to direct tactical air or artillery strikes that were too low a priority to qualify as targets for B-52 carpet bombing.

On several occasions, US air support was not available, and ground forces exploited the objectives themselves.⁶¹ The exploitation, usually conducted by ARVN soldiers, exacerbated the enmity of the rural population toward the United States and the Khmer Republic due to

⁵⁹ Shawcross, 175.

⁶⁰ Herring, 768-69.

⁶¹ Shawcross, 24-27, 135, 151.

inappropriate handling of the Cambodian citizens. As Chandler describes, they often behaved like bandits stealing personal possessions and cattle from the locals, and killing those they believed were traitors.⁶² A CIA report from Phnom Penh stated that Vietnamese commanders called in airstrikes on villages to displace the residents in order to loot the villages and steal the livestock. The ARVN officers then forced the villagers to buy back their stolen possessions.⁶³ The brutal actions of the ARVN soldiers may be attributed in part to a massacre of approximately 1,000 ethnic Vietnamese found floating in the Mekong River in April 1970, purportedly slain by the FANK.⁶⁴

Indeed, during the conduct of Operation Cambodian Incursion both US and ARVN forces did much to drive the peasants to side with the Khmer Rouge. Shawcross calls Cambodia a free-fire zone for US aircraft. He further claims that pilots supporting ground operations had almost unlimited latitude in choosing whatever target they wanted, and did so with little discrimination. Moreover, Shawcross claims US officials deliberately falsified many of the post-operational reports which emboldened pilots to act without restraint.⁶⁵

Many Vietnamese communists had already moved into the eastern regions of Cambodia in an attempt to escape the war in Vietnam. The ground incursion into Cambodia had a similar effect on them as the bombing. The bombing along the Ho Chi Minh trail drove the NVA westward toward Phnom Penh into areas more populated than their eastern border sanctuaries. The large-scale ground campaign by US and ARVN forces now served to exacerbate the situation. The areas to the west provided little in the way of tactical advantage for the Vietnamese, but did give them a greater strategic advantage in the form of an opportunity to

⁶² Chandler, *Tragedy*, 204; Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 306, 350-51.

⁶³ Shawcross, 174-75.

⁶⁴ Committee on Foreign Relations, 3.

⁶⁵ Shawcross, 174.

recruit Cambodians into the Khmer Rouge.⁶⁶ The movement of US and ARVN forces into Cambodia during Operation Cambodia Incursion is depicted in Figure 2.

