

Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and Cambodia*

A foreign policy that placed the defense of human rights at its center characterized the administration of Jimmy Carter—at least rhetorically. “As President,” Carter wrote in his memoirs, “I hoped and believed that the expansion of human rights might be the wave of the future throughout the world, and I wanted the United States to be on the crest of this movement.”¹ Most popular and scholarly commentators have been critical of Carter as a foreign-policy leader, but his devotion to human rights, the degree to which he made it a central aspect of American foreign policy, and the successes he had bringing about real changes abroad figure prominently in recent efforts to rehabilitate the former president’s reputation as such a leader. Thus, historian Douglas Brinkley writes that Carter’s “insistence that human rights be a cardinal principle in global governance” was one of the president’s greatest accomplishments. “Human rights considerations,” he continues, “became paramount in deciding which governments . . . received American aid and political support.” By the end of Carter’s administration, “human rights had permanently entered the diplomatic parlance of American foreign policy.”² Political scientist Robert A. Strong agrees, arguing forcefully that Carter’s accomplishments have been woefully underappreciated, including his achievements in human rights. “President Carter advanced the cause of human rights on the American political agenda and in the world community,” he states.³

Unquestionably, Carter intended to give more prominence to human rights than any recent previous administration. Several of his high-ranking officials, including civil-rights veterans Patricia Derian and Andrew Young, sought to elevate human-rights considerations in policy-making, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was sympathetic. Under Carter, therefore, the degree to which a given country honored human rights affected American policy. Even Carter’s

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1. Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, 1982), 144.

2. Douglas Brinkley, “The Rising Stock of Jimmy Carter: The ‘Hands-on’ Legacy of Our Thirty-Ninth President,” *Diplomatic History* 20 (Fall 1996): 505–29.

3. Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2000), 262.

critics acknowledged that he cut aid to the brutal military junta in Argentina, for example, and by some accounts saved thousands of lives in the process. The United States also prevented the Dominican military from aborting a free election and persuaded Indonesia to release thirty thousand political prisoners.⁴ Yet, in the case of the murderous Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, headed by the notorious Pol Pot, human-rights considerations hardly entered into the administration's foreign-policy calculus, despite the fact that Carter himself characterized the Khmer Rouge as the "worst violator of human rights in the world today." Not surprisingly, Carter scarcely mentions Cambodia in his memoirs, nor do revisionist scholars discuss his policy toward that country.⁵

The administration's failure to elevate human-rights concerns in its policy toward Cambodia can be attributed to several factors. After the recent traumas caused by the debacle in neighboring Vietnam, most Americans wanted to forget about Southeast Asia. There was also a sense that the United States could exert no influence on the secretive and xenophobic Khmer Rouge regime. Major issues of more immediate importance to the United States also deflected attention from Southeast Asia: forging a new Panama Canal treaty, trying to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian problem, responding to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and dealing with the Iranian hostage crisis, for example. But in the final analysis, old-fashioned geopolitical considerations—in particular, the desire to oppose the perceived expansion of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia at the expense of America's new friend, China—won out over human rights in Carter's Cambodia policy. In a final irony, after the Vietnamese drove the Khmer Rouge from power at the end of 1978, the United States secretly

4. Joshua Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy* (Lanham, MD, 1986), 7–17, 197–200. But see also David Sheinan, "The Cost in Blood: Human Rights in U.S.-Argentine Relations, 1977–1980," paper presented at the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations meeting, 22 June 2000, Toronto, which argues that Carter's policy toward Argentina was not based primarily on human-rights considerations and did not, in any event, have much effect on the regime.

5. Neither Strong nor Brinkley mentions Cambodia. Carter's policy toward Cambodia has received relatively little attention. The most complete account is Sheldon Neuringer's short book, *The Carter Administration, Human Rights, and the Agony of Cambodia* (Lewistown, NY, 1993). In a book based mostly on published sources (most unpublished sources were not available when he wrote), Neuringer is critical of Carter, concluding that his administration's support of the Pol Pot regime in the United Nations was "at worst an act of moral dereliction, at best a grievous error in judgment" (81). A much shorter, if equally critical, account is Michael Haas, *Cambodia, Pol Pot, and the United States: The Faustian Pact* (New York, 1991), 11–17, which is based on published sources and interviews. See also Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York, 1986), 95–99. Since these books appeared, the Carter Presidential Library has released more documentation. Nevertheless, much material remains classified. The most recent account is Christopher Brady, *United States Foreign Policy towards Cambodia, 1977–92* (New York, 1999), 13–49. Based exclusively on published materials, the book analyzes the constructed "realities" of the administration, as well as the dynamics of decision-making within the administration. Brady concludes that Carter's policy toward Cambodia was "a major failure for the President as an individual while being only a minor embarrassment for the administration" (49).

supported efforts to resuscitate and sustain their remaining military forces. For this, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, presumably with Carter's at least tacit approval, bears primary responsibility.

Cambodia achieved independence from France in 1953–54 under the leadership of its young king, Norodom Sihanouk. Sihanouk continued to lead the country until he was deposed in 1970 by Lon Nol and Sirik Matak. Sihanouk had mostly managed to keep his country out of the war that was ravaging Vietnam, although the North Vietnamese did infiltrate personnel and supplies through the Cambodian border region, and Viet Cong forces sometimes retreated into Cambodia. American and South Vietnamese forces regularly launched attacks across the border, sometimes killing innocent Cambodians in the process. In 1963, Sihanouk ended all American aid, and in May 1965, he broke diplomatic relations with the United States, primarily due to the continuing cross-border raids. In 1969, President Richard Nixon ordered the secret bombing by B-52s of the so-called Cambodian sanctuaries, but he also restored relations with Sihanouk's government. The bombing did not end the communists' use of Cambodia, and so the administration then took advantage of Sihanouk's ouster in March 1970 and the installation of the new pro-American government to invade Cambodia in an effort to destroy the enemy's headquarters.⁶ This action expanded the war and brought Cambodia fully into the Vietnam imbroglio. For the next five years a brutal war ensued, as the Lon Nol government fought a losing battle with the North Vietnamese and then increasingly with the insurgent Cambodian communist rebels, the Khmer Rouge, to whom Sihanouk had lent his support (although he had little influence on their actions). Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians perished. In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge came to power, drove the city-dwellers into the countryside, and established a government, Democratic Kampuchea (DK), so brutal that an estimated 1.7 million more Cambodians died—this out of a total population of perhaps seven million—before the Vietnamese drove the Khmer Rouge from power at the end of 1978.⁷

Carter administration officials were well aware of the vicious nature of the Khmer Rouge. Even before Pol Pot took over Cambodia, the government had substantial evidence of Khmer Rouge brutality. In February 1974, for example, Foreign Service officer Kenneth Quinn (who would serve as ambassador to Cambodia in the 1990s) wrote a lengthy and chilling report about Khmer Rouge

6. Nixon preferred to term the action an "incursion" and refused to acknowledge that he was violating Cambodian sovereignty, on the grounds that the areas into which American and South Vietnamese forces went were no longer "Cambodian" because they had long been controlled by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.

7. A good account of the war is Wilfred P. Deac, *Road to the Killing Fields: The Cambodian War of 1970–75* (College Station, TX, 1997). For accounts of Cambodia under the Pol Pot regime, see Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79* (New Haven, CT, 1996), and David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven, CT, 1991), 236–312.

governance in areas of Cambodia they then controlled.⁸ Nor was the general public unaware of events in Cambodia. Some Americans learned about Khmer Rouge atrocities as early as 1974 from a story in April in the *Washington Star News* and another in July in the *Chicago Tribune*. In March 1975, shortly before the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh, Sydney Schanberg, writing for the *New York Times*, reported an American official as saying (with remarkable foresight) that the Khmer Rouge would “kill all the educated people, the teachers, the artists, the intellectuals and that would be a step backward toward barbarism.” Schanberg himself reported that the Khmer Rouge had already displayed “battlefield brutality,” had “burned whole villages, murdered unarmed peasants and even sometimes mutilated their bodies.”⁹ Once the Khmer Rouge came to power, Henry Kamm and David A. Andelman detailed their atrocities, based on refugee accounts, in the *New York Times*.

Nor was Congress silent on the Cambodian developments. In 1975, several representatives made speeches deploring the violence and genocide. On the right, Representative John M. Ashcroft (R-OH) flayed the “liberal media” for downplaying the bloodbath in Cambodia.¹⁰ But in fact, much of the information about the atrocities came from that same media, and more liberal members of Congress also spoke out condemning Khmer Rouge rule. Senator Alan Cranston (D-CA), for example, who had been highly critical of American policy in Cambodia, credited reports of “brutal deaths in the tens of thousands” and condemned the new tyrannical regime.¹¹

In 1976, as Cambodia sealed itself off almost completely from the outside world, the country received less attention. But a number of representatives (including, among others, John P. Murtha [D-PA] and Claiborne Pell [D-RI]) continued to speak out publicly about the regime; and some important press accounts helped keep Americans aware of the disturbing developments in Cambodia. François Ponchaud’s well-informed articles appeared in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, for example, and Edith Lenart wrote two graphic articles for the *Pittsburgh Press*. But more Americans undoubtedly read a major *Time* magazine expose. Based largely on refugee reports, *Time* focused on the regime’s “savagery” and included graphic drawings of the way in which executions were carried out. The article concluded that a genocide was in progress.¹²

8. Kenneth M. Quinn, “The Khmer Krahom Program to Create a Communist Society in Southern Cambodia,” 19 February 1974, enclosed in Lehman, U.S. Consulate Can Tho, to Department of State, 20 February 1974, Airgram A-008, Cambodian Documentation Project, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. I am grateful to Sorya Sim for providing me with a copy of this important document.

