
Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: David Anderson, Anne Foster, T. Christopher Jespersen


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In 1979 many non-specialists received their most thorough introduction to Cambodia and its involvement in the Vietnam conflict in William Shawcross' *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*. As a journalist, from 1970 on Shawcross reported on the war for the *Sunday Times* of London and other papers. Shawcross covered the 1972 Khmer Rouge offensive before leaving for the United States and returned to write about the collapse in 1975 of the Lon Nol regime, which had been backed by the United States. After receiving reports in 1975 about the brutal behavior of the victorious Khmer Rouge, Shawcross started research on his book.

Shawcross’ study provides an interesting comparison with Kenton Clymer’s study published almost thirty years later. Shawcross’ journalistic approach contrasts significantly with Clymer’s academic orientation, exhibited in four previous studies from a study of John Hay as U.S. diplomat, a revised Ph.D. dissertation under the direction of Bradford Perkins, to an examination of Protestant missionaries in the Philippines, to the U.S. and the independence of India, and the award winning two volumes on which *Troubled Relations* is based, *The United States and Cambodia, 1870-1969: From Curiosity to Confrontation* and *The United States and Cambodia, 1969-2000: A Troubled Relationship*. This study received the Robert H. Ferrell Book Prize for 2005 from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR). Established by Ferrell’s former students to honor his contributions to diplomatic history, the prize recognizes distinguished scholarship in the history of American foreign relations, broadly defined.

There are significant areas of agreement between Shawcross and Clymer, most notably in their depiction of Cambodia as a sideshow, offstage from the main arena in Vietnam, with disastrous consequences for Cambodia. Both authors are also highly critical of U.S. policymakers, particularly Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger and, in the case of Clymer, their successors from Gerald Ford through George H.W. Bush. The most significant difference is in their tone and overall approach. Shawcross views Cambodia as the foreign policy side of Watergate with emphasis on Nixon and Kissinger’s reliance on secrecy and misleading explanations on U.S. policy. Shawcross also found it difficult to believe the accounts of genocidal repression by the Khmer Rouge from 1975 on and attempted to rationalize their behavior as in part a consequence of the brutalization caused by the U.S. bombing of Cambodia from 1969 through 1973.\(^1\) Clymer never mentions Watergate and places U.S. involvement in Cambodia from the end of WWII through 1990 in the context of the Cold War and the Vietnam conflict. Clymer dismisses earlier efforts, such as Shawcross’, to rationalize the repression of the Khmer Rouge and is more effective in his criticism of U.S. policymakers. By taking a scholarly, dispassionate approach to a subject that has generated great passion, Clymer presents an even more persuasive case than did Shawcross. By carefully weighting the available historical evidence, considering alternative

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explanations, and indicating where the evidence is insufficient for a definitive evaluation, Clymer’s judiciousness triumphs over Shawcross’ emotionalism.

The reviewers agree with the SHAFR prize committee and note significant contributions that Clymer provides, most notably

1.) David Anderson, Anne Foster, and Chris Jespersen endorse Clymer’s careful evaluation of Cambodian leaders, most particularly Norodom Sihanouk. Unlike U.S. officials from Eisenhower through Nixon, Clymer emphasizes Sihanouk’s persistent efforts to maintain the independence of Cambodia and his clear perception that the greatest threats came from its neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam, South or North, rather than Cold War combatants, China, the Soviet Union, or the United States. Clymer is very perceptive in developing the nuances in Sihanouk’s maneuvers such as when he withdrew a long-term proposal for an international conference to neutralize Cambodia and guarantee its borders as the Vietnam war escalated. Clymer does not suggest that Sihanouk was without flaws in his management of foreign relations and domestic adversaries, noting his exasperating tendency to say one thing, make gestures, and shift abruptly in a different direction. However, Sihanouk’s idiosyncrasies never matched the level of ignorance, misperception, and arrogance exhibited by U.S.

2.) An interesting question is how to account for the repeated failures in U.S. policy that Clymer thoroughly documents. On the one hand, the reviewers emphasize the distorting impact of global Cold War calculations as well as the Vietnam conflict as undermining any appreciation of Cambodia’s situation and Sihanouk’s strategy and tactical maneuvers. Anderson, however, adds a layer of cultural factors: “there was a manifest racism and cultural arrogance in American attitudes toward the peoples of Southeast Asia that predated and continued through the Cold War and that often was as significant as political ideology in shaping U.S. policy toward the region.” Foster does note the desirability of more attention to economic and cultural factors, and in his response, Clymer agrees that these dimensions of the relationship merit further study.(1) Both Cold War imperatives and cultural factors seem at play with the Eisenhower administration which, as Jespersen notes, found Sihanouk “inconsistently sufficiently anti-communist” and deferred to Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon who wanted to depose Sihanouk. Clymer carefully notes that some evidence indicates that Washington in 1957 and 1958 provided limited assistance to Sihanouk’s adversaries and coup plotters in Saigon and Thailand as well as the Khmer Seri force under longtime adversary Son Ngoc Thanh (pp. 29-48)

3.) Clymer offers a careful assessment of Sihanouk’s efforts to keep Cambodia out of the escalating Vietnam war in the 1960s, most notably with a proposed international conference that would guarantee Cambodia’s neutrality and borders, which the U.S. resisted until March 1965 when China’s opposition influenced Sihanouk’s retreat on the issue and break in relations with the U.S. when Americans persisted in bombing across the South Vietnam border with Cambodia. Clymer finds far more understanding of the situation on Sihanouk’s side than in the responses of U.S. officials to reject the conference proposal, to their failure to curb South Vietnamese raids into Cambodia as well as train Khmer Serei commando units to infiltrate Cambodia with about 1,000 serving in the
Civilian Irregular Defense Groups funded by the CIA and led by Vietnamese and American Special Forces along the Cambodian border. Clymer recognizes the challenge perceived by U.S. officials over a growing North Vietnamese presence in the Cambodian-South Vietnam border area as well as Viet Cong use of Cambodia as a sanctuary. However, he notes the reluctance or inability of U.S. officials to weigh the challenges faced by Sihanouk with the possible gains from indirect harassment of Cambodia as well as U.S. air attacks and a helicopter raid on a village in June 1968. Furthermore, Clymer astutely points out the hydra-headed nature of the U.S. presence in South Vietnam with U.S. military and intelligence and CIA pursuing their own interests and potentially disrupting any efforts at relaxing tensions with Sihanouk. (pp. 92-93)