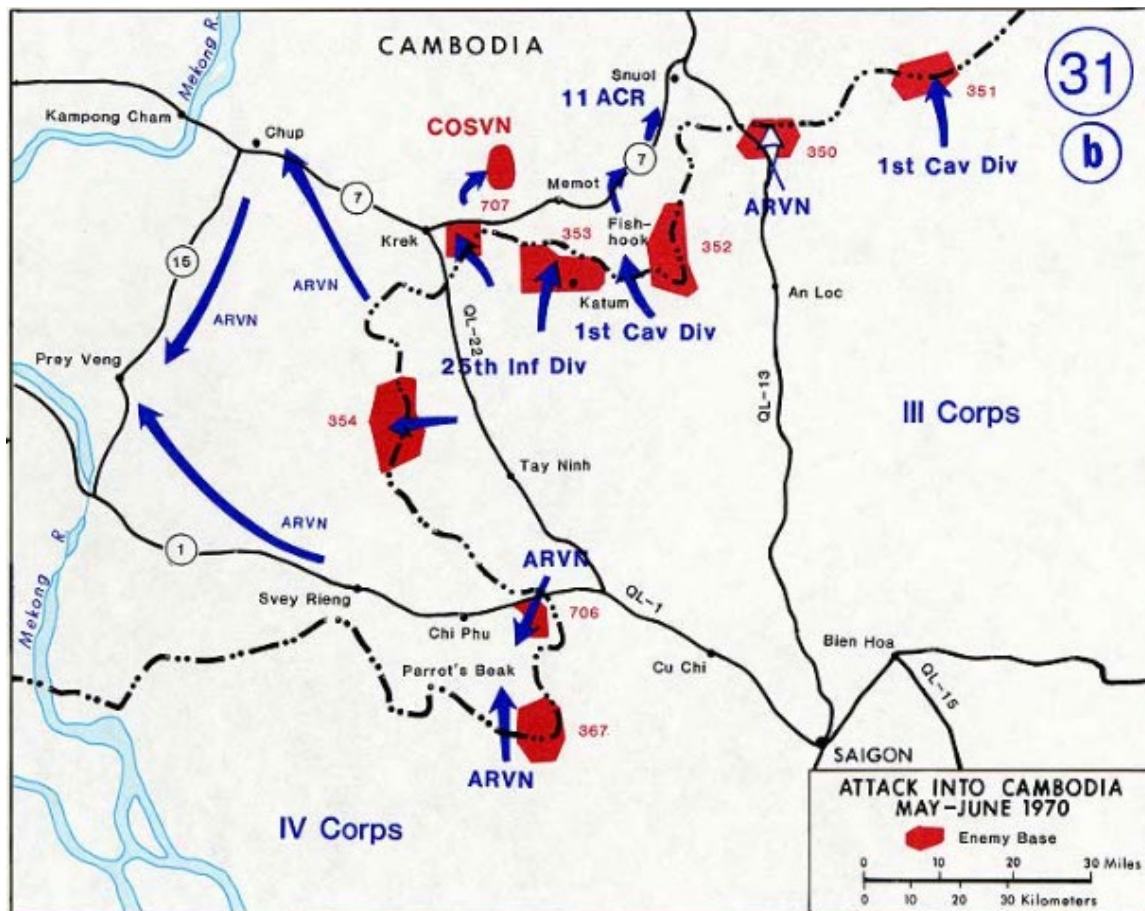


Figure 2. Operation Cambodia Incursion 1970. Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, “Moments in U.S. Diplomatic History,” accessed 30 October 2018, <https://adst.org/2017/04/u-s-incursion-into-cambodia/>.

Foreign assistance

As the US and ARVN forces drove the NVA westward away from the Vietnamese border, the Khmer Republic’s armed forces proved unable to defend their territory. Nol knew the small numbers of the FANK could not win a war against the growing insurgency backed by the DRV, whose soldiers operating inside Cambodia’s borders numbered 45,000 to 60,000 by Deac’s

⁶⁶ Whitaker et al., 232.

estimate, and 35,000 to 40,000 by Kiernan's.⁶⁷ Regardless of the exact number, both approximations represent well equipped and experienced soldiers. In contrast, an analysis by the Pentagon's Systems Analysis Office on the readiness of the Cambodian army concluded that they suffered from a myriad of shortcomings including lack of experience, obsolete equipment, and an incompetent and corrupt officer corps.⁶⁸

At the beginning of the civil war in March of 1970, the FANK consisted of approximately 35,000 soldiers. Nol immediately mobilized 10,000 more soldiers, and by May of 1970, an estimated 150,000 additional citizens had volunteered for service. The Khmer Republic did not possess the capability to arm or train the volunteers. Lowenstein and Moose state in a US Senate report, the 10,000 reservists called to active service were armed with "a heterogeneous collection of Chinese, French, Soviet, and U.S. equipment." The Khmer Air Force had forty attack aircraft in various states of disrepair, lacking spare parts, and critically short on ammunition to conduct missions.⁶⁹

The FANK proved no match for the NVA, and the Khmer Republic became increasingly dependent on assistance provided by the United States. Nol continued to request more aid, and Washington continued to acquiesce. Kissinger stated in a briefing to the White House staff that Nol requested enough military equipment from the United States to equip an army of 200,000. When Kissinger told Nol to reconsider, Nol then sent a new request to outfit an army of 400,000. In the end, Kissinger compromised with an aid package aimed at equipping an army of 220,000. Nixon himself endorsed the aid in what he declared was an effort to preserve Cambodia's neutrality, and to combat the proliferation of communism from reaching Phnom Penh.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Deac, 71-72; Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 286.

⁶⁸ Shawcross, 164-65.

⁶⁹ Committee on Foreign Relations, 10.

⁷⁰ Shawcross, 161.