9. Sydney Schanberg, “The ‘Enemy’ is Red, Cruel and, after 5 Years, Little Known,” *New York Times*, 2 March 1975.

10. *Congressional Record* 121, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 6 May 1975, pt. 10:13096. More problematically, Ashcroft also insisted that a bloodbath was under way in Vietnam.

11. *Ibid.*

12. See, for example, François Ponchaud, “Le Cambodge Neuf Mois Après,” *Le Monde*, 17 February 1976; “Why Are the Khmer Killing the Khmer?” *Time*, 26 April 1976, 4-7. (In some editions of the magazine, the story is on pp. 8-11.)

Some citizens were so stirred by the report that they urged President Gerald R. Ford to speak out about the horrors in Cambodia.¹³

Time also published a brief excerpt from *Murder of a Gentle Land: The Untold Story of Communist Genocide in Cambodia*, a forthcoming book by *Reader's Digest* editors Anthony Paul (among the last journalists to leave Phnom Penh) and John Barron. Based on hundreds of interviews with refugees on the Thai border, the book was certainly the most widely read contemporary account of the horrors of Khmer Rouge. And if it was sensationalistic and provided little context, including almost nothing about what had happened in Cambodia during the five years preceding the Khmer Rouge victory, it was very influential and even became the basis for congressional hearings into Cambodian developments in 1977.¹⁴

To be sure, there was some initial skepticism about the accuracy of the earliest public reports. In the aftermath of the Vietnam debacle and the Nixon administration's lies about what it was doing in Cambodia, government accounts were not always trusted. In 1975, when President Ford urged Congress to provide yet more aid to the beleaguered Lon Nol government, he found that predictions of a bloodbath were unpersuasive. Skeptics also pointed out that refugee reports tend to be exaggerated.

President Ford's inability to get substantial additional aid for Cambodia in 1975 also resulted from a widespread belief that American policy during the early 1970s had been responsible, at least in part, for the unfolding tragedy. With hundreds of thousands of Cambodians already dead as a result of the war even before the Khmer Rouge took over, many people—Americans and Cambodians—did not see how things could get worse. When the Khmer Rouge finally entered Phnom Penh, many breathed a sigh of relief. At least the war was over, and the dying would cease. A few scholars and other observers initially defended early Khmer Rouge actions, including the emptying of the cities.¹⁵ But by the time Carter came to Washington, ample evidence of the brutal nature of the Khmer Rouge was available to both the new administration and the public at large.

When Carter took office in January 1977, he immediately addressed issues remaining from the Vietnam War. The new president pardoned those who had resisted the draft and began the process (ultimately abortive) of restoring diplomatic relations with Vietnam. But Cambodia received little attention. Beyond

13. For example, Thomas Turner to Ford, 11 May 1976, Gerald R. Ford Papers, White House Central Files (hereafter WHCF): Subject File CO [Country] 21-CO 26, Folder CO 26-Khmer Republic, Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

14. William Shawcross, "The Third Indochina War," *New York Review of Books*, 6 April 1978.

15. See, for example, Gareth Porter and G. C. Hildebrand, *Cambodia: Starvation and Revolution* (New York, 1976); Laura Summers, "Consolidating the Cambodian Revolution," *Current History* 69 (December 1975): 218–22, 245; and William Goodfellow, "Starvation in Cambodia," *New York Times*, 14 July 1975. Most skeptics changed their minds when evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities became clear. I am grateful to Cindy Flores for calling my attention to the Summers article.

the interesting decision at some point in 1977 to approve three licenses to ship DDT to Cambodia to ease the country's problem with malaria (the shipments apparently being made through DK authorities in Hong Kong), no major policy initiatives were taken in 1977. (DK officials never acknowledged that they had received the chemicals.)¹⁶

The administration's inattention to the tragedy in Cambodia soon caused a growing number of people to point out that its silence belied its rhetoric about the centrality of human rights to its foreign policy. "I am especially amazed that you, with your important policy of defending human rights, have not found it 'proper' to speak up in defense of thousands of defenseless Cambodians who are being brutally beaten to death for merely having existed in the middle class," wrote one citizen to the president.¹⁷ Representative Norman Dicks (D-WA) also implored Carter to condemn the Khmer Rouge, whose atrocities, he wrote, rivaled "those perpetrated in Nazi Germany during World War II, and which make human-rights violations in Chile, Uganda, and the Soviet Union pale by comparison."¹⁸ In response, Carter insisted that the United States would "continue to speak out against this or any other nation which systematically denies the right to enjoy life and the basic human dignities."¹⁹ But little, in fact, was done.

Outrage at the lack of response to the disturbing developments in Cambodia resulted in the first congressional hearings on Cambodian developments since the victory of the Pol Pot forces in 1975. In May 1977, the Subcommittee on International Organization of the House International Affairs Committee heard from four witnesses: Barron; scholar Gareth Porter, who questioned reports of mass murder and systematic atrocities and defended the decision to evacuate Cambodia's cities; and former Foreign Service officers Peter A. Poole and David Chandler, both of whom had previously served in Cambodia. Poole and Chandler offered cautious assessments of the situation in Cambodia and thought past American military actions in Cambodia were substantially responsible for bringing the Khmer Rouge to power. But beyond agreeing that some humanitarian assistance (such as additional shipments of DDT, along with food

16. Douglas J. Bennet, Jr., to Romano L. Mazzoli, 31 January 1978, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Jimmy Carter Papers, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter Carter Papers). Ambassador Charles Twining, interview with author, 27 December 1994, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Testimony of Peter A. Poole, U.S. Congress, House Committee on International Relations, *Human Rights in Cambodia: Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Organization*, 95th Cong., 1st sess., 3 May 1977, 3. See also Neuringer, *The Carter Administration, Human Rights, and the Agony of Cambodia*, 27.

17. Kristen Lund to Carter, 11 June 78, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers. See also Nearovi Pen to Carter, 18 February 1977, WHCF-Public Relations, Box PR 50, Folder "PR13 3/1/77-4/30/77," Carter Papers, and letter from Johannes M. Spronk, enclosed in Les AuCoin to Carter, 8 July 1977, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

18. Norman D. Dicks to Carter, 24 March 1977, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

19. Carter to Ronald M. Ellsweig, 11 May 1977, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

and medicine) might be helpful, none of the witnesses initially offered any suggestions on how the United States could significantly change the Cambodian situation, and all except Barron opposed strong public condemnation. "You have no specific recommendations for the U.S. policy which you would put forward as a means of ameliorating or encouraging moderation in the regime there," committee chairman Donald M. Fraser (D-MN) stated in apparent frustration.²⁰

The witnesses' testimony appalled Representative Stephen Solarz (D-NY). Although Solarz, who was quickly becoming the leading congressional authority on Cambodia, agreed that the American bombing of Cambodia had been "contemptible," what was now happening in Cambodia was "one of the most monstrous crimes in the history of the human race." To stand by and say nothing betrayed "a kind of implicit racism." If the victims were white, he went on, the United States would not be talking "about sending DDT to the offending nation in an effort to ameliorate the situation." The situation was so horrendous and unprecedented, Solarz thought, that it required "an exceptional and maybe extraordinary response on our part."²¹

The very fact that these hearings took place suggested that the administration was not providing leadership in responding to the Cambodian holocaust. In July, the committee heard from Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Holbrooke and a Khmer-speaking Foreign Service officer, Charles Twining, who had been watching the Cambodian situation from Bangkok (and who later served as the first American ambassador to Cambodia when relations were restored in the 1990s). Both testified about the flagrant DK human-rights violations, including systematic executions that numbered in the tens or hundreds of thousands (many more had died from overwork, starvation, or disease). But neither Holbrooke nor Twining thought that the United States could do much to change the situation. "I am not sure that the Cambodian leadership would care a hoot about what we or anyone else would have to say," Twining remarked. He doubted that even the Chinese, who had provided the Khmer Rouge with diplomatic, technical, and material support, could influence DK behavior. In the end, the committee, noting the Carter administration's "high priority" given to "human rights conditions around the world," approved a resolution protesting Khmer Rouge brutality and urging the administration to work with other nations to try to bring about an end to the "flagrant violations of internationally recognized human rights now taking place in Cambodia."²² But little happened.

20. U.S. Congress, House Committee on International Relations, *Human Rights in Cambodia: Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Organization*, 14.

21. *Ibid.*, 32, 47. Solarz raised the possibility of an international boycott or even an international police force.

22. *Ibid.*, 15, 24. Although there were no hearings in the Senate, in November 1977 Senator Robert Dole (R-KS) and others introduced a similar resolution denouncing human-rights abuses in Cambodia.

However, by the end of 1977—presumably in response to growing pressure—the administration was forced to take more interest. Late in 1977 or early in 1978 the National Security Council (NSC) staff reviewed the Cambodian situation, which led Brzezinski to call for a more aggressive American posture. The United States “should do more to call attention to Cambodian violations of human rights and generate international condemnation” of the Cambodian government, he said.²³ On 17 January 1978, Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher publicly reiterated the American condemnation of DK, but the State Department once again insisted that it had “no leverage to affect the human-rights situation in Cambodia.”²⁴

Such expressions of impotence did not assuage the critics. On 28 February 1978, for example, Solarz wrote directly to the president condemning the flagrant violations of human rights, and Carter then ordered that a strong condemnation of Democratic Kampuchea be prepared.²⁵ The State Department’s draft statement, however, was inadequate. It unaccountably focused on Indochinese refugees and made no distinctions among Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as generators of refugees. “For balance,” the draft also included a condemnation of the human-rights practices of Vietnam and Laos (which hardly compared to the draconian measures in force in Cambodia). Cambodia was said to be “among the worst violators of human rights in the world today.”