4.) The reviewers endorse Clymer's extensive critical assessment of Nixon and Kissinger's bombing and invasion of Cambodia and the destructive consequences for Cambodia and the replacement of Sihanouk by the Lon Nol regime. Typically, Clymer provides a fair description of Nixon and Kissinger’s calculations but then calmly demonstrates how thoroughly and destructively they miscalculated the impact of their actions on the Vietnam war, on Hanoi’s determination to unify Vietnam under its control, on the instability in South Vietnam and its war effort, and on Nixon’s important shift from treating Cambodia as a sideshow to preserving the Lon Nol regime. Clymer than proceeds to let Kissinger in particular discredit himself with his unwillingness to recognize the growing independence of the Khmer Rouge with respect to North Vietnam (pp. 126-127, 138), the refusal to talk with Sihanouk after his removal, and the blaming of Congress for the results in Cambodia (138).

5.) Perhaps the most troubling and fascinating topic that Clymer covers in depth is U.S. policy after 1976 with respect to the impact of resentment over losing the war to North Vietnam and Cold War calculations with respect to the Soviet Union and China. As the reviewers emphasize, Clymer skillfully evaluates how Carter deferred human rights concerns on the Khmer Rouge regime to Zbigniew Brzezinski’s determined advocacy of cooperation with China, Thailand, and indirectly the Khmer Rouge after Vietnam invaded Cambodia to drive the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh to the Thai border area and set up the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) under Prime Minister Heng Samrin. Ignoring the aggressive Khmer Rouge actions along the Vietnamese border and the nature of their regime, Brzezinski ultimately persuaded Carter to back aid to the Khmer Rouge and Thai-Chinese arms to them. (pp. 161-181)² Despite a rhetoric of rejection toward Carter’s diplomacy, the Reagan administration continued the U.S. policy on aiding resistance groups against the PRK, increasing aid to Thailand, but not direct military assistance to Cambodian groups although Congress approved direct aid in 1985. When Vietnam announced that it would withdraw from Cambodia in 1990 and negotiations began that involved all of the Cambodian groups except the Khmer Rouge, the Bush administration pursued what had become a typical ineffective American policy of wanting to keep the Khmer Rouge out of power and also replace the Heng Samrin regime. Finally, as Anderson emphasizes, Clymer ironically notes that the most important U.S. contribution to the final settlement that

isolated the Khmer Rouge was “to do little and finally to allow the regional parties to arrive at their own solution.” (4)

6.) Presentism does appear in the reviews and indirectly in Clymer’s study. Both Jespersen and Anderson reflect at the end of their reviews on the “lessons” of Cambodia for the current U.S. war in Iraq. Anderson notes differences between Iraq and Cambodia, such as on religious history, but suggests that for U.S. policy “the lesson is compelling that less might be more. Washington could try to do less to shape an internal outcome for the sake of its own interests, and it could do more to allow a local conflict to come to its own resolution.” (4) Noting the presence of Vietnam era leaders, Kissinger, Vice President Dick Cheney and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Jespersen suggests that “it’s time for Iraqis to read up on their Cambodian history, or at least the nature of Cambodia’s relationship with the United States.” (5) Clymer, however, has the final understated but symbolically last word on the subject when he concludes his Epilogue with the statement that “ideologically driven foreign policies have produced problematic results. Perhaps in situations short of genocide or the truly awful suppression of human rights, it is best to heed the words of one of the wisest of American secretaries of state, John Quincy Adams.” (pp. 213-214)

Participants:


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In understated, matter-of-fact, and scholarly prose, Kenton Clymer levels sharp criticism at United States policies toward Cambodia throughout the Cold War era. In the global drama of Cold War history, it might seem that tiny Cambodia played only a bit part. As Clymer’s meticulous research demonstrates, however, the way that American strategists over many years perceived Cambodia as a nation and Cambodians as a people speaks volumes about the nature of U.S. foreign policy. *Troubled Relations* is an abridgement of his two-volume, award-winning history of relations between the United States and Cambodia. The longer work provided a much needed chronicle of the details of U.S. interactions with Cambodia that had generally been obscured by attention on U.S. responses to Cambodia’s larger and stronger neighbors—Vietnam and Thailand—and the region’s most imposing presence, China. This new and concise analysis cuts to the chase in depicting a pattern of U.S. policy that was often condescending, dismissive, and even immoral in its attitude toward and impact on Cambodia.

Clymer begins his analysis in the late nineteenth century, decades before there was a Cold War and a full century before Cambodia gripped the attention of Americans as U.S. troops entered that country in the spring of 1970 during the Vietnam War. Although the first American travelers to the region marveled at the temples of Angkor, they like other Westerners could not conceive that the Cambodians, who appeared to them lazy and degenerate, could have possibly have built such grand structures. There was a manifest racism and cultural arrogance in American attitudes toward the peoples of Southeast Asia that predated and continued through the Cold War and that often was as significant as political ideology in shaping U.S. policy toward the region. As the Cold War struggle for power between the United States and the Soviet Union emerged after World War II, a social and political revolution against Western imperialism and imperiousness grew throughout Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. It was during the First Indochina War, in which communist-led Vietnamese challenged French colonial claims to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, that the United States began seriously to insert itself into the affairs of the region. From the recognition of Cambodian independence from France in the Geneva Agreements of 1954, which ended that war, U.S. relations with Cambodia were defined both by the anticommunism of America’s Cold War policies and the anticolonial nationalism of Cambodia’s leaders, especially Norodom Sihanouk.

