The U.S. Role In Cambodia Essay, Research Paper

A demonstration of American impotence in Asia cannot fail to lessen the credibility of American pledges in other fields We are no longer fighting in Vietnam only for the Vietnamese; we are also fighting for ourselves.

-Henry Kissinger (Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs)

In John T. Rourke s International Politics on the World Stage, a distinction is made between two kinds of power, coercive and persuasive. Coercive power is the power to make another country do something through military force and economic sanctions while persuasive power uses moral authority and technological excellence, which enhance a country s image of leadership. Rourke argues that the latter is growing in importance while the former is declining because it is more costly and less effective. The United States is the premier power in the world and with that power comes the obligation to use that power responsibly, and hence, know when it is better to use coercive power and when persuasive power is needed. When the Americans extended the Vietnamese war into the borders of Cambodia, this was a prime example of coercive power. The use of an extensive B-52 campaign without the full knowledge of important Cambodian and American officials, the killing of innocent Cambodian civilians, and the falsification of documents and lying to the public about the bombings, are all examples of the coercive power used in the bombing of Cambodia. These misuses of power show a lack of responsibility as well as a lack of morality. Not only was this misuse of power immoral, but it was to ultimately fail.

In 1954, the Geneva Conference on peace in Southeast Asia recognized Cambodia as a neutral country. This neutrality meant that Cambodia was not supposed to get involved in the war in Vietnam. On March 18, 1969, two months after Richard Nixon took office as President of the United States, the bombing of COSVN HQ-Central Office for Vietnam headquarters- began. This bombing was a request by General Creighton Abrams, commander of US forces in South Vietnam, based on the information obtained from photo reconnaissance and a rallier. Richard Nixon decided to go thorough with the bombing but only with the utmost secrecy. Only a few key officials were told and he did not bother to use the usual measure of asking congress before starting an extensive bombing campaign. This illegal use of force was to become major part of Nixon s Watergate trials later, though he would not be convicted of the offence. To maintain this secrecy, the falsification of documents and the misstating of facts to Americans were necessary. Some bombing missions in Cambodia were entered in the records as having taken place in Vietnam (Shawcross).

The bombing in Cambodia paid absolutely no attention to human life. When the bombing was finally discovered in 1973, the President and Henry Kissinger, National Security Adviser (1969) and Secretary of State (1973), maintained that they paid a close watch on human life and kept casualties at a minimum and only bombed areas that were not populated. But history tells a different story: not only did they know that some of these areas were populated, but they even ignored suggestions about which areas should not be bombed because of heavy population. The first bombing campaign against area 353, COSVN HQ, called Operation Breakfast, covered 25 square kilometers and had a total population of approximately 1,640 Cambodians, 1,000 of which were said by the Joint Chiefs to be peasants. The Cambodians, unlike the Vietnamese, were not used to bombing in their country, so they were not as prepared. The secret nature of these attacks put the Cambodians at an even greater risk because they were surprised by the attacks and, unlike Vietnamese, had no reason for protective shelters in or around the villages. Three of the fifteen sanctuaries bombed during this campaign, collectively called Menu, were said to have sizeable concentrations of Cambodian civilian or military population, and were not recommended for attack at all. (The definition of sizeable is not known, although it is presumed to be more than the 1,640 Cambodians living in the Breakfast site, which was approved.) It seems that these reports were ignored because bombing of these sanctuaries went ahead. One of the three, Base Area 704, had 247 B-52 missiles flown against it (Shawcross). In total, there were 3,630 B-52 raids on sanctuaries in the neutral country of Cambodia.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, leader of Cambodia until 1970, could only sit and watch as his country was being bombed as the result of a war that he was not even supposed to be part of in the first place. Prince Sihanouk had no control over what was happening to his country. Just as he had no control over the Vietnamese coming into his country and building sanctuaries, he also had no control over the bombing. Sihanouk s aide, Charles Meyer, maintained that although he was happy that the Vietnamese were being bombed, the prince was never asked to approve the use of B-52 missiles. These missiles cause great damage and Sihanouk knew that these areas were heavily populated so There was no question of B-52s (Charles Meyer). By cooperating with both the Vietnamese and the Americans, Sihanouk was trying to protect his people from the war by confining it to the borders. This plan was soon to blow up in his face as the bombing was to fail and only force the Vietnamese to move further into the country and thus causing new problems.

Had Richard Nixon gone to congress before bombing, maybe the mission would have been done with more accuracy and scrutiny, increasing the chances of success. Because Nixon conducted these missions in secrecy, there was much less regard for human life and less contact with people who might have been able to help out the missions. Instead, congress was not given a chance to exercise its constitutional right to decide whether or not to bomb, and the missions failed. After Breakfast, the U.S. sent a group of men into Area 353 to see the damage caused by the mission and to pick up any survivors. Of the two Americans and eleven Vietnamese, four survived; one American, three Vietnamese. All Breakfast had done was to make them mad. To escape the bombing, the Vietnamese Communists began to move deeper and deeper into the country, causing conflict between them and the people. The effects of this were to be disastrous and were to set the stage for what was to happen to Sihanouk. The bombing, in effect, destabilized his power by making his people mad. The people s anger added fuel to a growing opposition to Sihanouk and would help get him overthrown by his Prime Minister, Lon Nol, and his cousin, Prince Sirik Matak. The U.S. was partly responsible for this deposition and even supported them. The United States was to move troops into Cambodia to chase the communists. Lon Nol proved himself powerless without American help and he soon became dependent on them not only for defense but in the economy, too. The Americans had made a big mistake by supporting an incompetent leader and now had to stick with him rather than admit that they were wrong. This would spell doom for Cambodia as it left it vulnerable to the new rising power, the Khmer Rouge, who turn out to be the most oppressive rulers in Cambodian history and were to begin the darkest time in Cambodian history with the death of two million people.

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had many great achievements during their tenure, but Cambodia stands as a failure. Though it would be impossible to say that they are at fault for all the terror that Cambodia was to face, they still remain partly responsible. With their bombings of the countryside and their invasion of Cambodia, they managed to create more dismay than they were trying to avert. The coercive manner in which they did this did not help at all, though it only managed to hinder their chances for success. When Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia, he stated that his action was taken not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia, but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam. If this was so, then why not contact congress when he wanted to bomb? Nobody could have predicted what was to happen to Cambodia as a result of the violation of its neutrality, and we cannot fault Nixon and Kissinger totally. But there are laws in place, which restrict the power of the President because, sometimes, two heads are better than one and the decision-making process should not rest on the head of only one, or a couple of men, but to a large group that are paid to make these sorts of decisions, who, more often than not, make better decisions than the individual. The reason why coercive power is declining to make room for persuasive power is not only because it is more costly, but because it is a better decision. Nixon and Kissinger lacked morality when making their decisions and were thinking very selfishly, not taking into account what consequences their actions would have. In 1967, Lyndon Johnson refused to bomb Cambodia because of domestic protest and damage to Cambodia s neutrality. He weighed the options and decided it would not be a good idea. Nixon did not weigh the options and the effect was disastrous.

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