The NSC staff rewrote the statement, largely eliminating the “balancing” comments about human-rights abuses in Vietnam and Laos. But it still began with the statement that “since 1975, more than one-third of a million people have fled their homes in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.” Brzezinski considered the NSC rewrite “too timid” and amended parts of it himself. Thus, instead of referring to people fleeing “the loss of basic political and economic freedoms,” the National Security Adviser substituted simply “mass murder.” Instead of the Cambodian government merely being “certainly among” the world’s worst violators of human rights, DK became simply “the worst violator of human rights in the world today.” Instead of the government “causing unparalleled misery,” it was accused (based on refugee reports) “of inflicting death on hundreds of thousands”—and perhaps one to two million people—because of “genocidal policies without parallel since the days of the Holocaust.”²⁶

23. Paul B. Hentze to Theodore Shackley, 9 January 1978, National Security Affairs, Staff Materials, Horn/Special, Box 1, Carter Papers.

24. Douglas J. Bennet, Jr., to Romano L. Mazzoli, 31 January 1975, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

25. Christine Dodson to Pater Tarnoff, 14 April 1978, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers. Brzezinski’s assistant, Michael Oksenberg, seems not to have approved of the idea, but the State Department was nevertheless ordered to draft a statement by 18 April that would express “U.S. concerns over the human rights policies of the Government of Cambodia.” Oksenberg’s apparent dissent is noted in Jessica Tuchman Mathews to Christine Dodson, 14 April 1978, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

26. Draft statements on Cambodia, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

For reasons that are not yet clear, the final version, issued on 21 April 1978, was not quite so strong. All references to countries other than Cambodia remained out, thus focusing attention just on Cambodia, and the condemnation of Cambodia as “the worst violator of human rights in the world today” remained. Refugee allegations of “hundreds of thousands” of deaths also survived, but the charge that one to two million people had perished because of genocidal policies was removed. The term “genocide” did, however, survive in a subsequent section that called attention to a recent Canadian House of Commons resolution condemning the “acts of genocide” in Cambodia. Carter pledged to support the “growing international protest” against DK and noted a Norwegian committee’s hearings into the matter, as well as appeals by Amnesty International and the decision of the United Nations Human Rights Commission to ask the Cambodian government to respond to the allegations against it.²⁷

Even in this slightly watered-down version, the condemnation of Cambodia earned Carter much applause from human-rights organizations and ordinary citizens. Carter soon asked for recommendations on “additional actions which would encourage the Cambodian Government to improve its human-rights record.”²⁸ However, attention soon shifted to the plight of the Cambodian refugees who had managed to escape to Thailand. (There was virtually no interest, it might be noted, in the tens of thousands of Cambodian refugees for whom Vietnam was caring.)²⁹ Congress again took the lead, with both houses passing resolutions urging that 15,000 Cambodian refugees be allowed to come to the United States. In October 1978, the Dole-Solarz bill authorizing such admissions sailed through Congress.

The special refugee legislation did not, however, address the plight of the millions of Cambodians still living under the Khmer Rouge government. Although some, like Senator George McGovern (D-SD), eventually called for armed intervention to end the suffering in Cambodia, most of those who wanted stronger action believed that the United States should persuade the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Khmer Rouge’s only real ally, to end Cambodia’s reign of terror. In 1978, this seemed more realistic than it had the previous year, since both the United States and China hoped to establish full diplomatic relations. “Hope you have had (or will have) a chance to mention the impact

27. “Human Rights Violations in Cambodia,” statement by the President, 21 April 1978, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

28. Brzezinski to Cyrus Vance, 28 April 1978, Vertical File, “Cambodian Directives,” Carter Papers.

29. In his testimony before the House Subcommittee in July 1977, however, Richard Holbrooke volunteered that the flow of refugees into Vietnam was larger than the flow into Thailand, and Twining acknowledged that they were well treated: “The Vietnamese only ask the Cambodians to stay out of politics. . . . Otherwise they are free to work, they are free to go to new economic areas, they are free to do more or less what they want.” U.S. Congress, House Committee on International Relations, *Human Rights in Cambodia: Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Organization*, 17–18.

around the world of the Khmer Rouge behavior to the PRC,” wrote one of Brzezinski’s friends at the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University. “Surely they have an interest in moderating it.”³⁰

Carter himself instructed Brzezinski to read his statement of 21 April 1978 condemning DK to the Chinese, which the National Security Adviser apparently did in May. But again, it was congressional opinion that pushed for stronger action. In July 1978, a bipartisan group of eighteen congressional representatives urged Carter to make Cambodia a part of the discussions aimed at normalizing relations with China.

We have, through various actions, demonstrated to the Chinese our willingness to act in a spirit of cooperation to reduce the tensions that plague that sector of the world [they told Carter]. It would only seem reasonable that the Chinese themselves make a concrete effort to show the American people that it [sic] will also cooperate. Cambodia provides the most visible area for such a demonstration, and the clearest avenue where our government can most fruitfully act to reduce the horrendous misery of the Cambodian people.³¹

The representatives’ suggestion did not commend itself to Brzezinski. The National Security Adviser was fiercely anti-Soviet and consequently a strong proponent of improving relations with the Soviet Union’s bitter antagonist, China. Just as he had ended talks on restoring relations with Vietnam because he feared it might complicate normalization with China, so, too, he did not want to make China’s intervention with Pol Pot a condition of normalization. The State Department explained why: “We believe . . . it would be a serious mistake to inject the Cambodian human-rights violations into future US-PRC bilateral negotiations on normalization,” Assistant Secretary of State Douglas J. Bennet wrote to the congressional representatives. To do so, he went on, would “seriously complicate this process without significant positive impact on the situation in Cambodia.”³²

To give first priority to the geopolitical advantages inherent in normalizing relations with China, however, belied the Carter’s administration’s insistence that concern for human rights was the primary determinant in its foreign policy. To many, the policy of seeking to normalize relations with China without calling on its government to pressure the Khmer Rouge seemed hypocritical. China was the only country in the world that might be able to influence a regime that Carter himself had accused of being the world’s worst violator of human rights. By not linking the two issues, American policy appeared to be based purely on

30. John Richardson to Brzezinski, 30 May 1978, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

31. Michael Harrington, James M. Hanley et al. to Carter, 6 July 1978, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

32. Bennet to James M. Hanley et al., 17 August 1978, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.



Figure 1 National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski hosts a dinner for Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, 28 January 1979, a month after the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and drove the Khmer Rouge from power. Two and a half weeks after this picture was taken, Chinese troops attacked Vietnam in retaliation for Vietnam's military actions in Cambodia. Although President Carter offered a number of pro forma objections, the Chinese invasion did not displease Brzezinski. Other Americans pictured are Secretary of State Cyrus Vance (to Deng's right) and Richard Holbrooke (with glasses at the end of the table). Brzezinski subsequently favored resuscitating the Khmer Rouge to oppose the Vietnamese. Photo courtesy of the Jimmy Carter Library.

realpolitik calculations and, in particular, a desire to play the China card in the strategic battle with the Soviet Union.

Brzezinski's fascination with China sometimes troubled Carter. "Zbig," the president jotted on one of Brzezinski's papers advocating a delay in normalizing relations with Vietnam, "you have a tendency to exalt the PRC issue."³³ But Brzezinski held firm. He regarded the establishment of full diplomatic relations with China as his crowning achievement, but there was no relief for Cambodia.

Relief for Cambodia finally came in December 1978, when Vietnamese troops—along with some Cambodians who had fled from the Khmer Rouge and taken refuge in Vietnam—invaded Cambodia and quickly drove the Khmer Rouge regime out of Phnom Penh. Soon, Pol Pot controlled only a small part of the country near the Thai border, as well as some refugee camps inside Thailand. The Vietnamese installed Heng Samrin as the new prime minister of

33. Carter's comments on Brzezinski to Carter, 13 October 1978, Subject File, Box 42, Folder "Weekly Reports 9/78-12/78," Brzezinski Donated Material, Carter Library.

the Peoples' Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Several months after the invasion, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong told a visiting group of Americans representing Church World Service (the overseas ministries arm of the National Council of Churches) that Vietnam had acted to "salvage a nation. . . . We have brought that nation from death to life," he said.³⁴ Actually, Vietnam's motives were more complex. Regardless, Vietnam ended the murderous rule of the Khmer Rouge. Despite the distrust that most Cambodians historically had for the Vietnamese, on this occasion their hereditary enemy was their liberator.

The Carter administration did not see it that way, however. Only a couple of months before the invasion, the Americans had been close to normalizing relations with Vietnam, only to have Brzezinski stop the process. It was more important to go forward with the Chinese talks, he felt, and discussions with Vietnam, which was thought to be closer to the Soviet Union than to China, might complicate the matter.³⁵ Thus, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia, the United States condemned the act, arguing hypocritically that it could not in principle "condone or support the use of military forces outside of one's own territory."³⁶

To the Carter administration, and especially to Brzezinski, the Vietnamese action had the deleterious effect of expanding Soviet influence in Southeast Asia. Pol Pot's regime was despicable, but it was allied with China, which the United States now supported. It quickly became American policy to get Vietnamese troops out of Cambodia. As Brzezinski put it in some suggested "talking points" for Carter to use when he met with Chinese Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping in January 1979, "[W]e must maintain diplomatic pressure to get Vietnam to remove its forces from Cambodia."³⁷

The diplomatic calculus quickly became more complicated, for during his visit to Washington at the end of January, Deng asked Carter how the United States would respond to "a punitive strike against the Viet Nameese." Brzezinski had expected something of this sort and was worried that Secretary Vance would persuade Carter "to put maximum pressure on the Chinese not to use force." But Carter's response was fully acceptable to Brzezinski. For the record, Carter personally told Deng that there were a number of disadvantages to taking

34. Eugene L. Stockwell, "Record of Conversation with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam," 26 October 1979, Presidential Commission on Hunger, General Records-Subject File, Box 11, Folder "Cambodia [2]," Carter Papers.