Very quickly, as Clymer notes, Cambodia presented strategists in the Eisenhower administration with a common Cold War challenge—Sihanouk’s desire to keep his small nation politically neutral in the big power rivalry. Sihanouk was an adept, small state survivor. He well understood the dangers to his country posed by too close of an identification with either the American or Soviet sides of the Cold War, and he also had to deal daily with his larger neighbors, Thailand and the two Vietnams created by the Geneva Agreements. These adjoining states were variously connected to the Cold War conflict in opposing ways. In this brief volume, Clymer does not specifically address the extensive literature on neutralism and nonalignment, perhaps because that work often focuses on
larger states like India and Egypt. He does develop at length, however, how the heavily forested boundary between neutral Cambodia and the staunchly anticommunist South Vietnam, was, in fact, a vigorously contested frontier between the concepts of neutralism and partisanship in the Cold War.

Clymer describes how the Eisenhower administration reluctantly and the Kennedy administration more readily adapted to Sihanouk’s desire for neutrality in the Second Indochina War, which pitted the Democratic Republic of Vietnam backed by China and the Soviet Union against the Republic of Vietnam backed by the United States. He corroborates Washington’s accommodation with Third World nationalism and neutralism that other scholars have found in other places. Cambodia often had a diametrically opposed view of the world from that of Washington, and it also had the ability to act independently. In 1958, Sihanouk’s government recognized the Communist regime in Beijing. That move angered officials in Washington, who were trying to shore up South Vietnam as a regional bastion against China’s influence, but, as Clymer notes, “it mattered little to [Sihanouk] that the South Vietnamese government was anti-Communist.” “No Cambodian would ever believe Chinese were more dangerous than Vietnamese,” Clymer quotes Sihanouk telling the U.S. ambassador in Phnom Penh (35).

The dramatic U.S. military escalation in Vietnam in 1965 led to a formal break in diplomatic relations between Washington and Phnom Penh that lasted until 1969. This off and then on relationship revealed that both sides wanted something from the other. Cambodia did not want to be overwhelmed by its historic Vietnamese antagonists, whether communist or anticommunist, and thus the outcome of the American war in Vietnam mattered greatly to Cambodia. The Cambodia-Vietnam border region also mattered greatly to American war planners seeking to deny use of the area to Vietnamese communist forces. As Clymer notes, however, the expanding war simply exacerbated the fundamental bias in American foreign policy: “Even when regional factors were recognized, the United States almost always subordinated them to Cold War considerations. It was too bad that Sihanouk would be angered, but opposing the spread of international Communism took first place” (73). The legendary American CIA operative Edward Lansdale complained about the “big picture” boys in Washington who, in trying to view the whole world, lost focus on the reality of life at the village and country level.

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2 See, for example, Peter L. Hahn and Mary Ann Heiss, eds., *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World since 1945* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001); Kathryn C. Statler and Andrew L. Johns, eds., *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

This history of colonialism and containment of communism in Southeast Asia provides the backdrop for Clymer’s indictment of U.S. policy in and after 1970. He agrees with William Shawcross and others that the U.S. bombing and invasion of Cambodia had devastating consequences for Cambodia, but he finds the errors in U.S. policy more deeply rooted than Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger’s tactical mistake of trying to locate and destroy a Vietnamese communist command center that may not have existed. He details an ignorance and arrogance, by Kissinger especially, about the true nature of both the Cambodian government of Lon Nol and its Khmer Rouge enemies. Such ignorance and arrogance were not new, however, and they continued on into the Ford, Carter, and subsequent administrations in Washington.

At the heart of the problem was Washington’s repeated subordination of the immediate welfare of Cambodia and Cambodians to long-term and often abstract geopolitical calculations. Most troubling of all was the inability of several U.S. administrations to confront honestly the genocidal horror of the Khmer Rouge regime because of concern for possibly hurting U.S. relations with China in the bizarre power politics of Asia. Added to this brutally expedient realpolitik, which saw China and implicitly the Khmer Rouge as a balance to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, was an emotional inability by some U.S. leaders to acknowledge that Hanoi had won the Vietnam War. As a historian, Clymer is careful not to say that alternative choices along the way would have spared Cambodians from suffering. He does note, however, that the Americans often did not even try available options. He cites numerous examples of unwillingness by American geo-strategists like Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski in the Carter administration to work with Sihanouk on constructing internal Cambodian political stability. The persistence of global calculations in American policy after 1975 and refusal to appreciate local conditions prevented U.S. policy makers from learning from experience in Vietnam and Cambodia. By the 1980s, Clymer notes, “the new Reagan administration displayed almost no concern for Cambodia (or other third world countries), and the people who lived there, per se” (182). The issue for American policy toward Cambodia by that time had become whether or not to provide so-called lethal aid to the coalition of Cambodian groups (including remnants of the Khmer Rouge) who opposed the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), the Vietnamese-supported government in Phnom Penh that had ended Khmer Rouge rule.

The Reagan administration, seeking, as one congressman put it, to “ideologize our foreign policy,” opposed the PRK because it was communist and was allied with America’s former enemies in Hanoi (187). Critics such as Dith Pran, who had survived the killing fields of Cambodia, argued that making lethal aid available to those groups resisting the PRK risked rearming the Khmer Rouge. In addition, the New York Times, among others, labeled as “bankrupt and immoral” the unwillingness of the administration to assure support to the still influential Sihanouk, if he would openly break all ties with the Khmer Rouge (193). In other words, Cold War geopolitics continued long after the end of the American war in Indochina to shape U.S. policy without due respect for regional realities, or what George Herring has termed the “poisonous tangle of local politics.”4 It is little wonder that

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American strategists who led the United States into another regional conflict in Iraq in 2003 had trouble applying lessons from the Vietnam experience to that war when, even in the decade immediately after American troops left Southeast Asia, the “big picture” boys could not see what had gone wrong.5

