

Aggression Rights and Wrongs: Vietnam in Cambodia; the United States in Iraq

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A recent book by Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: A Political Survey*, dramatizes once again the fantastic double standard that operates in cases of cross-border attacks by the weak, and U.S. targets, and the strong, especially the United States. Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978, quickly defeating the Khmer Rouge and pushing its remnant forces into Thailand. Vietnam did this under considerable provocation, as the Pol Pot regime was extremely hostile to Vietnam, carried out a major ethnic cleansing of Vietnamese within Cambodia, and mounted a series of cross-border attacks that cost many Vietnamese lives. Vietnam's invasion was therefore based on, and a response to, serious Cambodian provocations. By contrast, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not based on actions by Saddam Hussein injurious to the United States. The Bush administration was obliged to construct a series of lies to justify the attack and occupation of a distant country, lies that had been crudely (and obviously) fabricated before the attack, which were decisively confirmed as lies in its aftermath.

Of course, both before and after the invasion of Iraq it had been alleged that as Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator ousting him was desirable and therefore in itself justified the invasion. But the same argument would justify the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, as Pol Pot had been furiously assailed as a mass killer and "another Hitler." In a politically neutral world his ouster by the Vietnamese would have been treated at least equally as a liberation and part of that "responsibility to protect" that has become a favorite of contemporary interventionists—in fact more so, as in the late 1970s Pol Pot ranked higher than Saddam as a killer.

But following the failed U.S. attempt to dominate Vietnam by military attack, that country was hated by U.S. officials who had actually cozied up to Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge in the last years of Pol Pot's rule, even while the U.S. and Western establishments continued to denounce that rule as beyond the pale. A useful indication of the shift was former U.S. official and Vietnam expert Douglas Pike's November 1979 reference to Pol Pot as a "charismatic leader" of a "bloody but successful peasant revolution." Thus, although there had been Western calls for forcible action against the Pol Pot regime when Vietnam proceeded to oust that regime, the United States—hence its allies, clients, and the "international community"—treated this as intolerable aggression. The view was that the government soon installed in Phnom Penh was a Vietnamese and illegitimate "puppet"—although it was composed of Cambodians who had been a political faction in Cambodia under attack by Pol Pot—and that it was urgent that Vietnam remove itself from Cambodia and allow an "independent" Cambodian government to be formed and rule.

What followed then was international condemnation of Vietnam, sanctions, a Chinese

punitive invasion of Vietnam in February 1979, and a widespread refusal to recognize the new government of Cambodia. Cambodia's seat at the UN was kept for Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge on the grounds of "continuity" with the old Cambodia (as the State Department informed Congress in 1982). Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, along with several other exiled Cambodian factions, fled to Thailand, were welcomed there, and their cadres were protected and funded by China, the United States, and other countries. The Khmer Rouge was free to make sporadic attacks on (and steal timber from) their former homeland. (Imagine the U.S. and UN response if Iran provided a homeland for an ousted Saddam Hussein faction that made periodic incursions into Iraq.) The design in supporting Pol Pot was to "bleed" Vietnam, as explicitly stated by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. The United States cooperated fully in this bleeding enterprise, even though it involved the huge hypocrisy of supporting "another Hitler" and imposed further injury on the long-suffering Cambodian people, about whom many crocodile tears had been shed while Pol Pot had ruled Cambodia.

Another part of the U.S. and allied design was to force Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia and to replace the government it had brought into power with one either closely aligned with the West or impotent. The United States succeeded in getting the UN and its allies to put enough pressure on the Cambodian government and Vietnam to force them to accept an election process that would replace the existing government. One problem with this solution was that the Cambodian government that was to be replaced was doing a credible job, despite the horrendous conditions that it inherited and the refusal of the "international community" to give any substantial aid to the badly damaged and slowly recovering country. According to a UN report of 1990: "Considering the devastation inherited from war and internal strife, the centrally directed system of economic management...has attained unquestionable successes, especially marked in restoring productive capacity to a level of normalcy and accelerating the pace of economic growth to a respectable per capita magnitude from the ruinously low level of the late 1970s."

Vickery claims that this new government also "made creditable progress in developing social services, health care, education, agriculture, and vaccination programs for children and animals." It also performed relatively well on women's rights and civil liberties, given the immediate background and in comparison with its Cambodian predecessors and nearby neighbors (like Thailand).