35. The fear of going ahead with normalization of relations with Vietnam because of possible Chinese objections appears to have had little basis in reality. As Carter himself put it later, "During the early part of 1978, the Chinese sent word to me that they would welcome our moving toward Vietnam." *Keeping Faith*, 194. The best discussion of attempts to normalize relations in 1978 is Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (New York, 1986), 263-96.

36. "Draft Talking Points for Vance-Chai meeting," n.d., Geographical File, Box 10, Folder "Sino-Vietnamese Conflict, 2/17/79-2/21/79," Brzezinski Donated Material.

37. Brzezinski to Carter, "Suggested Talking Points for Your Second Session," n.d., Geographical File, Box 9, Folder "China-President's Meeting with Deng Xiaoping," Brzezinski Donated Material.

such action. “I strongly urge you not to approve it,” he told the Chinese leader. But, as Brzezinski put it, Carter’s letter to Deng “did not lock the United States into a position which could generate later pressures to condemn China in the UN.”³⁸

The Chinese soon massed 170,000 troops and a substantial number of combat aircraft on the Vietnamese border. Asked by reporters in a “deep background” session about why the Chinese troops were there, Brzezinski responded only, “[O]ur position is that we join in the consensus that the Vietnamese have been the aggressors.” Asked if the Chinese would also be aggressors if they attacked Vietnam, Brzezinski refused to take a position on the grounds that the question was hypothetical.³⁹

Feeling little pressure from the United States to desist, the Chinese armed forces invaded Vietnam on 16 February 1979. At that point, Carter apparently sympathized with the Chinese, for on the day of the invasion he reportedly told the National Security Council that “the Soviet-backed . . . Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia gave the Chinese little choice but to invade Vietnam.”⁴⁰ This remained at the heart of the American view of Indochina. As one official put it, “[T]he Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea is the root cause of the tensions in the region.”⁴¹ Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Chinese invasion Brzezinski met almost daily with the Chinese ambassador and provided him with intelligence reports on Soviet troop deployments. Thus, as historian Qiang Zhai writes, “[T]he US was secretly assisting China as it delivered its ‘punishment’ to Vietnam.”⁴²

38. Carter to Deng Xiaoping, 30 January 1979, Geographical File, Box 9, Folder “China-President’s Meeting with Deng Xiaoping,” Brzezinski Donated Material. A note indicates that Carter read this letter to Deng and an interpreter transcribed it for him. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of a National Security Adviser, 1977–1981* (New York, 1983), 409–10.

39. Memorandum for the record, 1 February 1979, Geographical File, Box 10, Folder “China-President’s Meeting with Deng Xiaoping,” Brzezinski Donated Material.

40. Michael Oksenberg and William Odom to Brzezinski, 19 February 1979, Geographical File, Box 10, Folder “Sino-Vietnamese Conflict, 2/17/79–2/21/79,” Brzezinski Donated Material.

41. B. Lynn Pascoe to Edward F. Snyder and Gretchen Eich, 5 April 1979, WHCF: Subject File National Security-Defense, Box ND-48, Folder “ND16/C) 172, 1/20/77–1/20/81,” Carter Papers. Because Deng had visited with Carter only two weeks before the Chinese attack took place, the Soviet Union and others accused the United States of sanctioning, if not actually helping to plan, the Chinese action. The administration’s public response was that Deng had not raised the issue of attacking Vietnam while in the United States—a patent falsehood. To the allies, however, Carter acknowledged that the issue had come up and that he had counseled Deng not to attack because it only distracted attention from the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. Minutes of the Special Coordination Committee Meeting, 17 February 1979, Geographical File, Box 10, Folder “Sino-Vietnamese Conflict, 2/17/79–2/21/79,” Brzezinski Donated Material. The minutes read, “One of the first press questions will be ‘Did Deng raise the issue of an attack on Vietnam while he was in the United States?’ Our answer to the press is ‘no.’”

42. Qiang Zhai, communication to the author, 1 May 2001. I am grateful to Qiang Zhai for his assessment of Carter’s letter to Deng and American policy surrounding the Chinese invasion.

In all of this, there was almost no thought given to what was best for the Cambodian people—those who had suffered so severely under the Khmer Rouge and who were now (for the most part) free of that scourge. Nothing indicates that the administration gave any thought whatsoever to trying to prevent Pol Pot from resuming his murderous rule. What would happen to the Cambodians if the Vietnamese withdrew? The question was not raised. Instead, everything was examined from a geopolitical standpoint.

From such a perspective, the fact that Pol Pot's forces had not been completely destroyed cheered the administration. One of the reasons for the Chinese not to invade Vietnam, Carter told Deng, was that "the Kampuchians seem to be doing better than expected as guerilla fighters."⁴³ And at a meeting of the Special Coordination Committee on 18 February, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Stansfield Turner stated, in response to an inquiry from Brzezinski, that "there was no retrogression in the ability of the Pol Pot forces to hold their own."⁴⁴ Presumably, this intelligence pleased the National Security Adviser. In any event, Brzezinski went out of his way to see that nothing interfered with the new relationship he had established with China.

Once again, it was up to Congress to try and force action on behalf of the Cambodian people. On 22 February 1979, Solarz and eight other members of Congress called the administration on its failure to address the issue of the possible return of the Khmer Rouge to power. "The need to prevent the restoration of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia seems to have been overlooked by the Administration," they wrote. If the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia without an international force of some kind in position, they stated, "the genocidal Pol Pot regime" would reestablish itself in Phnom Penh, and the suffering of the Cambodian people would continue, as would regional instability. Instead of simply condemning the Vietnamese, they wrote, the administration ought to devote its energies to getting the superpowers to accept an international force that would replace the Vietnamese in Cambodia and, at the same time, prevent the return of Pol Pot.⁴⁵

The administration responded that the letter "contains many of the elements that we are exploring with others in our search for a solution,"⁴⁶ and it may be that Vance asked the Chinese whether they would support an international conference on Cambodia.⁴⁷ But there is little evidence that the Carter administra-

43. Carter to Deng Xiaoping, 30 January 1979, Geographical File, Box 9, Folder "China-President's Meeting with Deng Xiaoping," Brzezinski Donated Material.

44. Minutes of the Special Coordination Committee Meeting, 18 February 1979, Geographical File, Box 10, Folder "Sino-Vietnamese Conflict, 2/17/79-2/21/79," Brzezinski Donated Material.

45. Solarz et al. to Carter, 22 February 1979, WHCF: Subject File: National Security and Defense, Box ND-47, Folder "Executive, ND 16/CO-172, 1/1/78-4/30/79," Carter Papers.

46. Bennet to Solarz, n.d., WHCF: Subject File: National Security and Defense, Box ND-47, Folder "Executive, ND 16/CO-172, 1/1/78-4/30/79," Carter Papers.

47. "Draft Talking Points for Vance-Chai Meeting," Geographical File, Box 10, Folder "Sino-Vietnamese Conflict, 2/17/79-2/21/79," Brzezinski Donated Material.

tion devoted much energy to trying to prevent the Khmer Rouge from returning. This was evident on 1 March 1979, when Holbrooke, in testimony before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, called for the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia but said nothing about how the Khmer Rouge would be prevented from resuming control if the Vietnamese withdrew. It was left to Solarz to make the point that the administration had no plan to prevent Pol Pot returning to power if the Vietnamese left.⁴⁸ The administration's major goal was to get the Vietnamese to leave Cambodia, because their presence there—and the regime they had installed and supported—represented, in the administration's view, a gain for Soviet influence in the region at the expense of the Chinese. From this perspective, keeping Pol Pot's forces in the field where they could fight the Vietnamese was in the administration's interest, despite the embarrassment of supporting, if only indirectly, a man who had perpetrated genocide in Southeast Asia. The interest of ordinary Cambodian people was of little concern.

Attention soon shifted toward the plight of the hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees. Tens of thousands of Cambodians were fleeing to Thailand to escape the Khmer Rouge and the continued fighting in their country. But the simultaneous exodus of large numbers of "boat people" from Vietnam complicated the international situation of the Cambodian refugees. Sometimes rescued half dead on the high seas by merchant vessels or American warships, frequently suffering from horrific attacks by pirates and marauders before reaching Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, or elsewhere (where they were forced to live in often wretched refugee camps, if they were not actually pushed back out to sea), the plight of the boat people was an embarrassment to Vietnam. A great outcry to assist the boat people arose. It was more comfortable for the American government to focus attention on the boat people than on the "land people" (the Cambodian refugees). Not only were they more immediately visible, but it was easy to blame the allegedly pro-Soviet government of Vietnam directly for causing the problem.⁴⁹

But the Cambodian refugees could not be ignored altogether. Stories about their harrowing lives under the Khmer Rouge and traumatic accounts of escape through minefields into Thailand began to appear in American publications, and letters from ordinary citizens and from members of Congress urged a strong

48. U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Assistance Legislation for Fiscal Years 1980–81*, part 4, *Hearings and Markup before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs*, 96th Cong., 1st sess., 27 February 1979, 69, 96–97. Holbrooke did comment that neither the Pol Pot nor the Heng Samrin regime was responsive to the popular will.