Military assistant to Kissinger, Brigadier General Alexander Haig flew to Cambodia to discuss with Lon Nol exactly what aid the United States would provide. The intent was to support Nixon's anti-communism policy, but also attempt to appease those in Washington who were against further escalation of military operations in Southeast Asia. Haig informed Nol that the extent of US aid equated to the withdrawal of US ground forces at the conclusion of Operation Cambodian Incursion, followed by a program of restricted military and economic aid.⁷¹ On 30 June, Nixon laid out his seven-point plan for Cambodia to the American people. According to the report, the US would provide no ground personnel or advisors. It would conduct air interdiction missions to protect US forces in Vietnam, turn over captured military supplies to Cambodia, provide small arms and unsophisticated equipment, and encourage other countries to provide military, diplomatic, and economic aid to Cambodia.⁷²

US foreign aid continued until August of 1973, when the United States abruptly ended the bombing campaign. Economic aid continued until the fall of the Khmer Republic in April of 1975. In total, aid to Cambodia cost America over \$1.6 billion US dollars; \$1.18 billion in military assistance, and \$503 million in economic assistance. This figure does not include the \$7 billion cost to the United States for the air campaign.⁷³ The aid, equaling almost \$1 million per day was not enough to save Lon Nol's government. Nye's study of the use of power also addresses the unintended effects large economies may have on small countries positing they may cause accidental harm, and "if the effects are unintended, then there is power to harm, but it is not

⁷¹ Shawcross, 163.

⁷² Whitaker et al., 220.

⁷³ ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, "Timeline: US-Cambodia Relations," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 32, no. 3 (December 2010): 467-468, accessed 22 August 2018, <https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/348>.

power to achieve preferred outcomes.”⁷⁴ Nye’s assertion proves true in this instance. The Khmer Republic’s economy was so dependent on US foreign aid, by 1975 it was beyond recovery.

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s assistance to the CPK consisted of NVA regulars and guerrillas to support the poorly trained and minimally equipped Khmer Rouge in combat operations against the Khmer Republic. The DRV was frugal in the number of arms they provided to the CPK in an attempt to keep the CPK reliant on their aid, preferring to provide troops instead. In the early years of the revolution until 1972, the CPK relied heavily on the well trained and experienced troops of the NVA armed with Soviet military equipment. The CPK leadership, whose vision was a racially pure agrarian state, harbored great enmity for the Vietnamese. The party leaders understood the Vietnamese were a means to an end they would discard as the Khmer Rouge gained strength.

After Sihanouk’s fall in 1970, the Khmer Rouge began to increase their numbers rapidly. In 1971 much of the FANK’s forces and equipment were destroyed by the NVA during a poorly planned and executed operation to open lines of communication to the northern provinces from Phnom Penh. This defeat, combined with rapidly rising numbers of Khmer Rouge soldiers, allowed the CPK to start expelling NVA from their ranks. By 1973 there were reportedly as few as 5,000 NVA soldiers in Cambodia. The CPK successfully drove the NVA soldiers from their ranks entirely by 1975.⁷⁵

The Cambodian economy

Cambodia’s agriculture was hit especially hard by the war. In 1968 agriculture was 41 percent of the GDP.⁷⁶ By 1970, the Cambodian economy was already in a state of crisis caused

⁷⁴ Nye, 6.

⁷⁵ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 316-17; Whitaker et al., 259.

⁷⁶ Sokty Chhair and Luyna Ung, “Economic History of Industrialization in Cambodia” (WIDER Working Paper, Helsinki, 2013), 3-4, accessed 22 August 2018, <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/economic-history-industrialization-cambodia>.

by multiple factors including the government's manipulation of crop prices starting in the late 1960s. By 1970, lack of food exacerbated by the refugee crisis and regional instability drove the economy into hyperinflation. From 1970 to 1974, food prices in Phnom Penh climbed from a base index of 338 in March 1970 to 8,117 in April 1974.⁷⁷ Nationalization, or central control, of rice crop prices allowed the Cambodian government to increase their profit margin by lowering the purchase price, and then exporting the rice for a greater profit. The decreased income to the farmers further agitated the rural population while the high prices in the city drove the urban population to despair.