In 1991, the Supreme National Council in Cambodia, chaired by Norodom Sihanouk, arranged for the State of Cambodia to cede power to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, which set the stage for successful national elections in 1993. It was a remarkable outcome in view of the tragic events that had plagued this small country for over two decades, and it was an outcome, Clymer notes, that owed little to U.S. policy. In fact, the principal American contribution was a negative one, that is, to do little and finally to allow the regional parties to arrive at their own solution. Could the chronicle of Cambodia’s travails and recovery so well described by Kenton Clymer offer a model for a war-torn, faction-ridden Iraq? Is Cambodia an example of how to integrate hostile factions into an internally defined peaceful settlement? Certainly the religious history of Iraq and Cambodia are very different. Also, there is no symbolic mediator like Sihanouk in Iraq. For the United States, however, the lesson is compelling that less might be more. Washington could try to do less to shape an internal outcome for the sake of its own interests, and it could do more to allow a local conflict to come to its own resolution. Clymer himself draws no parallels between Cambodia and Iraq, but he ends his excellent analysis paraphrasing John Quincy Adams’s wise advice to Americans in 1821 “to wish democratic reform and freedom well but not to go on crusades to change the world.” Clymer quotes directly from Adams that, if the United States were to do otherwise, “She would become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit” (213-214).

Kenton Clymer has been attracted to topics of critical importance for understanding the history of U.S. foreign relations in South and Southeast Asia, topics which other historians have inexplicably neglected, including especially his still-classic work on U.S. Protestant missionaries in the Philippines and an insightful look at U.S. relations with India. Fortunately for the rest of us, Clymer has addressed these topics with skill, even-handedness, and insight. *Troubled Relations* is no exception. It is invaluable to have this one-volume abridgement of his important two-volume study of U.S.-Cambodian relations since 1870. This volume will be more accessible to students, non-specialists, and, one can hope, policymakers. In ten chapters, each of modest length, we learn about Cambodian history and politics, and the ways in which the United States has intervened in and affected those developments. The story is not a familiar one, and Clymer deftly balances the need to convey basic information with attention to the intricacies of policy and details which enliven the story. Perhaps most impressive, many controversial and still-debated events are presented both fairly and with clear, persuasive arguments about why they occurred and the consequences they had.

*Troubled Relations* is organized chronologically, beginning with the apparent first contacts between Americans and Cambodians in 1870, moving through the episodic initial impressions Americans had of the country and people and exploring the American missionary movement there before World War II. After World War II, the narrative becomes more political, detailing what quickly appears to be a tragic story of Cambodian efforts to gain and maintain status as an independent, neutral nation while the United States pursued Cold War policies in the region which at best hindered and for a time, prevented Cambodia from achieving its goals. The horrors of the Khmer Rouge era are presented, but in a muted fashion, since the focus is on political relations between the United States and Cambodia. The treatment of the post-Democratic Kampuchea years is especially welcome. The epilog concludes with a plea to listen to John Quincy Adams, and spread democracy by example rather than “going abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” The horrors unleashed in Cambodia, in part due to U.S. policies, certainly lend credence to that plea.

The book is primarily a straightforward narrative, so impressively researched, and so clearly written, that I at first was not sure what kind of commentary might be useful for this roundtable. Several points seem worthy of comment, however.

First, many foreign relations historians pride themselves on the multi-archival, multi-lingual research characterizing much work in the field. Such research is always impressive, and allows us to have greater understandings of the variety of opinions which informed policy about a single event, as well as providing insight into how other nations perceived what the United States was doing. *Troubled Relations* is a model in this regard, with research done in the United States (many different archives), Australia, and even Cambodia. But Clymer has done something even more important, and more rare: He has multiple intellectual homes, in both the History Department and the Southeast Asian
Studies Program at Northern Illinois University, and clearly has immersed himself in the broader study of Cambodia. His work shows understanding of Cambodia's history, its culture, its artistic traditions, its religions, and indeed of Southeast Asian history and culture more generally. He is connected to the scholarly community studying Cambodia, and therefore brings to his work on U.S.-Cambodian relations a sensitivity to events on the Cambodian side which help tremendously to explain many previously puzzling aspects of that history. One such example is his attention to why Norodom Sihanouk made the choices he did and how he was able to maneuver as he did. In this book, Sihanouk appears an often astute man, a sometimes astute politician, and a keen observer of the United States who knew he had few cards to play to get the United States interested in Cambodia's national interests. It's a more plausible portrait than others I have read. The successes of this book demonstrate that multi-lingual, multi-archival research is not sufficient for truly international histories, which are at their richest when grounded in multiple historiographies.

Amongst scholars, and a relatively large segment of the general public, the tragedy of the Khmer Rouge years is well known. *The Killing Fields* guarantees that for people of a certain age. For younger Americans, popular books like *First They Killed my Father* (by Loung Ung) and *A Problem from Hell* (by Samantha Power) have meant the events have not been forgotten. But if Vietnam the country has often seen its identity reduced to Vietnam the war, Cambodia, and U.S.-Cambodian relations, have been reduced to genocide and maybe some treatment of the U.S. invasion of Cambodia in 1970. The second point I was reminded of as I read *Troubled Relations* is how important it is for us to have such excellent general histories of U.S. relations with countries perhaps considered of minor or episodic importance. A key argument Clymer makes is that Cold War imperatives and decisions made with the war in Vietnam as their sole consideration meant that the United States, often knowingly, followed policies which were diametrically opposed to Cambodia's needs and interests. U.S. officials often knew this, and U.S. officials on the ground in Phnom Penh frequently were at odds with counterparts in Saigon and Washington D.C. about not merely policy decisions but interpretations of events. Clymer's work serves as a reminder that often U.S. officials had sufficient local knowledge to make a more effective decision for a particular country, but purposefully chose to prioritize something else. More importantly, it prompts scholars to think more broadly about the costs of global wars such as the Cold War.