49. Thus, in July, in a speech at the U.N. Conference on Indochinese Refugees, for example, Vice President Walter Mondale devoted only one paragraph to the Cambodian refugees in Thailand and instead emphasized Vietnam's "fundamental responsibility" for the refugee situation in general. Speech by Vice President Walter F. Mondale to the UN Conference on Indochinese Refugees, 21 July 1979, WHCF: Subject File: National Security and Defense, Box ND-38, Folder "Executive, ND 16/CO 1 Indochina, 8/1/79–11/30/79," Carter Papers.

American commitment to alleviate their suffering. When, in June 1979, Thailand forced 45,000 Khmer refugees back into Cambodia with tragic results, there was a strong outcry. "I cannot bear to think that either I personally or the American people can sit back silently while this tragedy continues," wrote a businessman from New York.⁵⁰ Carter unconvincingly blamed the PRK and the Vietnamese,⁵¹ but the United States began to work with the Thai government and voluntary organizations to deliver food and other relief supplies to the border, where they were simply left to be picked up by needy refugees on the Cambodian side.

Attention to the Khmers soon increased dramatically when reports of imminent famine inside Cambodia itself began to appear. It was estimated that tens of thousands—perhaps as many as 200,000—were starving every month. A Church World Service delegation in Phnom Penh summed it up soberly in this way:

Rice rations, where available, are minimal. Food production is abysmally low. No one is sure what percentage of arable land is currently planted, but some estimates go as low as 5%, while none surpass 20%. Thus the prospects of rice and other food production are dismal. In such conditions infant mortality appears to be high, though reliable statistics are unavailable. We saw few children under the age of five. The need for basic foodstuffs is massive, as is the need for medicines, mosquito netting, and in time, immunological vaccines. The present trickle of assistance through international relief agencies, principally UNICEF and ICRC [the International Committee of the Red Cross] working jointly, and a few other agencies, is miniscule in the face of appalling need, and prospects of delivery and distribution of foodstuffs on a large scale are not heartening. . . .

Factories that process food, such as fish processing plants, are inoperative, with machinery out of repair. Schools are only beginning to function. There are few teachers, and there is a complete dearth of the most basic elements such as paper and supplies. There is a dearth of manpower for reconstruction, and the administrative infrastructure of the nation is extremely fragile, lacking basic necessities throughout.⁵²

Despite the apparent emergency, the Carter administration was hardly in the forefront of the effort to get aid into Cambodia itself. It criticized the Heng

50. Sidney S. Rosdeitcher to Brzezinski, 14 June 1979, WHCF: Subject File: Countries, Box CO-66, File "Executive, CO 172, 4/1/79-1/20/81," Carter Papers. See also Claiborne Pell to Carter, 14 June 1979, WHCF-Correspondence Tracking, Box 6, Document #050838, Carter Papers; and Rudy Boschwitz and Robert Dole et al. to Carter, 28 June 1979, WHCF-Subject File: National Security-Defense, Box ND-47, Folder "ND 16/1081, 1/20/77-1/20/81," Carter Papers.

51. Neuringer, *The Carter Administration, Human Rights, and the Agony of Cambodia*, 60.

52. Kirk Alliman et al., "Report on Visit to Kampuchea by Church World Service Delegation, October 19-20, 1979," Presidential Commission on Hunger, General Records, Subject File, Box 11, Folder "Cambodia [2]," Carter Papers.

Samrin regime (and its Vietnamese supporters) for insisting that all aid be channeled through the PRK, claiming that the regime was hindering distribution. But what most concerned the United States was that food shipments through Phnom Penh might be diverted to the Vietnamese soldiers in Cambodia or be used in other ways to bolster the PRK.

Within the U.S. government, efforts to get food into Cambodia itself were centered in the Presidential Commission on World Hunger, headed by Sol M. Linowitz. Although the Cambodian famine had not been a part of the commission's original mandate, by October Ambassador Linowitz thought that the commission could not ignore the world's most pressing hunger problem. In response to the commission's efforts, as well as an appeal by leaders of prominent relief agencies, on 8 October 1979, Vance recommended to the president that the United States clearly commit itself to support an expected joint appeal from UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) and the ICRC for an initial U.S.\$100 million to fund an international relief effort inside Cambodia for six months. "I believe the United States . . . should without delay make an initial commitment to the UNICEF/ICRC effort," he implored the president. "Given congressional and press concern, which is increasing rapidly, and the announced participation of other nations in this relief effort, I believe that you need to lead off your press conference with an announcement of this commitment."⁵³ The Secretary suggested an initial American contribution of \$7 million.

In view of the need, \$7 million was a small amount, and members of the Commission on World Hunger began to urge Linowitz to call on the president to commit \$30 million. Others spoke up as well. For example, Theodore M. Hesburgh, the president of the University of Notre Dame and the chairman of the Overseas Development Council, called together leaders of several religious denominations and humanitarian organizations to discuss the Cambodian situation and urge a substantially higher commitment.

Pressure on the administration also came from Senator Edward Kennedy, who chaired the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Immigration and who was thought likely to challenge Carter for the Democratic nomination for president in 1980. In a speech at Georgetown University, Kennedy chastised the administration's "past indifference" to the Cambodian situation. The United States, he complained, was "more concerned with which dictator . . . sits in the United Nations than with the many children dying in the nation they

53. Henry Owen to Carter, 8 October 1979, Staff Offices: Speechwriters, Chron File, Box 57, Folder "Kampuchean Statement," Carter Papers. Brzezinski and the National Security Council approved such a commitment, but the Office of Management and Budget demurred on the grounds that it was not possible to tell if the relief supplies distributed inside Cambodia would reach the needy, nor was it clear that the Emergency Migration and Refugee Assistance Fund could be utilized to assist persons who had not crossed an international border. Carter brushed aside such objections and issued the necessary orders on 15 October.

purport to lead.”⁵⁴ Kennedy’s points that the administration lacked a sense of urgency, was unduly concerned with the geopolitical situation, and was insufficiently concerned with the humanitarian tragedy were well taken.

Faced with the mounting pressure, the administration finally decided to undertake a major effort on behalf of the suffering Cambodians. On 23 October, Carter met with congressional leaders to get their assent to a large increase in funding for Cambodian relief. Then, at Carter’s personal request, Hesburgh and approximately thirty-five other religious and humanitarian leaders met with him at the White House. The president told them that he was directing that an additional \$3 million in aid be made available immediately to UNICEF and the ICRC, and that he was going to urge the Congress to approve sending an additional \$20 million in commodities to Cambodia, “subject only to assurances that it will reach the needy.”⁵⁵ All told, the administration was now proposing to spend \$30 million (including the \$7 million already authorized) for Cambodian relief, with an additional \$9 million going to Catholic Relief Services and United Nations programs that were assisting Cambodian refugees in Thailand. Hesburgh and the others were gratified. The next day, they issued a press release supporting Carter and urging the Congress, as well as the public, to increase assistance to Cambodia, a country that, they said, “has already lost half of its former population of eight million.”⁵⁶

In addition to announcing more aid, Carter sent letters to other major donor countries urging them to increase their own contributions. He also formed an interagency working group to coordinate relief efforts, naming former senator Dick Clark to head the group, and issued a presidential proclamation calling on all Americans to contribute generously to Cambodian relief. All in all, it was a major administration effort. Even Sihanouk’s wife, Princess Monique, was impressed. From Beijing she wrote to praise “la générosité du peuple américain et . . . l’action magnifique de son président.”⁵⁷

Important as the administration’s newfound attention was, it still lagged behind public opinion on the issue. After Senator John C. Danforth (R-MO) gave a “chilling report” to his colleagues about his recent visit to Phnom Penh, where his delegation saw Cambodians “literally dying before our eyes,” Congress approved an additional \$30 million “with unanimous whoops of

54. Kennedy’s speech is quoted in Ray Jenkins to “Rick,” 1 November 1979, Staff Office-Press-Jenkins, Box 2, Folder “Kampuchea (Cambodia), 1979,” Carter Papers.

55. “Statement by the President,” enclosed in Henry Owen to Carter, 23 October 1979, WHCF CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

56. Press release, Overseas Development Council, 24 October 1979, Presidential Commission on Hunger, General Records, Subject File, Box 11, Folder “Cambodia [2],” Carter Papers.

57. Monique Sihanouk to Carter, 26 October 1979, WHCF, Foreign Affairs, Box FO-31, Folder “Executive FO3-2 (CO 81), 1/20/77-1/20/81,” Carter Papers. Former GKR Prime Minister In Tam sent a similar telegram of appreciation.

approval.” Congress had almost doubled the amount requested by the administration.⁵⁸

Even with enthusiastic public support for assistance, however, just how forthcoming the United States would be in allowing funds to be spent inside Cambodia (as opposed to along the border) remained uncertain. Politics still mattered. For example, on 10 October, two days after Vance had urged the president to provide more assistance to Cambodian relief, Bill Herod, representing the Church World Service, testified before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs that the Treasury Department had not yet approved the organization’s request (made the previous June) to send \$100,000 worth of mosquito nets to Cambodia to help prevent malaria.⁵⁹ And on 29 October, *Washington Post* columnist Jack Anderson alleged that State Department officials had “deliberately sabotaged” the relief effort insofar as it applied to aid being provided to those inside Cambodia itself. There was, he charged, a “deep-seated anti-Vietnam bias in the State Department,” a bias that was reflected “in the shameful U.S. vote to seat the infamous Pol Pot regime in the United Nations.”⁶⁰ Anderson may have exaggerated State Department obstructiveness, and his observation about anti-Vietnamese sentiment applied at least as much to the NSC. But whatever its location, suspicions of Vietnam and the PRK permeated American policy toward the region.