Low buying prices by the government also caused black market sales to the CPK and NVA to increase dramatically. Farmers smuggled as much as 40 percent of the rice crop into Vietnam where the DRV paid three times the Cambodian government's rate.⁷⁸ The Cambodian government resorted to using its military to halt black market sales through forced collection. This practice had previously led to a peasant uprising in 1967 that was brutally suppressed by the military. It now served to further widen the gap between Phnom Penh and the rural population.⁷⁹

Table 2. Cambodia, Output of Major Crops (Metric Tons), Selected Years, 1968 to 1974.

Crop	Crop Year					
	1968-69	1969-70	1970-71	1971-72	1972-73	1973-74
Rice	2,503	3,814	2,732	2,138	953	762
Rubber	117	52	13	1	15	12
Corn	117	137	121	80	73	No Data
Sugar (palm and cane)	93	93	53	48	No Data	No Data

Source: Sokty Chhair and Luyna Ung, "Economic History of Industrialization in Cambodia" (WIDER Working Paper, Helsinki, 2013), 7, accessed 22 August 2018, <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/economic-history-industrialization-cambodia>.

⁷⁷ Sophal Ear, "Cambodia's Economic Development in Historical Perspective: A Contribution to the Study of Cambodia's Economy" (Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1995), 68.

⁷⁸ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 251.

⁷⁹ Nguyen-vo, 57.

Table 2 shows a marked decrease in all crops following the initiation of the civil war in 1970. Crop output increased steadily from 1950 to 1970. Rubber and rice, accounting for over 60 percent of all exports, decreased dramatically from their high point in the 1969-1970 crop year. This decline coincided with the start of another US bombing campaign, Operation Menu.⁸⁰ Many factors contributed to the reduction. Rice fields destroyed by bombing, and insecurity in the farming region are both linked to decreased crop output. The Khmer Republic had minimal access to most of the rice paddies and rubber plantations since the Khmer Rouge controlled those provinces, particularly the rural areas outside of population centers.⁸¹

The war's effect on rubber output was particularly significant. Cambodian rubber output per acre and quality were high before 1969. Kampong Cham province northeast of Phnom Penh was dedicated primarily to rubber plantations. Although the northeast province of Ratanakiri was suitable for rubber cultivation, the Khmer Rouge denied access to their most tightly controlled territory. The bombing destroyed many of the plantations and processing facilities, and the use of agent orange by the US military for defoliation caused rubber output to decrease nearly to zero by 1972.⁸² Table 3 shows a corresponding decrease in GDP in the same years as the decrease in crop output or collection shown in Table 2.

Table 3. Cambodia, Annual GDP (Million USD), 1966 to 1975.

Annual GDP Cambodia								
Year	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975
GDP	1,100	980	720	970	510	700	590	721

Source: Countryeconomy.com, “Cambodia GDP–Gross Domestic Product,” accessed 1 November 2018, <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/cambodia?year=1975>.

⁸⁰ Whitaker et al., 288.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 268-69.

By 1975, Phnom Penh was almost entirely reliant on US delivery of food to feed the two million people displaced by the war. Food prices, especially for high demand items such as rice, fruit, charcoal, meat, and vegetables, rose as much as 100 percent in 1970 due to the disruption in transportation caused by hostilities. The Nol government attempted unsuccessfully to control food prices and by the end of 1971, rice prices were twice the government established rate and four times the government rate for salt.⁸³ Of note was the disparity of prices by class. The working class price index rose 49 percent while the middle class rose only 35 percent. The rise was probably due to greater availability to the more affluent classes. Authorities in Phnom Penh reported that the rise in price index was much higher in the city than in the rural areas. Surely a result of the influx of refugee to Phnom Penh which numbered 1.2 million people by the end of 1970, double from the year before. By the end of 1971, the Cambodian Ministry of Health estimated 2 million Cambodians were displaced.⁸⁴

Regime strategies

The CPK

The strategy used by the opposing leaders, Pol Pot, and Lon Nol, in their handling of the peasant population outside of the cities had the opposite effect on their attitudes toward the current regime and the Khmer Rouge. The factors discussed in the previous sections contributed extensively to the success of the CPK, but research also suggests the Khmer Rouge executed a well-orchestrated propaganda campaign. The information campaign executed by the Khmer Rouge and the NVA was highly effective in recruiting the rural peasant population to their cause. Conversely, the Khmer Republic's repressive tactics were more effective in driving the peasants to the Khmer Rouge than assuring their safety.