This observation brings up my third point. It became tragically clear when reading this book that Cold War imperatives meant that appropriate policies for countries such as Cambodia were nearly impossible to expect from the U.S. government. Time and again, knowledgeable U.S. officials made recommendations for or attempted to pursue strategies which plausibly could have been expected to produce a better outcome for Cambodia, and for the United States, than the policies eventually chosen or pursued. There were obstacles, of course. Sihanouk was unpredictable, Lon Nol did have a stroke and subsequently diminished capacity, the People’s Republic of China did often treat Cambodia like a pawn. All those factors did make it more difficult for the United States to pursue helpful policies for Cambodia. But the narrative makes clear that decisions in Washington about Cambodia virtually always placed the needs and interests of many countries above those of Cambodia.
That observation perhaps is not surprising, but Clymer's book reminds us with stark, relentless examples of the consequences.

The most important and extensive example of those consequences is the at best neutral, often supportive relations the United States had with the Khmer Rouge government of Democratic Kampuchea during the late 1970s, the reluctance with which the United States supported efforts to break their hold on power, and the continued U.S. aid which reached Khmer Rouge during the 1980s when they struggled in opposition to the Vietnam-backed government of Hun Sen. Global geopolitics again structured U.S. choices, as the United States followed the old adage: “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Vietnam and the Soviet Union were enemies of the U.S.; the P.R.C. an incipient friend, so its ally Democratic Kampuchea was at least tolerated. U.S. policy choices here were disturbing, and the reasons for them remain obscure, controversial, and sometimes still classified.

My fourth observation about Clymer's work is how carefully researched and argued are his assessments of these controversial moments. He clearly has come to some passionate judgments of events, but has been remarkably fair in arriving at them. For instance, many Americans were initially dismissive of reports about the extent of the killing fields in Cambodia, and this skepticism was fed by assessments from scholars of leftist persuasions who wrote and testified that the situation was not as awful as reported by the U.S. government. Clymer sets the skepticism in context, noting that many Americans distrusted any reports by the U.S. government in the aftermath of Watergate and the war in Vietnam. Since U.S. intelligence reports, often anonymous, were the primary source of information about the killing fields, and since such reports so often in the past had been manipulated for political means, Clymer suggests a tragic consequence was skepticism about what turned out to be very real atrocities. Clymer argues that the scholars, such as Gareth Porter, who fueled this skepticism were too accepting of Khmer Rouge claims as opposed to U.S. government ones, but notes as well that Porter wrote when the regime was still solidifying its power, and a greater variety of experiences existed. Ideologues surely will not be persuaded by Clymer's even-handed explanations, but for many, they will help set these divisive events in historical context.

Clymer provides a similarly helpful assessment of Reagan administration policies, which apparently torpedoed a coalition government led by Sihanouk. During the 1980s, U.S. policy aimed to defeat the Soviet Union by focusing on it, rather than by helping Third World countries, leading the United States to de-emphasize Cambodia altogether. The anti-Vietnam policies still held, though, so although the United States ostensibly supported negotiations, which would have helped Sihanouk regain some power, when Sihanouk refused to break with the Khmer Rouge completely, the U.S. withdrew support. Clymer explains this confusing turn of events by noting that the United States would not have supported a Hun Sen-Sihanouk coalition, which was the only possible way to move forward. Sihanouk felt under the circumstances that he had no choice. Again, although this conclusion involves some reliance on logic in the absence of smoking gun documents, Clymer's fair-minded approach is persuasive.
My sixth, and final observation concerns my only disappointment with the book. The initial chapter was fascinating to me, perhaps because it covers my own research time period, but I think even more because that chapter wove together analysis of economic and cultural relations, as well as attention to the importance of the imagery about Cambodia in the United States, of how Americans encountered Cambodians and what they subsequently thought about them. I missed this type of research and analysis in the later chapters, which focused almost exclusively on traditional diplomatic relations. The desire to produce a book of modest length, and the relative unfamiliarity of the basic narrative of U.S.-Cambodian relations may have prompted a decision to focus on traditional political relations, but it comes at a cost. The early chapters explain well that Cambodia and the United States had the most minimal of political or economic relations, but that the two strong areas of contact were tourism and U.S. missionary activity. For example, the splendor of Angkor Wat attracted admiring tourists even when travel conditions were dangerous, but we hear about these travels only in the early chapters. Did they continue through much of the years under study? How did the independent Cambodian government view this industry? Was it a source of significant income? Did it pose problems for Cambodians, who perhaps had too little control over who visited, and how they did? An exhaustive examination of these questions is outside the scope of this book, but surely struggles over tourism formed important parts of the U.S.-Cambodian relationship at various points. Other aspects of U.S.-Cambodian economic relations are almost completely neglected (except for the politics of economic aid), and also would have been interesting to learn.

American fascination with Angkor Wat in the early 20th century stemmed partly from the assessment of visiting Americans that the “lazy” and “degenerate” (p. 6-7) Cambodians they observed could not possibly have ever been capable of building such amazing monuments. Much speculation at the time addressed who might have built Angkor Wat, with answers ranging from ancient Javanese or Chinese to visiting Persians or Assyrians. In the 1920s, the U.S. Consul in Saigon, Leland Smith, found the Cambodians to be “even lazier than the Annamites” (p. 8). As Clymer notes, such judgments fell well within a normal range of the racialist world view of many early 20th century Americans. If the image involved Americans had of Cambodians before World War II was of a degenerate, lazy race, how did that influence U.S. policy after 1945, all the way through until the present? Did the image change? If so, how and when, and to what effect? Was there a difference between what U.S. officials wrote (or said) and the portrayal of Cambodians in the media? Clymer’s attention to these issues for the years 1870-1940 is fascinating, but the lack of attention to them for the years after 1940 makes it more difficult to interpret why particular decisions and assessments were made. When future scholars write the book, which incorporates these cultural aspects of the relationship into the study of U.S.-Cambodian relations, however, they will rely heavily on the insights of this more traditional political history.
In this highly readable, one-volume version of his earlier two volumes on U.S.-Cambodian relations, Kenton Clymer provides a useful and handy guide to the topic in a book quite suitable for undergraduate courses on the Vietnam War, Southeast Asia, and U.S. relations with the region. Using an extensive array of primary sources, including some well-selected photographs from the personal collection of Ambassador Julio A. Jeldres, Clymer analyzes the complicated relations between these two nations and pays close attention to causal factors that influenced historical outcomes. The end result is disturbing, not because of any flaws or deficiencies on the author’s part, but rather because of the historical investigation itself, the outcome for the Cambodian people, and the way in which the American involvement in Cambodia continues to be debated.