A second problem for Western interventionism was that Vietnam gradually withdrew its military forces from Cambodia and had them all out by 1989, in keeping with Vietnam's promises and contrary to Western assurances that Vietnam intended a permanent stay. This suggested that the Cambodian government no longer needed the Vietnamese military presence to govern and in another political context it might have raised questions about the need for foreign intervention to assure "independence." But all of this was irrelevant to the United States, which refused to accept a government friendly toward and influenced by the Vietnamese. That government had to be ousted, no matter what the consequences, and the experiences of post-ouster Guatemala (1954 onward) and post-ouster Nicaragua (1990 onward) indicated that the consequences could be painful and even disastrous to the indigenous population.

A third problem for the West was that Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge (KR) was the most powerful faction across the border in Thailand and anxious to return to power. Not only did this not interfere with the effort at regime change, the United States and its allies actually insisted

that the KR be one of the constituent parties that would take part in an election for the new government. The U.S. and its allies organized a Paris conference in 1991 to firm up a massive international intervention in Cambodia, with the supposedly regime-changing election to be held in 1993. This regime change process ended the progress made by the post-KR government by introducing neoliberal rules that cut back needed social programs, and via the deliberately splintering political arrangements that made the government more corrupt.

Amusingly, the electoral rules imposed to help weaken the power of the Vietnam-sponsored government, including proportional voting, succeeded in allowing that earlier government to retain preeminent power, although its effectiveness was reduced as it struggled in a more hostile environment. But the power of the KR, which had rested heavily on Western subsidy and diplomatic support, dwindled quickly, although its indigenous partners, now uneasily linked to the new government, maintained the KR's venomous hostility toward Vietnam and Vietnamese.

What has been called the "Nicaragua strategy"—with an international boycott and sanctions, a subsidized contra force attacking the target state and forcing it to spend resources on defense, and an election designed to finalize regime change—was used in the case of Cambodia and was partially successful: it succeeded in imposing a great deal of pain on the target population and terminated economic and social progress under a government opposed by the United States; but it did not succeed, as in Guatemala and Nicaragua, in fully effecting a regime change. The heavy costs to the Cambodian people resulting from Western (U.S.) hostility to the Cambodian government continues to today.

Vietnam did not have aggression rights so its occupation and the government that it installed had to be removed in the interests of international law and justice with the help of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.

In the case of the U.S. invasion-occupation of Iraq, all the principles that affected Vietnam and Cambodia are stood on their head.

(1) Although in contrast with the Vietnam-Cambodia case the U.S. invasion was based on no provocation by the distant victim state, no sanctions were imposed on the U.S. by the UN or international community, and although "humanitarian interventionists" proclaim a newly accepted "responsibility to protect," no protection was offered the Iraqis from March 2003 to the present. David Rieff, George Packer, Samantha Power, Michael Ignatieff, Thomas G. Weiss, Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-Moon and company have never called upon the world to intervene to protect the Iraqis—despite a million or more Iraqi deaths, over four million refugees, and a steady stream of Falluja type assaults and massacres—although, according to Thomas Weiss of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, the responsibility to use force to protect "kicks in...if a state is manifestly unable or unwilling to protect its citizens," as is manifestly the case with Iraq under U.S. attack and occupation.

(2) No demand has been made that the invader get out and the Security Council even voted shortly after the invasion to give the invader occupation rights (under Security Council Resolution 1546, June 8, 2003, which might be called the U.S. "pacification rights" resolution). This has not been altered even though the invader has made it plain that it intends to stay indefinitely with a gigantic embassy, a number of very large "enduring bases," and steady efforts to negotiate a long-term presence with the Iraqi government.

(3) No protest has been made that the government of Iraq, militarily and financially dependent on the occupation, is not truly “independent,” and that independence would require the withdrawal of the occupation army and other conditions that might make an election free and meaningful (points forcibly made as regards the Vietnam occupation of Cambodia or as regards Syria in Lebanon).

(4) In the decisions on “surges” and debates about how long the United States will stay in Iraq, neither the conditions of true independence, nor the demands of international law, nor the desires of the Iraqi people, enter the discussion. (Polls there have regularly shown that the Iraqis, as well the U.S. public want us out.) These are decisions for the U.S. ruling elite, grounded in U.S. aggression rights and the cowardice and lack of moral force of the international community.

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