⁸³ Whitaker et al., 299.

⁸⁴ Shawcross, 222.

Nye suggests soft power, including the use of communications strategies to win over the people, is much more effective than military might in the fight against insurgencies. His position “outcomes are shaped not merely by whose army wins the war but also by whose story wins,” is central to US count insurgency doctrine today.⁸⁵ The message must appeal to the masses to keep radical groups from recruiting among the populace. The combination of military force must be used alongside soft power instruments to win the hearts and minds of the people. Pol Pot understood this principle, while Lon Nol did not.

The Pol Pot regime had a strategic vision of how to achieve victory, and changed tactics based on the problem they were facing during each phase of their strategy. Pot was able to cunningly reframe the problem, and develop a strategy to meet that strategic goal. The Khmer Rouge and NVA first spread their message through leaflets and seemingly altruistic actions. Before 1968, when the Khmer Rouge officially began their armed struggle, propaganda teams distributed leaflets throughout the population centers to spread their message of a democratic Kampuchea to undermine Sihanouk.⁸⁶ The period between 1968 to 1970 is considered by the CPK a transition period where political struggle transitioned to armed conflict with the FANK. The Khmer Rouge began to launch small-scale attacks on FANK outposts to gain arms and ammunition.⁸⁷ Their strength began to build more rapidly. During this period, support from the DRV was essential as the Khmer Rouge had few guns, and was just learning how to conduct organized military operations.

The Khmer Rouge continued to recruit the peasant population actively but changed tactics. Propaganda teams visited villages following US bombings, and used the shock of the bombs and the deaths of loved ones to pit the population against the Khmer Republic, whom they

⁸⁵ Nye, 19-20.

⁸⁶ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 255-58, 279-80.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

saw as allied with the United States. Kiernan cited an interview with a Cambodian civilian from a village the US bombs destroyed, and allegedly killed fifty villagers in three separate bombing sorties; “Many monasteries were destroyed by bombs, People in our village were furious with the Americans; they did not know why the Americans had bombed them. Seventy people from Chalong joined the fight against Lon Nol after the bombing.”⁸⁸

The Khmer Republic

Sihanouk’s backing of the Khmer Rouge contributed significantly to the recruitment of the Cambodian peasantry. Shortly after arriving in Beijing, Sihanouk called on the people to rise against Lon Nol. A CPK leader stated in an interview following Sihanouk’s announcement, “everyone joined the resistance.”⁸⁹ Although this statement is exaggerated, it does show the power Sihanouk had over a portion of the population of Cambodia, especially the lower classes.

Authors and historians do not often contribute Sihanouk’s influence as a major factor in the Khmer Rouge’s success. It is much more common to fault a failing economy or a bombing campaign for the insurgency; those factors are typical of a country ripe for revolution.⁹⁰ However, Deac notes that on 26 March 1970, two days after Sihanouk’s call for an uprising, Kompong Chom, the third largest city in Cambodia, erupted in “peasant dominated demonstrations.”⁹¹ Demonstrators sacked the mayor’s mansion and killed Lon Nol’s brother, Lon Nil. Over the next four days, the demonstrations spread to several towns throughout Cambodia. Nol used the FANK to keep the protesters from marching on Phnom Penh. Deac described the FANK tactics during the suppression as brutal, and notes the FANK killed and arrested hundreds of protesters. Deac

⁸⁸ Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 20-21.

⁸⁹ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 311.

⁹⁰ Parsa, 7.

⁹¹ Deac, 69.

further claimed “These first and last pro-Sihanouk demonstrations of the Cambodian War sharpened the unforgiving polarization that led to the killing fields of 1975.”⁹²

Kiernan references two interviews that described the brutal repression of the peasantry by FANK forces. The interviewees stated that Lon Nol’s forces fired into the crowd killing dozens of citizens, and FANK tanks ran over people in the streets during the demonstrations. In a particularly graphic display of brutality, a woman who witnessed the events in the town of Takeo-Kampot describes the chaos following a day of demonstrations;

The next day, there was another demonstration, of thousands of people – Young, old, men and women from many villages around. Then the soldiers arrived from Takeo city, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nim. Tanks flattened people, two or three hundred died. I rode my bicycle there and saw all the bodies. Some people were not yet dead, and were lying there, waving flags and their hands, saying “long live Samdech Euv.” Then soldiers brought tanks and flattened them all again.⁹³

At this point in the revolution, many of the demonstrators had little or no interest in the Khmer Rouge or the CPK’s ideological movement. The people were angry with the FANK and Lon Nol for his deposition of Sihanouk and handling of the situation.⁹⁴ After this, they joined the Khmer Rouge solely to fight back.