Clymer begins with a brief overview of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, moves briskly to the 1940s and 1950s, and then focuses the remaining three-quarters of the book on the period from 1965 onwards. Not surprisingly, he pays special attention to the American war in Vietnam and how it came to engulf Cambodia. But before getting to that, he points to the complicated nature of U.S. relations with Cambodia after France was forced to withdraw from Indochina in 1954. Into the breech stepped a somewhat reluctant Eisenhower administration. The hesitation was very real, what with military and domestic political concerns about engaging in another costly and unpopular land war in Asia. In 1952 Eisenhower had campaigned on how his military experience would end the fighting in Korea, and he was true to his word, effecting an armistice in July 1953. Becoming bogged down in Vietnam or Cambodia shortly afterwards was not really an attractive prospect.

Why would he need to in the first place? For one, Norodom Sihanouk’s rule during the 1950s, particularly his public embrace of neutralism and his 1956 state visit to the People’s Republic of China, raised concerns for the Eisenhower administration. Sihanouk was considered insufficiently anti-communist at various times - or inconsistently sufficiently anti-communist - and while the Cambodian leader focused his attention regionally, the Americans viewed Cambodia through the global Cold War competition. To borrow from Thomas McCormick, “Empires were of a piece, and the loss of one member affected the organic health of the whole.” What held true for the British Empire was also true of the American.¹ America’s initial foray into Vietnam had been in support of France, but when France withdrew, there were questions about the Japanese economy and its need for regional trading partners. Vietnam was linked, and since Cambodia was next door, it became enmeshed too.

Sihanouk’s actions, moreover, irritated America’s main man in Southeast Asia, Ngo Dinh Diem, so much so that he and his brother lobbied American officials for Sihanouk’s ouster. Diem had himself been the beneficiary of American covert assistance early in his tenure as

head of the newly created South Vietnamese state. Now he wanted covert action to tip the balance in Cambodia against Sihanouk. Having had success putting into place friendly rulers in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), and South Vietnam (1954-1955), Eisenhower administration officials offered American assistance toward changing Cambodia’s leadership in 1957 and again in 1958. Sihanouk survived both efforts, however, even though, as Clymer points out, “at the highest level it remained official American policy under certain circumstances to assist Cambodian dissidents against Sihanouk, a policy reaffirmed on 2 April 1958 in NSC5809.” (34) Sihanouk proved himself durable indeed, more so than his Vietnamese counterpart who was assassinated in 1963. Clymer does a careful job of detailing the difficult balancing act Sihanouk faced year in and year out and from one American administration to the next.

American meddling reflected a poor understanding of Cambodia’s leader on the part of policymakers, especially those in the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. As Clymer notes, “The tragedy was that Sihanouk had no sympathy with Communism and no illusions about the result of a Communist victory.” (57) But that was given little or no consideration by American officials, at least the ones in Washington, where decisions were made. They did not like his methods.

Clymer is careful to point out the difficult situation Sihanouk faced. “All of this illustrates how Sihanouk had to maneuver carefully in a web of conflicting pressures.” (94) Sihanouk was first and foremost concerned how he could ensure Cambodia’s survival as an independent nation, all the while remaining sensitive to Cambodia’s precarious position with stronger neighbors like Vietnam and Thailand, not to mention Chinese machinations, and, of course, the United States and its massive military presence.

Sihanouk broke relations with the United States during the escalation of the war in Vietnam after American planes bombed two Cambodian villages just across the border with South Vietnam in April 1965. Sihanouk maneuvered as best he could, but his was a very small country caught in a struggle between much larger nations. “His larger goal,” Clymer asserts, “was to ensure his country’s survival to try to keep it from becoming further enmeshed in the violence in neighboring Vietnam, and to gain international acceptance of Cambodia’s boundaries.” All very sensible on the Cambodian leader’s part, but also irrelevant since, “To the United States, these were not the primary concerns.” (94) Johnson administration officials were so focused on the war that they never sent an apology to Sihanouk even though a thirteen-year-old boy was killed and despite the recommendation of the American chargé Alf Bergesen.

American officials were tone deaf when it came to Cambodia, and nowhere was that made clearer than in the actions of Henry Kissinger. The former National Security Adviser and former Secretary of State, and the only person to occupy both positions at the same time (Condoleezza Rice became the second to occupy both separately), does not provide any searching introspection when it comes to the calamity that befell Cambodia during the Nixon years. Instead, he lays the blame on Congress: “The effect of congressional restrictions was to impose an unbearable, almost vindictive constraint both on the scale of American assistance to impoverished Cambodia and on the flexibility with which Cambodia
could use it.”  

In another section, he asserted, “the American superpower had already turned itself into an impotent spectator absorbed in a narcissistic pursuit of its own domestic controversy.”

Again, writing in the third volume of his memoirs, Kissinger insisted, “Cambodia was taken over by a homicidal clique primarily because Americans subordinated the country’s survival to their own domestic drama.”

And finally: “There was nothing left to do other than to watch in anguish, then with a growing sense of horror as the Khmer Rouge turned the victory that American actions had facilitated into genocide against their own people.”

Kissinger did not confine his defense to his memoirs. In his history of international affairs from the Congress of Vienna to the end of the Cold War, he wrote about what happened in Southeast Asia with equal interpretive zeal: “Cambodia was cut off altogether,” by Congress, “with the argument that it would save lives – a euphemism for abandonment, and a grim joke in light of the genocide that followed. In 1975, Cambodia and South Vietnam were overrun by the communists within two weeks of each other, putting an end to America’s emotional misery but not to Indochina’s.”

