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The Killing Fields—Again?

As we approach the tenth anniversary of the communist takeover in Cambodia, one may wonder when fighting and hardship will cease in that torn land. Mired in death and destruction, the Cambodian people have experienced a scenario of horror. The film, "The Killing Fields," grimly reminds us of the final days before their sentence to genocide. What is missing, however, is the role in bringing catastrophe that was played by actors whose interest in posturing overwhelmed Cambodia's cries for survival. At 29 and a Navy Lieutenant, I was on the ground during that final year. I watched as Congress crafted a future that many today would rather forget.

A SEAL commando first and intelligence officer second, I was one of the military attaches selected for duty in Phnom Penh. Our charter was clear—get the Cambodians through the offensive.

It was *déjà vu* Vietnam. Phnom Penh, the capital city, was surrounded by thousands of communist gunners. By day and night, thundering rockets tore open the city. Bloodshed and hunger were everywhere.

Attaches did not suffer politicians easily. Congress was divided over whether Cambodia's problems were to be settled by conquest or negotiation. We wondered if anyone bothered reading combat intelligence reports written by the people who were there.

Days began at 5 a.m. It was then that I read press clips sent by my mother. Breakfast took conditioning: warm bread from the local market baked with insects, coffee and half-ripened fruit. Attaches lived off the local economy. Our thoughts drifted often to Congress at mealtime. It cut our cost-of-living allowance in its rift with the White House.

"The Killing Fields" reminded me of how tough it was for correspondents living at the Hotel Phnom. It was Phnom Penh's Plaza Hotel. Sitting by the pool at night they sipped cool drinks served by short-coated Cambodians. Constantly on the prowl, they dogged us by day to get a combat lead or a picture surreptitiously taken of an American officer poring over a map with a Cambodian. They would label it unlawful advising.

As deputy naval attaché, I observed the Cambodian performance in moving supplies from Saigon up the Mekong. It was nightmarish. Blasted by sophisticated rockets and mortars, raked by machine-gun fire, the small Cambodian navy paid the price. Expert communist gunners became better. The river became littered with battered hulks, rusting sentinels in a riverine graveyard.

As communist lethality on the rivers increased, so did the din of congressional outrage. The lawmakers tightened down on personnel numbers. In time only 200 Americans could lawfully remain in the country. It made our task more difficult. President Ford pleaded for humanitarian and military assistance. Congress needed to act quickly to save lives. We wondered if the politicians could see the Cambodians through this hurricane gate of bloodshed.

In Washington, Sens. Kennedy, Tunney and McGovern painted a dismal picture of Americans' economic stagnation. They urged that not another dime be spent on Southeast Asia. Only Cambodians could solve Cambodia's problems, they said. Emergency supplemental assistance was not the answer.

News came that Bella Abzug and some congressional friends would visit—to menace, we feared—

the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh. Their actual reactions were sober and respectful after viewing firsthand the Cambodians' bone-chilling agony.

The war's reality was especially strong and discordant for young staffers. Some had dodged the draft only to find themselves, strangely, on a Navy combat vessel viewing remnants of war along the Mekong.

In Washington, debate continued. President Ford warned that without near-term relief the Cambodians would not make it to the rainy season; negotiations would have no chance. America's heartland was reaching out with sympathy and concern to the Khmer people. Would not Congress respond?

Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib told the House Foreign Affairs Committee, "I guarantee 100 to 0 that without aid Cambodia won't survive." In the Senate, Edward Kennedy bellowed, "Once again we are hearing the same old arguments and the same old controversies over the same old war. The lingering and bloody conflict there deserves more of our diplomacy and not more of our ammunition."

Intelligence reports told that the Khmer Rouge were on the march to Phnom Penh. Communist field commanders crushed skulls with hammers and chained men to machine guns in the face of government fire.

On March 13, 1975, the Senate Democratic Caucus voted 38-5 against further military aid to Cambodia, 34-6 against any supplemental aid in FY '75. This followed a similarly lopsided vote by House Democrats on March 12. The House resolution stated "the sense of the Democratic caucus to firmly oppose" any further aid. Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott said he too favored a new gov-

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ernment in Cambodia that could negotiate a truce and safe treatment of refugees.

The news came to us like a fusillade of Soviet rockets. We in the embassy felt scorched, deserted, betrayed. Saddened military attachés wept with their Cambodian comrades. The final indignity was having to explain away congressional justification for sending Phnom Penh down the drain.

Ten years have passed since this devastation of humanity. Untold innocents still suffer. Graphically, the movie shows communist justice monstrous and murderous.

What about the Congress that played a leading part? Many still try to cleanse their souls by speaking out on hunger and refugee problems worldwide. Many villains, however, remain behind cold marble walls waiting for the next "Killing Fields."

Engraved in stone at the face of the National Archives building less than a mile from the Capitol is the message, "What Is Past Is Prologue." Will these words be ignored as Congress sets the stage again, this time for millions in Central America?

Clearly, the country, including the Reagan administration, contemplating lessons for dealing with Central America now, has lessons to sift from Cambodia's ashes. Close attention must be paid to the guardians of liberal politics and to their kind of commitment against communism. A Latin policy crafted after the Cambodian tragedy may result in another cinema that none of us may wish to see.

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