Thomas Mockaitis notes that most reputable counterinsurgency (COIN) books recognize similar lines of effort used to conduct effective operations. They include removing the causes of unrest on which the insurgency feeds or “winning hearts and minds.” This strategy requires a strong and fair government that the people see as having their best interests in mind. Mockaitis posits a state that loses an insurgency is “not out-fought but out-governed.”⁹⁵ These statements

⁹² Deac, 69.

⁹³ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 302-03; Samdech Euv is a title for Prince Sihanouk meaning “Exalted Lord” or “King Father” or “Prince Father.” The author researched numerous sources, and the translation varies depending on the source. Absolute accuracy is not important in this case as the general theme of the title can be gleaned from the three translations.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 302-03.

⁹⁵ Thomas R. Mockaitis, “Resolving Insurgencies” (Monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2011), 11.

are very relevant to the Cambodian insurgency. The two drastically different strategies used by the CPK and the Khmer Republic played a significant role in the CPK's success over Lon Nol.

The proliferation of the Khmer Rouge

The increase in numbers of the Khmer Rouge is difficult to show with accuracy. The CPK kept no detailed documents of their numbers. All of the estimates are derived from statements and interviews given by CPK party leadership, US and Cambodian intelligence estimates, and firsthand accounts by citizens on the ground at the time of the civil war. According to Ross in his country study of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge's strength was estimated between 400 and 2,000 in mid-1970. He theorized the discontent of the people against the new government led by Lon Nol was not strong enough to draw larger numbers to the Khmer Rouge at that time.⁹⁶ This statement is telling in itself. It shows a primary factor in the rise of the insurgency was discontent of the people. Following Nol's Coup in 1970, Sihanouk loyalism took hold of the peasant population causing the Khmer Rouge's numbers to increase sharply.

Kiernan, in his analysis, shows how prominent the bombing and the ground campaign were to the recruiting of the rural population. His firsthand accounts from Cambodian interviews vividly display the Khmer Rouge winning the people in small chunks. An attack on a village by the ARVN forces caused fifty locals to join the revolution.⁹⁷ The previously mentioned bombing sortie that destroyed several monasteries in a village caused seventy people to join the fight against Lon Nol. Another village was bombed and napalmed causing sixty people to "join the Khmer communist army out of anger at the bombing."⁹⁸

The disposition of the people was such that any number of factors could cause them to join the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge's numbers rose to 15,000 by the end of 1970. By 1973,

⁹⁶ Ross, 254-55.

⁹⁷ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 306.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 353.

the US embassy placed the number of militant armed insurgents at 50,000.⁹⁹ The Khmer Rouge was now large enough to challenge the NVA soldiers supporting them, though it took another two years before the Khmer Rouge mounted a successful attack on Phnom Penh. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge numbered 68,000 ethnically pure Khmer.¹⁰⁰ Without the US bombs to hold them back, they marched on Phnom Penh, overthrew Lon Nol and evacuated the inhabitants into forced labor camps in the countryside.

Findings, Analysis, and Conclusion

This monograph set out to test three hypotheses: first, the cross-border incursions of the United States and the South Vietnamese military, and the US bombing campaign in Cambodia contributed to the Khmer Rouge's rapid increase in troop strength between 1970 and 1975. This hypothesis is shown to be true. Numerous accounts confirm that the bombing campaign strengthened the enmity of the population toward the United States and the Khmer Republic causing them to join the Khmer Rouge. The ground campaign drove the soldiers of the DRV west into Cambodia further affecting the rural populace positively toward the communist movement and negatively toward the US and ARVN soldiers. These factors all played an essential role in the proliferation of the Khmer Rouge.