Kissinger was sadly fixed to certain ideas. Clymer does not support Kissinger’s explanation for why events unfolded as they did, and he refuses to exonerate Nixon’s National Security Adviser for his role in the tragedy that ensued. For example, Clymer noted that Kissinger proved unwilling “to acknowledge that the Khmer Rouge were not dependent on Hanoi – something even in 1975 he would not fully accept – [and that] was a major misreading of the Cambodian situation.” (127) On the “secret” bombing, Clymer concludes, “The bombing had little lasting impact on the ability of the other side to wage war. COSVN was not destroyed, and the Vietnamese Communists moved deeper into Cambodia.” (96) In short, it was an unnecessary failure, one that brought devastation to the Cambodian countryside without securing American forces’ strategic flank.

As had been U.S. policy from the start of the nation’s involvement in Vietnam, if an initiative failed, the proper response was to escalate things. Almost as if on cue, the Nixon administration then decided to invade Cambodia in late April 1970: “The invasion brought Cambodia itself directly into the war for the first time – and with devastating


3 Ibid., 514.

4 Ibid., 499.

5 Ibid., 514.

6 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 697. Kissinger continues to have his work cut out for him. In a recent article discussing the calamities of the twentieth century, Tony Judt wrote, “Absent the forcible involvement of Cambodia in the Vietnam War, we would never have heard of Pol Pot.” That’s hardly an endorsement of Kissinger’s take on history. See “What Have We Learned, If Anything,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 1, 2008, 18.
consequences. Prior to the invasion, the Vietnamese occupied limited, if perhaps growing, parts of Cambodia, especially along the frontier with Vietnam. Now they had driven deeply into Cambodia and were within a few miles of Phnom Penh.” (109) And the impact was felt elsewhere as the Nixon administration scrounged for funds when Congress refused to increase military assistance to the levels requested by the president. Greece, Turkey, and Taiwan all saw cuts in the aid they received from the United States. That money was redirected to Cambodia. U.S. aid programs to countries in Latin America also experienced large percentage decreases. (114) In the end Clymer summarizes the situation accurately and rather bleakly: “The United States had now acquired another weak government to defend, a government that controlled perhaps one-quarter of the country.” (115) That weak government was led by Lon Nol, who had led a coup while Sihanouk was out of the country. Nol’s government lost control of the countryside to the Khmer Rouge despite (or because of) a savage bombing campaign on the part of the United States, and the whole situation collapsed in similarly rapid fashion as it did in South Vietnam - and at the same time too, with the Khmer Rouge entering Phnom Penh in mid April 1975, just two weeks before Saigon fell.

One substantial feature to this volume is the considerable attention Clymer pays to the Carter administration. Clymer quite rightly places President Jimmy Carter, and especially his National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, under careful scrutiny for being so ideologically fixated on the Soviet Union as to provide assistance to the murderous Khmer Rouge regime, particularly after it was forced out of power by the Vietnamese in 1978. It is simply appalling to think that Carter, long known for his humanitarian work and frequently lauded for his administration’s emphasis on human rights, had a hand in bolstering Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary, and other Khmer Rouge leaders all because of geopolitical considerations. Brzezinski’s incessant preoccupation with the Soviet Union was just another example of American myopia, another farce, one in a long line of deeply troubling and ineffably sad episodes in U.S. relations with Cambodia. As if Nixon’s bombing were not enough, as if three and a half years of Khmer Rouge rule were not enough, Cambodians suffered even more because Brzezinski chose to compound the situation by bolstering the clique’s position along the border with Thailand. And what for? Because the Khmer Rouge had finally been driven from power by the Vietnamese. But the Vietnamese were receiving aid from the Soviet Union and had recently signed a strategic agreement with Moscow when it became clear that normalization of relations with the United States would not be forthcoming anytime soon. Instead, the Carter administration jumped at the chance to normalize relations with China, and since Beijing had supported the Khmer Rouge, and since Brzezinski was excessively animated by his antipathy for the Soviet Union, supporting the Khmer Rouge became policy, albeit without fanfare.

Brzezinski barely mentions Cambodia in his memoirs, and when he does, it is always in the form of Vietnamese aggressiveness as an extension of Soviet designs on the region. “Through the year, [the Soviets] continued buildup of their military presence in Vietnam and increased their support for Vietnamese aggressiveness in Cambodia.” The Khmer
Rouge receive no mention, and if Brzezinski’s memoirs were the sole source on U.S. diplomacy during the Carter years, one would never know that over one million people were killed in Cambodia between May 1975 and December 1978. That’s a deeply telling and troubling commentary on Brzezinski’s personality and his perception of world affairs.

The major problem with Troubled Relations is that, if used for a course on U.S. diplomatic relations, many students are unlikely to find the content disturbing and deeply so. Troubled Relations is troubling indeed. Clymer’s book is informative, readable, and carefully constructed. As a result, it’s incisive, and the story it tells is devastating. Kissinger got it completely wrong: his assertion that it was the American withdrawal from South Vietnam that led to the massive killings in Cambodia fails completely to appreciate the connection between American policies, American actions, and the consequences for Southeast Asia, and his failure is completely self-serving in just how far it goes to dismiss how a series of American administrations’ decisions undermined Cambodian sovereignty and ultimately led to some of the most appalling collateral damage in history. It has to be considered collateral since no American policymaker ever saw Cambodia as central; it was, as William Shawcross entitled his book about the Nixon administration and Cambodia, a “sideshow” compared to the central focus of Vietnam.8

Compounding the tragedy of the whole historical fracas is the fact that Kissinger is still around, respected and influential as ever, and most recently meeting with President Bush to offer his advice on how to handle the failing war in Iraq. By Bob Woodward’s account, in the aftermath of 9/11, Henry Kissinger became “the most regular and frequent outside adviser to Bush on foreign affairs.” He also met regularly with Vice President Cheney. What was the octogenarian’s advice? Stay the course in Iraq, which he viewed as a sequel to what happened in Vietnam. “Kissinger claimed that the United States had essentially won the war in 1972, only to lose it because of weakened resolve by the public and Congress.”9