In sum, although the administration had taken important steps to increase assistance to Cambodia, its willingness to address the tragedy in a forceful fashion remained in doubt. As a member of Vice President Walter F. Mondale’s staff put it in a letter to Carter’s chief of staff, Hamilton Jordan, “[T]here is little sense of the Administration having acted decisively. On moral, humanitarian, and political grounds, it should be otherwise.”⁶¹

Shortly thereafter, Holbrooke told the influential *Far Eastern Economic Review* that the United States would “subordinate all political considerations” to getting food to the Cambodian people.⁶² But political considerations only increased as a factor in the American aid program. The United States continued to accuse the Vietnamese and the Heng Samrin government of preventing

58. Don Oberdorfer, “Cambodia: Salvation Coming, but Slowly,” *Washington Post*, 4 November 1979.

59. Bill Herod, “Statement to the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, October 10, 1979,” Presidential Commission on Hunger, General Records, Subject File, Box 11, Folder “Cambodia [1],” Carter Papers.

60. Jack Anderson, “State Dept. Obstructing Cambodia Aid,” *Washington Post*, 29 October 1979.

61. Richard Moe to Hamilton Jordan, 12 November 1979, Chief of Staff Jordan, Box 41, Folder “Cambodia,” Carter Papers. See also Dennis J. Doolin to Carter, 7 November 1979, WHCF-Subject File, National Security-Defense, Box ND-47, Folder, “General, ND16/1081, 1/20/77-1/20-81,” Carter Papers. Doolin, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense of East Asia, was critical of the administration’s inaction.

62. “Richard Holbrooke and the Problems of Southeast Asia,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 November 1979, 14.

aid from getting to the starving people, with their Soviet supporters portrayed as an important part of the problem. The administration had made this charge in muted form before, but the upsurge in public sympathy with the starving people of Cambodia had overridden this sentiment, and Congress had appropriated millions of dollars for relief within Cambodia, funneled primarily through UNICEF and the ICRC. By late November 1979, however, those within the administration who wanted a strong public policy of blaming Hanoi, the PRK, and the USSR felt emboldened (probably because the recent Iranian hostage crisis had distracted attention from the Cambodian tragedy).

Brzezinski led the charge. The NSC staff drafted a militant statement accusing Vietnam, with Soviet backing, of "conducting a war of conquest" in Cambodia, a war designed "regardless of human cost" to put its "puppet regime" in control "of the entire country." Because the Vietnamese were denying the relief agencies access to hundreds of thousands of Cambodians, they would "carry a heavy burden before history for this callous and inhuman disregard of human life, bringing a new version of genocide to their tragic victims." Brzezinski sent the draft to the State Department, telling Vance that they would "be under great criticism if we do not react more publicly to the Soviet-Vietnamese impediments to more massive aid to Cambodia." He hoped the Secretary would agree and issue the draft statement.⁶³

It took ten days to issue a statement, indicating significant internal disagreement. Vance seems not to have gone along with the draft. It was, after all, hard to sustain the charge that the Vietnamese, who had rescued the country from the real perpetrator of genocide, Pol Pot, were themselves guilty of such a policy. In the meantime, there were conflicting signals from the administration. At a press conference announcing the appointment of Victor Palmieri as ambassador at large for refugee affairs, for example, NSC official Matt Nimitz called attention to the problems of distribution of supplies within Cambodia. Food was piling up, truck convoys were not being allowed to deliver the food to the countryside, and so forth. NSC official Lincoln Bloomfield, on the other hand, stated that there had been "some opening up inside Kampuchea." Goods were coming in via the Mekong River, and the number of daily relief flights to Phnom Penh had been increased from one to four; the number of international officials on the ground had also increased. This problem was still "very bad," Bloomfield acknowledged, but there were signs of movement. Nimitz agreed that some food was being distributed. The problems were both logistical and political, he said.⁶⁴

But Brzezinski was intolerant of ambiguity. Thus, on 3 December, he ordered the State Department to explain what it was doing to publicize alleged

63. Brzezinski to Vance, 27 November 1979, WHCF-Foreign Affairs, Box FO-31, Folder "Executive, FO 3-2 (CO 81), 1/20/77-1/20/81," Carter Papers.

64. Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Announcement and Briefing on the Appointment of Victor Palmieri as Ambassador at Large for Refugee Affairs," 30 November 1979, Staff Counsel-Cutler, Box 54, Folder "Cambodia 11/79-1/80," Carter Papers.



Figure 2 President Jimmy Carter meets with his two foreign policy advisers, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance (to Carter's left) and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. Although Carter respected both men, ultimately Brzezinski's pro-Chinese and hard line anti-Soviet views prevailed, and Vance resigned. For Cambodia, this meant that the United States would condemn Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and would ultimately side with the remnants of the genocidal Khmer Rouge, supported by China, as they battled the Vietnamese troops and the government they installed in Cambodia, the Peoples Republic of Kampuchea. Photo courtesy of the Jimmy Carter Library.

Vietnamese efforts to deny food to needy Cambodians. To the CIA, he was even blunter: the agency was directed "on an urgent basis" to publicize as widely as possible the Vietnamese "starvation policy."⁶⁵ Unsurprisingly, the official White House "Statement on Kampuchea," issued on 6 December 1979, reflected Brzezinski's tough approach. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia had brought to Cambodia "a new wave of oppression, hunger and disease," the statement read. The Vietnamese and the Heng Samrin authorities had "deliberately blocked and obstructed" the flow of aid to Cambodia. They were charged with not distributing supplies, exacting taxes on relief goods ("in effect imposing a surcharge on human survival"), diverting aid to the military and PRK officials and supporters, and even mining fields so that the crops could not be harvested.⁶⁶

65. Brzezinski to Director of CIA, 3 December 1979 [misdated 1985], Vertical File, "Cambodia Directives," Carter Papers.

66. The White House, "Statement on Kampuchea," 5 December 1979, WHCF-Foreign Affairs, Box FO-31, Folder "Executive, FO 3-2 (CO 81), 1/20/77-1/20/81," Carter Papers. Although the statement is dated 5 December, it was released on 6 December 1979.

The administration's statement was quickly challenged. Influential Washington columnist Mary McGrory immediately responded that "[I]f the Carter administration put as much effort into feeding the Cambodian people as it does into trying to discredit the Cambodian government, the famine would be over in a month." All agreed, McGrory stated, that distribution of food was inadequate and that people were starving as a result. The difference lay in how one assessed the causes. While the Carter administration charged that the PRK was "deliberately starving the Cambodians for political purposes," she wrote, international relief administrators blamed "the inexperience of the green and jumpy young managers of Cambodia and the total absence of any technology, beginning with telephones, trucks and railway lines."⁶⁷

Those in the field did indeed assess the distribution problem differently. Officials with Oxfam, UNICEF, the ICRC, and other relief organizations all disagreed, in varying degrees, with the administration's assessment. *New York Times* correspondent Henry Kamm, whose dispatches often highlighted the shortcomings of the PRK and Vietnamese, reported that relief administrators in Phnom Penh were "satisfied with the distribution."⁶⁸ Reports from the field also cast doubts on the accuracy of American claims that Soviet assistance was virtually nonexistent. For example, both ICRC and UNICEF officials pointed out that over 200 Soviet trucks had arrived in December and that they, along with the trucks recently imported by the international relief organizations, would speed delivery of food and other relief supplies.⁶⁹

Critics also complained, quite correctly, that the United States employed a double standard when it came to monitoring the distribution of supplies along the border versus in country. Inside Cambodia, the United States insisted that no aid whatsoever get to the Vietnamese troops and that monitoring mechanisms be in place. But along the border, aid was simply left for people to retrieve, with much of it taken back into Cambodia, where it could be used by military forces, including those of Pol Pot. Even when food deliveries became more systematized, with supplies delivered to the refugee camps, much aid ended up in the hands of various warlords and military forces, including the Khmer Rouge. One UNICEF survey documented that 87 percent of the food aid in

67. Newspaper clipping, Mary McGrory, "Carter's Geopolitics Helps Keep Cambodia . . .," *Washington Star*, December [day uncertain], [1979], Presidential Commission on World Hunger, General Records, Box 11, Folder "Cambodia [1]," Carter Papers.

68. Henry Kamm, "Cambodian Food Aid Reported Snagged," *New York Times*, 6 December 1979. See also Henry Kamm, "Red Cross Warns Cambodia on Blocking Aid Supplies," *New York Times*, 18 December 1979, and Lee Lescage, "Most of Cambodia's Relief Supplies Still Undistributed," *Washington Post*, 19 December 1979, both of which reported that relief officials with the ICRC and UNICEF blamed logistical problems more than political problems for the delays. The views of Oxfam and Church World Service officials are in McGrory, "Carter's Geopolitics Helps Keep Cambodia."

