

**Press Coverage of the Cambodian Genocide: An Analysis****Sharon Wu****May 9, 2012**

Between 1975 and 1979, 1.67 million Cambodians died as a result of Communist reform and American bombing. However, this genocide is considered to be one of the most under reported global crises of the twentieth century. The lack of reporting contributed greatly to the lack of action against the perpetrators. This paper examines press coverage of Cambodia's genocide in order to determine how the press response reflected American foreign policy.

I examined articles from 1970 (when civil war in Cambodia first broke out) to 1985 (when the Communist Party's General Secretary technically resigned). I used articles from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*, which were the three largest American newspapers that maintained correspondents in Southeast Asia during those years. I also examined editorial pieces from *TIME*, *The Nation* and *The New York Review of Books*, where many of the intellectual debates about Cambodia were published years later.

**Background**

From 1965 to 1969, both Johnson and Nixon ordered the bombing of eastern Cambodia in hopes of destroying Communist Vietnamese strongholds. Both bombing campaigns killed thousands of Cambodian non-combatants and devastated infrastructure and vital resources. Cambodian head of state Prince Norodom Sihanouk fought tirelessly to maintain Cambodia's neutrality throughout the Vietnam War. However, once the bombing began and Cambodians were dying in the thousands, he struggled to find a solution.

In 1970, Sihanouk was overthrown by Marshall Lon Nol. However, Lon Nol was incapable of running the state. His ineffective government quickly gave in to corruption, terror, and oppression. Additionally, he authorized a devastating third wave of U.S. bombing to kill off Cambodian Communist insurgents seeking to overthrow his government.

It was under these unsteady conditions that the Communist Khmer Rouge began gaining support. They viciously fought Lon Nol's soldiers for control of Cambodia. Lon Nol's fragmented army stood little chance against the fierce and aggressive Khmer Rouge soldiers.

In 1975, Khmer Rouge soldiers finally conquered the capital city of Phnom Penh. Led by the mysterious Pol Pot, the Marxist-inspired Khmer Rouge guaranteed recovery, but their actions completely contradicted their promises. The Khmer Rouge completely sealed off

the country from foreign influence. Borders were guarded, phone lines cut and mail services discontinued. All foreigners were forced to leave Cambodia. This became a critical obstacle for foreign reporters seeking to write about the country.

After their takeover, the Khmer Rouge ordered the mass evacuation of all city inhabitants to the countryside. Approximately 10,600 people died during this forced exodus. The Khmer Rouge also enforced agricultural collectivization policies that required every person to labor in grueling conditions in the countryside. Thousands died from starvation, disease and overwork.

Thousands more were systematically murdered. Unjustified torture and executions were commonplace. Anyone considered an enemy to the state was eliminated. Ethnic minorities and the educated elite were massacred. Mass graves were scattered throughout Cambodia.

The Khmer Rouge's reign finally ended in January 1979 when Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia and drove leaders out of Phnom Penh. They continued fighting for control of Cambodia for many years afterwards, but without success.

The most accurate statistic, by Yale historian Ben Kiernan, says that 1.67 million of a total of 7.89 million Cambodians died during these years. Approximately 21 percent of the population perished under Communist rule.

### **Findings**

American politicians and the public lacked the necessary information to devise a viable solution. There was definitely enough press about mass deaths to alarm the public, but journalists simply couldn't provide enough information to persuade anyone to take action.

Reporting on Cambodia's genocide was incredibly difficult. Because the Khmer Rouge closed the country, it was almost impossible for foreign correspondents to report directly. Instead, they depended mostly on refugee testimonies. Thousands of civilians managed to escape to refugee camps in Thailand. These refugees became a primary source of information.

However, journalists were criticized for using only refugee testimonies because their accounts were usually unverifiable. Journalists had no way of knowing if their stories were true, but there was no one else to confirm with. As a result, American media consumers were very skeptical of the already sparse information they received.

Those that did follow Cambodia's genocide understood that the only real solution was a military intervention. But after years of fighting in Vietnam, no one wanted to send more American soldiers to Indochina. American politicians never would have been able to garner enough public and political support to send troops to Cambodia.

This tied closely to the subject of culpability, which was discussed widely in the press. After Cambodia was opened up again and Americans had a better understanding of what exactly transpired, newspapers immediately began discussing who was to blame.

Naturally, the Khmer Rouge was solely responsible for systematic murder. However, many scholars, including Noam Chomsky, very publicly criticized the U.S. for contributing to the genocide as well. These scholars published long editorials regarding the issue of responsibility.

Firstly, they believed the U.S. played a large role in creating the political atmosphere from which the Khmer Rouge grew. Due to U.S. bombing and Lon Nol's inefficacy, Cambodians suffered immensely in a dysfunctional society. Their growing frustration drove them to support the Khmer Rouge, who promised to help the nation recuperate.

Secondly, the U.S. was strongly criticized for the extensive bombing, which destroyed vital resources. Critics of American foreign policy blamed the U.S. for the deaths related to disease and starvation. Even if the Khmer Rouge had not taken over, these deaths still would have occurred due to destruction.

In defense of all the people who stood by without taking action, one could ask, "What could we have realistically accomplished?" After Vietnam, no one in the U.S. wanted to see troops in Cambodia. It was an enormously complicated situation that couldn't easily be resolved simply with money or soldiers. Stopping the Khmer Rouge was one thing; rescuing the Cambodian population was another. Cambodia was burdened with a decade of fighting, corruption, famine, and murder. Saving Cambodia would mean a complete reformation of Cambodia's society, government and economy. There were no simple solutions.