Without trying to overdo the analogy, there is something to consider in how Cambodia and Iraq came to fall under the American imperial gaze and what the consequences (so far) have been for these two nations. Cambodia was forced to fit within the U.S. strategy to win the Cold War, the grand ideological competition between America and the Soviet Union. Iraq has become part of the global war on terrorism, itself a dubious intellectual construct and despite credible evidence that Iraq had anything to do with the 9/11 attacks. Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, veterans of the Ford administration, which oversaw the final stages of the dismal American failure in Vietnam and Cambodia, returned to government service in 2001, and bolstered by Kissinger himself


in the aftermath of 9/11, have set the United States on another war far away. The result is another massive and massively misguided military venture on America’s part. Perhaps it’s time for Iraqis to read up on their Cambodian history, or at least the nature of Cambodia’s relationship with the United States, and with regard to the latter, they could not do much better than to start with Kenton Clymer’s book. That’s probably not the kind of endorsement that is likely to make the back cover, but sadly it’s true.
I am immensely humbled by the very kind remarks that the three reviewers have made about *Troubled Relations*. I appreciate their comments about the book’s research basis and essential fairness. No author could ask for more. I wrote the book with the thought that the history of American relations with Cambodia deserved a wider audience than was possible with the original hardback version, and I was pleased when Northern Illinois University Press agreed to the project.

Perhaps the book even has some contemporary relevance. All three reviewers noted its current relevance to the war in Iraq. To that might be added aspects of the war in Afghanistan and in particular the covert operations into Pakistan. These incursions are strikingly reminiscent of secret US forays from South Vietnam into Cambodia stretching back to the early 1960s, incursions that Prince Sihanouk regularly protested, much as the Pakistani government protests American incursions launched from Afghanistan. As William Pfaff, the distinguished syndicated columnist, recently wrote, “The United States has just invaded Cambodia. The name of Cambodia this time is Pakistan, but otherwise it's the same story as in Indochina in 1970.”

The reviewers noted my admiration for Sihanouk. Not everything he did was admirable, including foreclosing an incipient movement toward democracy in the late 1940s and early 1950s. But he was generally popular among Cambodians, brought stability and a measure of prosperity to his country, and most important of all successfully maneuvered among the great powers to keep his small country out of the maelstrom that was engulfing neighboring Vietnam. Only after the United States began to bomb the sanctuaries in Cambodia (and Sihanouk was in fact worried about the growing presence of Vietnamese communist troops in his country), followed by Sihanouk’s ouster (about which the United States at the very least did not object) and the subsequent American and South Vietnamese invasion, was Cambodia brought directly into the war with dire consequences for Cambodia.

Regarding the consequences, I was pleased that Christopher Jesperson focused much attention on Henry Kissinger’s own account which invariably blamed others, mostly Congress, rather than any actions or inactions that he might have taken for the successive tragedies that engulfed Cambodia. To my mind, this is almost surrealistic. For example, Ambassador John Gunther Dean and others warned Kissinger numerous times about the need to contact the ousted Sihanouk to arrive at a political solution that might prevent or at least mitigate the horrors of Khmer Rouge rule. Just what the Khmer Rouge were likely to do if they took over was known, thanks to an excellent study by Kenneth Quinn (who would later serve as ambassador to Cambodia in the 1990s); yet Kissinger insisted on backing the Lon Nol regime, even as its incompetence increased.

When the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia in 1975, Jesperson quotes Kissinger as saying that he could “only watch in anguish, then with a growing sense of horror as the Khmer Rouge turned the victory that American actions had facilitated into genocide against their own people.” Leaving aside the question of whether it might have been Kissinger’s actions that facilitated the genocide, I

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have no doubt that Kissinger was horrified by the Khmer Rouge's actions. But that did not stop him from supporting the regime against the newly unified Vietnam, including very early on urging a Chinese presence there to bolster the new government.

Ironically, this action became even further entrenched under the Jimmy Carter administration, despite its human rights orientation, when, after the Vietnamese drove the Khmer Rouge from power at the end of 1978, Zbigniew Brzezinski explicitly urged that the Khmer Rouge be resuscitated to oppose the People's Republic of Kampuchea which the Vietnamese had installed. This remained American policy (though it was seldom acknowledged in public) throughout the 1980s. Had it succeeded, it might have resulted in the return of the Khmer Rouge, which was unquestionably the most powerful of the opposition groups and which dominated the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (which controlled virtually no territory but which the United States, China, and others recognized as the legal government of Cambodia). It is of course sometimes necessary to have unpleasant allies, but the Khmer Rouge was far beyond the pale. Our policy was unnecessary, and it delayed Cambodia's recovery. In reflecting on all of this, I was reminded of historian Felix Gilbert's conclusion to his wonderful little book, *To the Farewell Address*, published a long time ago in 1961 (and still in print by Princeton University Press): “America has wavered in her foreign policy between Idealism and Realism, and her great historical moments have occurred when both were combined.” Assisting the Khmer Rouge, even indirectly, was not one of our great historical moments.

Finally, Anne Foster is entirely correct to observe that more could have been done with culture and economics, beyond the first chapter. I can only plead that, given the constraints of time and space, the first go-around on the history of U.S. relations with Cambodia required, I think, understanding first the political and strategic relations. I have only the greatest admiration for scholars who take the cultural approach, however. Andrew Rotter's *Comrades at Odds* is an inspiration, and Foster rightly notes areas for further exploration. Tourism is indeed an excellent place to begin. In fact, the Cambodian government was very much aware of the importance of tourism, and when Sihanouk broke diplomatic relations with the United States in 1965 he tried to retain consular relations because, and he frankly put it, Cambodia depended on the revenues that tourism brought to the country. It would be quite possible to write a book that focuses more on such issues.

In conclusion, then, I again thank the reviewers for taking the time to read *Troubled Relations* carefully and seriously. I am gratified by their response to the book.