69. Kamm, "Red Cross Warns Cambodia on Blocking Aid Supplies"; Lescage, "Most of Cambodia's Relief Supplies Still Undistributed."

one sector of the border was misappropriated.⁷⁰ In other words, the United States used inadequate monitoring of aid delivered inside Cambodia as an excuse to limit assistance there but was unconcerned about the lack of monitoring of the aid that was delivered along the border, even if some of it got to Pol Pot's forces.⁷¹

Despite these criticisms, the administration continued to take strong positions against the PRK and its Vietnamese supporters. The International Communication Agency, which was given the task of publicizing the administration's new policy, saw to it that the "Statement of Kampuchea" reached a wide international audience through Voice of America broadcasts. The agency also publicized a James Reston column in the *New York Times* that relied on American intelligence reports that tended to discredit international relief efforts in Cambodia. The Soviet Union, these reports indicated, was actually blocking aid from reaching desperate people and was, instead, diverting it to the Vietnamese and PRK military forces.⁷²

Even as the administration disparaged the internal relief effort, it continued to focus attention on the plight of the Cambodian refugees along the border, which it blamed largely on PRK and Vietnamese actions. Brzezinski hoped to undertake highly publicized, dramatic efforts to provide food in this area. For a while, he considered a one-time air-drop of food inside Cambodia but near the border.⁷³ A little later, he personally asked the secretaries of state and defense to determine the feasibility of airlifting rice to the border, along with small wheeled carts that the people could use to transport the rice back into

70. William Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust, and Modern Conscience* (New York, 1984), 340-43.

71. Newspaper clipping, Richard M. Harley, "Are US Asian Policies Slowing Cambodia Aid?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 December 1979, Presidential Commission on World Hunger, General Records, Box 11, Folder "Cambodia [1]," Carter Papers. Some relief agencies also thought that the American failure to normalize relations with Vietnam increased the difficulties of distributing aid.

72. James Reston, "Is There No Pity?" *New York Times*, 12 December 1979. Another indication of the administration's more strident view was the decision to mimeograph a *New York Times* story by Henry Kamm dated 9 December, presumably for distribution within the government. The story was about an ethnic Chinese woman, Tran Chiv, who reported that the PRK was deporting ethnic Chinese in Phnom Penh to remote mountain areas and that this was consistent with Vietnam's policy toward Chinese people. But whoever mimeographed the story reproduced only half of it. The rest of the story indicated that Tran Chiv had originally been expelled by Pol Pot, that the Khmer Rouge had killed her sister and father, and that when the Vietnamese forces arrived they allowed her to go back to Phnom Penh, where the Vietnamese provided her and her husband with rice. When pressure on the ethnic Chinese became a problem, Vietnamese soldiers (for a price) took her and her family to Pursat, where she and her family made their way into Thailand. Clipping, Henry Kamm, "Refugee Says Cambodians Deport Ethnic Chinese," *New York Times*, 9 December 1979. The clipping and the mimeographed version of the story are in WHCF: Subject File, National Security-Defense, Box ND-38, Folder "Executive, ND 16/C01, Indochina 12/1/79-1/31/80," Carter Papers.

73. Brzezinski to Secretary of Defense, 26 November 1979, Vertical File, Folder "Cambodia Directives," Carter Papers.

Cambodia. It might also be possible, he said, for trucks to take the supplies across the border and unload food there. Leo Cherne, who chaired the Citizens Commission on Indo-Chinese Refugees and who often worked closely with the administration, agreed to try and organize such a convoy, designed to pressure the PRK and Hanoi into allowing relief convoys into Cambodia across the Thai border, instead of through Phnom Penh.⁷⁴

Although there was unquestionably a need for food along the border, Brzezinski's intentions were at least as much political as they were humanitarian. For the most part, he would be feeding people who were not under PRK control. Efforts to get assistance deeper into Cambodia—including into PRK-controlled areas—such as truck convoys from Thailand were designed, in part, to embarrass the PRK. All in all, the administration threw down the gauntlet to Heng Samrin and his Vietnamese and Soviet supporters. On 20 December 1979, Brzezinski curtly asked Vance to “let us know what additional measures the Department intended to take to put more pressure on the Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh.”⁷⁵ Though couched in terms of getting vitally needed food to starving Cambodians, administration pressures on the PRK had political motivations.

Brzezinski's aggressive approach to the PRK did not silence the critics. Kirk Alliman of the Church World Service stated that for the Carter administration, “the Vietnam War is still not over.”⁷⁶ Alliman continued his criticism of administration attacks on the PRK on the Public Broadcasting System's influential McNeil-Lehrer News Hour and with an important letter to the *New York Times*. He urged a “quiet, creative diplomacy” that could improve the distribution of food inside Cambodia—exactly the opposite approach of Brzezinski's, who wanted dramatic, showy efforts to force food into Cambodia from the Thai side.⁷⁷ Even more caustic was *Post* columnist Anderson, who continued to go after the administration's Cambodia policy in his widely read column. On 12 January 1980, for example, he again attacked the “cynical saboteurs” in the State Department and (a new addition) the NSC, who were determined to “use the Cambodian horror to score Cold War propaganda points.” The only significant diversion of food and other relief supplies, he contended, was along the Thai border, where corrupt Thai officials siphoned off as much as 50 percent of the food to sell at a good profit, and where Pol Pot's “'fat sadistic' soldiers” stole food intended for civilians.⁷⁸

74. “Convoy to Aid Cambodia Planned,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 December 1979.

75. Brzezinski to Vance, 20 December 1979, Vertical File, Folder “Cambodia Directives,” Carter Papers.

76. McGrory, “Carter's Geopolitics Helps Keep Cambodia.”

77. Kirk Alliman, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 26 December 1979. A *Time* magazine reporter agreed with Alliman's assessment and sent a copy of the letter to National Security official Jerry Schecter.

78. Jack Anderson, “U.S. Officials Impede Cambodia Aid,” *Washington Post*, 12 January 1980.

Such attacks irritated administration officials,⁷⁹ but they may have had some impact nevertheless. For example, Bloomfield, despite his irritation at Alliman and his contempt of Anderson, acknowledged that some relief supplies sent to Phnom Penh were getting distributed and that Oxfam and the Church World Service were getting supplies in.⁸⁰ And some administration figures were quite sympathetic to the critics' case. The Presidential Commission on World Hunger, for example, stated in its carefully worded report to President Carter that logistic arrangements for getting supplies into Cambodia were now "adequate." In what might have been perceived as a criticism of Brzezinski's hardnosed criticism of the PRK, the commission stated that stories of mismanagement threatened to reduce the public's willingness to support assistance to Cambodian relief. In addition, the commission acknowledged that Pol Pot's supporters benefited from the border program. This was not, the commission thought, deliberate American policy, but rather the result of "geography and movement of military forces" (which, it might be argued, applied with equal force to aid supplied within Cambodia).⁸¹

Carter's new Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, Victor H. Palmieri, also took a more balanced view than did the NSC or the State Department. Palmieri told the press that the famine had been temporarily checked in Cambodia, partly by the successful border feeding program, partly by the recent harvest, partly by the international agencies operating in Phnom Penh, and partly by the PRK itself, which had distributed Russian corn. Based on his discussions with international relief workers, Palmieri reported that distribution of supplies within Cambodia had improved. Asked directly why delays persisted, Palmieri would only say that there were a variety of reasons. He made no attempt to demonize the PRK or its Vietnamese supporters.⁸² Palmieri made many of the same

79. See, for example, Lincoln P. Bloomfield to Jerry Schecter, 14 January 1980, WHCF, Foreign Affairs, Box FO-31, Folder "Executive, FO 3-2 (CO 81) 1/20/77-1/20/81," Carter Papers.

80. Bloomfield to Schecter, 14 January 1980, WHCF, Foreign Affairs, Box FO-31, Folder "Executive, FO 3-2 (CO 81) 1/20/77-1/20/81," Carter Papers. Still, not enough was being distributed, Bloomfield wrote, and the United States was "not going to sit by idly and watch what is left of the Khmer people eradicated from the face of the earth because of the callousness of those who fight in the name of the people they are helping to eradicate." Such a statement badly distorted PRK and Vietnamese intentions; both were infinitely better than the Khmer Rouge, and neither was intent on eradicating the Khmer people.

81. Presidential Commission on World Hunger, "Recommendations for U.S. Actions to Help Alleviate Starvation and Malnutrition Among Victims of the Kampuchean Famine," enclosed in Jean Mayer to Carter, 25 January 1980, Presidential Commission on World Hunger, General Records, Subject File, Box 11, Folder "Cambodia [1]," Carter Papers. In another implied criticism of the administration, the commission came close to recommending that normal diplomatic relations be established with Vietnam. As it carefully stated, "improved official relationships with the Vietnamese Government" would likely facilitate the movement of relief supplies into Cambodia.

82. Department of State, "Transcript of Special News Briefing, Wednesday, January 24, 1980, 11:30 a. m.," Staff Counsel-Cutler, Box 54, file "Cambodia 11/79-1/80," Carter Papers. One new explanation as to why the PRK was distributing Russian corn rather than food

observations in a formal report to the president.⁸³ Even Ambassador Morton Abramowitz, in Thailand, apparently did not believe that problems with distribution of supplies inside Cambodia could be traced primarily to deliberate obstruction. “Phnom Penh’s distribution system operates near capacity,” he reported to the State Department. It was “hobbled by terrible transportation systems, inexperience, and Vietnamese/Heng Samrin priorities.”⁸⁴

State Department and NSC officials, however, continued to take a much more skeptical view of the situation within Cambodia. For policy reasons, Vietnam remained, in the words of a State Department paper prepared for Brzezinski, the “principal impediment” to relief efforts, and this was likely to continue for the foreseeable future. The paper contended that there was little reliable information from within Cambodia about the relief program, and it belittled the more positive assessments from private voluntary organizations, such as Oxfam and the Church World Service, on the grounds that “their fundraising and/or in some cases their political sympathies” affected their assessments—an analysis that was unfair to these groups and ignored the possibility that the government’s own estimation was colored by different “political sympathies.”⁸⁵ As for Palmieri’s recommendations to Carter, it appears that Brzezinski disapproved them.⁸⁶

Still, reports from the voluntary organizations, Palmieri, the President’s Commission on World Hunger, and Ambassador Abramowitz did affect the

supplied by the international relief organizations was that it wanted to build up a strategic reserve of foodstuffs, and now that one existed there would be less hoarding.

