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Sihanouk's fall played fateful role

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The events that led to Sihanouk's downfall and those that followed cause me to write today's column with a heavy heart. Cambodia's national tragedy cost Cambodians two million lives and delivered the country to Vietnamese expansionism. The tragedy also took my parents' lives, alienated some of my best friends and separated me from the land of my birth.

Had those in power chosen different courses of action, much loss could have been avoided. As Karl Marx said, "History does nothing; it does not possess immense riches, it does not fight battles. It is men, real, living, who do all this."

Men tend to reject what they don't conform to their view, because not to reject means accepting they were wrong. They look for what supports their views, brush off what doesn't, and they dig in.

To argue that Sihanouk's overthrow brought the Vietnam War to Cambodia ignores the reality that Cambodia's compromised neutrality under Sihanouk's leadership brought Vietnamese infiltration and U.S. response across the Cambodian border long before the overthrow.

To argue U.S. bombings gave rise to the Khmer Rouge overlooks Sihanouk's role in their expansion and the years of support they received from Vietnamese and Chinese communists. The support continued even when the Khmer Rouge's atrocities were impossible to ignore.

Eventually, the Khmer Rouge, having developed a sense of omnipotence, became defiant of their Vietnamese benefactors. This led to the December 1978 military invasion by Vietnam. The success of that invasion led to the ouster of the Khmer Rouge, the establishment of a Vietnamese puppet regime in Phnom Penh, and the imposition of the 1979 unequal treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation, which opened the door to Cambodia becoming part of greater Vietnam, in fulfillment of Ho Chi Minh's dream.

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"Les absents ont toujours tort," the French say. "The absent are always in the wrong" -- they cannot defend themselves.

Sihanouk won't tell. His political missteps led to Vietnamese presence in Cambodia as they fought their compatriots and the Americans. To get the Vietnamese communists out of Cambodia, Sihanouk reportedly told Lon Nol to organize anti-North Vietnamese and anti-Vietcong demonstrations, which got out of hand March 11.

On that day, Sihanouk told journalists, "I plan to ask the Russians and the Chinese authorities to ask the Vietcong to leave us in peace," otherwise Cambodia might go to "the right" with Lon Nol. Reportedly, Lon Nol assured Sihanouk on that day there was room for friendship with the communists, but the Lon Nol government told the communists to depart before dawn on March 15.

Seizing the political moment, an enraged Sihanouk denounced Lon Nol and company before leaving Paris for Moscow on March 13: They were "more patriots of the dollar than patriots of Cambodia."

Eventually, it was reported that a cassette recording of a closed-door meeting came to light. In the meeting it was alleged that Sihanouk threatened death to government leaders and Lon Nol. In Moscow later that day, Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny urged Sihanouk to return right away to Phnom Penh.

In Peking, China's foreign ministry summoned French Ambassador Etienne Manac'h on March 15 to ready an Air France plane to fly Sihanouk to Phnom Penh as soon as he arrived from Moscow. Press media reported from Phnom Penh of festive preparations to welcome Sihanouk along the road from Pochentong Airport.

But Sihanouk postponed his trip to Peking.

Lon Nol was said to have dragged his feet against Sihanouk's ouster until the evening of March 17, when he allegedly was confronted with the tape. On March 18, the Cambodian parliament voted 92 to 0 to depose Sihanouk as chief of state.

On March 21, the prince told the press in Peking: "It is absolutely not my intention to try to regain the power which I lost."

But two days later, on March 23, he reversed himself. Over Peking Radio, Sihanouk called on Khmers and foreign residents "to engage in guerrilla warfare in the jungle against our enemies," and announced the formation of the "National Union Government," the "National Liberation Army" and the "National United Front of Kampuchea."

In his "message and solemn declaration," Sihanouk spoke of personal revenge: "In the struggle which I am determined to see to its end (or at least until my death in the underground which I will soon join), I seek among other things, one personal goal. ... I will say that I want revenge."

On March 26, the Vietnamese Communists began military action in Cambodia's southern provinces.

On April 15, 1970, Sihanouk declared in a message, "Henceforth, I shall irreversibly be engaged in combat." He spoke of his "single objective of establishing in Cambodia a socialist regime whose leaders would be, on the one hand young, progressive nationalists, and on the other, communists."

And that's where we are today in Cambodia.