Second, the economic crisis caused by the Khmer Republic's abuse of the rice and rubber crop prices was vital in inciting the rural agrarian population and driving them into the hands of the Khmer Rouge. The findings also prove this hypothesis. The economic crisis before and during the Cambodian civil war led to mass starvation, and the displacement of millions of citizens. Farmers, no longer able to feed their families, turned to the Khmer Rouge for food. Others fled to population centers where the overcrowding caused disease and starvation. The government's

⁹⁹ Ross, 261.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

inability to supply food or adequate medical care killed thousands, further destabilizing the country.

Third, political and military assistance from the DRV was instrumental in the Khmer Rouge's ability to achieve its strategic objectives of overthrowing the incumbent Prime Minister and emplacing their government. In the early stages of the insurgency before 1973, DRV support allowed the CPK to build its strength while simultaneously assisting the Khmer Rouge to defeat FANK forces. After 1973, when the CPK drove the DRV soldiers from their ranks, they no longer played a role in the insurgency. The early support proved to be vital to the Khmer Rouge's proliferation. Had they not received military training and economic backing from the DRV, it is likely the FANK would have suppressed the insurgency for an indeterminate amount of time. DRV military support did not affect the final assault on Phnom Penh.

Three questions drove the research in this monograph. The explanation of the hypotheses above addresses the first and second questions. The third research question is much more difficult to answer. Could the removal of any individual or combination of variables have prevented the insurgency from occurring? US *Joint Publication (JP) 5.0, Joint Planning*, notes that eliminating specific threats may not resolve the underlying causes of an insurgency, and military action may exacerbate the problem rather than solve it.¹⁰¹ In this instance, the Khmer Republic had too many factors working against it to win. It is unlikely that the removal of one variable would have contributed significantly; however, without DRV backing early in the insurgency, the Khmer Rouge would not have been able to defeat the FANK forces directly.

US counterinsurgency doctrine states "Insurgents challenge government forces only to the extent needed to attain their political aims progressively. Their efforts seek not just to engage HN military and other security forces, but also to establish a competing system of control over the population, making it increasingly difficult for the government to administer to its people and its

¹⁰¹ US Joint Staff, *JP 3-24, Counterinsurgency*, 2018, I-6.

territory.”¹⁰² This claim is valid in this case study; the inability of the Khmer Rouge to confront the FANK militarily without the DRV forces would have led to a lengthy buildup of Khmer Rouge forces versus the rapid proliferation that occurred.

The US bombing and combined US and ARVN ground campaign are not the only factors the CPK could rely on to accomplish their aim of turning the people against Lon Nol. These factors, combined with Sihanouk’s influence, motivated the peasant population and allowed the Khmer Rouge to increase their numerical strength rapidly. These are certainly contributing factors; however, it is unlikely they were enough to gain the momentum needed for a successful insurgency on their own.

A strong economy would also have hurt Khmer Rouge recruiting. The Khmer Rouge centered their strategy on the recruitment of the peasantry. Their ability to project military power depended on the rural population. A strong economy would have eliminated the need for farmers to look elsewhere to provide food for their families. This one element would have required the CPK to modify their recruiting strategy, relying instead on the force of arms as Lon Nol did. An important factor in the CPK’s strategy was fostering enmity toward the Khmer Republic. As with the DVR backing, the Khmer Rouge would have taken much longer to build their numbers without the failing economy.

Carl von Clausewitz, in his oft-cited book, *On War*, describes war as a “paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.”¹⁰³ His theory of the paradoxical trinity is particularly relevant to the variables

¹⁰² US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, *Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), II-2.

¹⁰³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 89.

discussed in this research. The three magnetic poles represent the Cambodian people, the opposing armies, and the governments. Pol Pot and the CPK used a thoughtful strategy to create conditions, or used conditions present in the operational environment, to polarize the people's enmity toward the Khmer Republic. Through this method, they would win an insurgency and hold a country hostage for four years.

Further research is always useful in determining the causes of insurgencies. Pol Pot was a secretive leader who is shrouded in mystery. Lon Nol was a weak leader of limited ability and vision. This case study of the Cambodian insurgency from 1970 to 1975 shows that many elements in common with insurgencies were present, and specifically ones in developing countries as determined by Parsa's work and US military doctrine. There is, however, no great mystery that the conditions present in Cambodia during this time-frame made the country ripe for regime instability and revolution.

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