83. Victor H. Palmieri to Carter, 28 January 1980, National Security Adviser–Brzezinski Material, Country File, Box 43, Folder “Kampuchea 1/80–1/81,” Carter Papers. Palmieri’s recommendations included: continued international pressure to increase distribution inside Cambodia, using chartered barges and aircraft (probably from communist countries) within the country; “full demilitarization” of the food distribution stations along the border; “rehabilitation of agricultural production in Kampuchea . . . despite some probable diplomatic gains by the Heng Samrin authorities from this process;” a clear decision to make it a major American objective to try and return most of the Khmer refugees to “a recovering Kampuchea”; and “avoiding diplomatic or resettlement policy and actions which will inhibit or delay this and make more onerous consequences inevitable.”

84. Quoted in remarks by Richard Holbrooke in Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “*Kampuchea: The Never-Ending Tragedy in Indochina*,” 2 April 1980, Current Policy no. 156.

85. “Contingency Plans on Khmer Relief,” enclosed in Peter Tarnoff to Brzezinski, 29 January 1980, National Security Adviser–Brzezinski Material, Country File, Box 43, Folder “Kampuchea 1/80–1/81,” Carter Papers. In his book, *Quality of Mercy*, William Shawcross demonstrates that in the spring of 1980, at least some of the relief workers in Cambodia shared the State Department view that little food was being distributed to the countryside, that much of the food that was distributed was going to the Cambodian military, and that the Heng Samrin was often hostile to suggestions on how to improve the distribution system. Shawcross does acknowledge some improvement in the situation in the last half of 1980. *Quality of Mercy*, 253–81.

86. In a sheet attached to Palmieri’s report, there is a notation that on 14 February “ZB disapproved Recom.” It is probable that this meant that Brzezinski disapproved of Palmieri’s recommendations, although it is possible that his disapproval may have been directed at a recommendation from Henry Owen that Carter sign a thank-you note to Palmieri.

public posture of the administration and seem to have convinced some officials that there had been improvement in the distribution of relief aid inside the country. Thus, in an important address to the Council on Foreign Relations on 2 April 1980, Holbrooke stated that there was a debate about how much food had been diverted within Cambodia and acknowledged that international agencies were now reporting that “food is now getting out to the provincial capitals.”⁸⁷

But if the administration had been forced to acknowledge that logistical problems, inexperienced officials, and an infrastructure destroyed by the Khmer Rouge were at least partially—and perhaps primarily—responsible for the delays in distributing food, and if it had to agree that the situation had improved in recent weeks with more food getting through, this did not change the political calculus. Although the United States might have to funnel some assistance through Phnom Penh because of the immensity of the humanitarian disaster, it remained American policy to force the withdrawal of the Vietnamese and, with them, the government they had installed in Phnom Penh. In sum, the administration would accept some challenges to its view of the relief situation, but it would not accept suggestions that it change its basic policy toward the region.

Thus, for example, in his address to the Council on Foreign Relations, Holbrooke painted the Vietnamese in the darkest of colors. Some aid was now getting through, but the Vietnamese had “done nothing to facilitate this” (a judgment at odds with reports emanating from all of the international relief agencies, which said that the Vietnamese were distributing at least some aid). American policy, Holbrooke said, was to end Soviet military involvement in Vietnam, end Vietnamese military operations in Cambodia, and replace the Heng Samrin regime with one that represented the will of the people. This was precisely the same policy enunciated in 1979. But just as in 1979, it failed to address how this could be accomplished without running the danger that the Khmer Rouge would re-emerge to reassert their terrorist rule over Cambodia.⁸⁸

A further indication of American priorities was evident in the nascent effort to build a political and, perhaps, a significant military resistance to the forces of the PRK and Vietnam. Because many documents remain classified, the details of this effort are not all known, but Sihanouk was one important key. After his ouster in 1970, the prince had thrown his support to the Khmer Rouge resistance. But he knew that in the final analysis, the insurgents would have no use for him; when they were finished with him they would “spit me out like a cherry

87. Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “*Kampuchea*.”

88. *Ibid.* The refugees on the Thai border hated the Vietnamese, Holbrooke stated, although he did acknowledge straightforwardly that they spoke of Pol Pot “with far greater emotion and bitterness.” Some refugees even bitterly recalled the American bombing in Cambodia when Lon Nol had been prime minister.

stone," as he once put it.⁸⁹ During the Khmer Rouge rule, Sihanouk had been, in effect, their prisoner, and several members of his family had died at their hands. He had no trouble breaking with them after their defeat in 1979. At the same time, however, he had no love for the Vietnamese-dominated successor regime. Therefore, the Carter administration looked favorably upon the prince's aspiration to replace Heng Samring and once again lead his country, and the Americans maintained contact with him almost from the moment the Vietnamese pushed the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh. Ambassador Leonard Woodcock visited regularly with him in Beijing, and when Sihanouk came to Washington, he met with officials from the State Department and the NSC.

In December 1979, Robert Oakley, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, met Sihanouk in Paris for a two-hour discussion and delivered a letter from Vance. Shortly thereafter, Ambassador Abramowitz met with China's military attaché in Bangkok. Exactly what they discussed remains classified, but possible American "representations to Sihanouk" were apparently talked about, since, according to Brzezinski, Carter wrote "we should do this" on that portion of Abramowitz's report.⁹⁰ It is likely that Carter wanted to encourage Sihanouk, who had only a very small armed force loyal to him, to cooperate with the remaining Pol Pot forces as a way of resisting the PRK and Vietnamese, for on 14 January 1980 Vance wrote a personal memo to Carter in which he stated that he did not think (as Carter apparently did) that the United States should urge Sihanouk "to cooperate with the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime as long as Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge henchmen continue to control that regime." Chinese efforts to have the DK change its image had resulted in only cosmetic changes, Vance pointed out, and therefore if Sihanouk were to ally with DK, "he would undermine his ability to rally support among Kampuchean and his prospects of being eventually accepted by the Vietnamese as an alternative to Pol Pot and Heng Samrin."⁹¹

In any event, Sihanouk apparently asked for more than political support. As Vance put it, "[W]e have been unresponsive . . . to his suggestions that we provide covert military assistance to Kampuchean resistance forces that accept Sihanouk's leadership." To do so, Vance stated, would "enmesh us again in an Indochina scenario without a visible end, would pose severe domestic and international costs, and probably in the end reduce our influence over the eventual outcome."⁹²

89. Sihanouk told this to Italian journalist Oriana Fallacci. William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*, rev. ed. (New York, 1987), 321.

90. Brzezinski to Vance, 4 January 1980, Vertical File, Folder "Cambodia Directives," Carter Papers.

91. Vance to Carter, 14 January 1980, Vertical File, Folder "Cambodia Directives," Carter Papers.

92. Vance to Carter, 14 January 1980, Vertical File, Folder "Cambodia Directives," Carter Papers. Carter made no written comment on the section of Vance's memo that addressed covert

Vance thought it unwise to provide covert military assistance to Sihanouk's very limited forces, much less have the prince make common cause with Pol Pot. But the NSC was more open to these possibilities. In March 1980, the NSC asked the CIA to prepare a study on the current state of DK forces in Cambodia. The CIA was to provide numbers, location of units, state of health and morale, number and quality of weapons and supplies, and so forth.⁹³ Three days later, Holbrooke told a Senate subcommittee that the Khmer Rouge would survive the dry season fighting and would probably "emerge with roughly 20,000 troops able to operate effectively in western Kampuchea and to a lesser extent throughout the country."⁹⁴ By publicizing this (Holbrooke's testimony was quickly published and distributed as a public document), the government may have wanted to indicate to Vietnam that it faced significant resistance, which the United States was at least tacitly backing.

By May 1980, Vance, who had served as a cautionary force in the administration, was gone, having resigned in protest over the attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran. Brzezinski was pleased. Vance, he informed Carter, had never spoken out strongly on behalf of Carter's policies, and "the people around Cy continuously conspired either to dilute your policy or to divert it into directions more to their own liking." Brzezinski suggested that some of them be reassigned.⁹⁵

With Vance out, Brzezinski became an even more dominant figure in the administration, which meant that Cambodia would be viewed even more firmly through the geopolitical Cold War lens. Carter's anger at the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979 not only gave Brzezinski a freer hand in places like Cambodia but doubtless hardened the administration's approach to any issue that involved the Soviet Union. "Softer" approaches, such as an emphasis on human rights or a willingness to accept ambiguity in Vietnam or Cambodia, were increasingly distant from the administration's thinking. This was seen in two interrelated issues that re-emerged in the summer and fall of 1980: who should represent Cambodia in the United Nations, and whether to give support to—or encourage others to support—the remnants of the Khmer Rouge in their resistance to the PRK.

In 1979, the United States had reluctantly voted to allow DK to retain its United Nations seat. Within the administration, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Patricia Derian had argued passionately against the vote, as had

aid for Sihanouk's forces. But he did make it clear that he wanted to back the prince as the future leader of Cambodia. "He & we should continue to strive for Sihanouk's assuming the interim [?] leadership of Cambodia—with minimal political involvement of Pol Pot," he wrote in the margins. "We can see if S. has any proposals worth pursuing."

93. Christine Dodson to Ben Evans, 21 March 1980, Vertical File, Folder "Cambodia Directives," Carter Papers.

94. Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State, "Crisis in Indochina," 24 March 1980, Current Policy no. 151.

95. Brzezinski to Carter, 1 May 1980, Brzezinski-Subject File, Box 23, Folder "Meetings: Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski 5/80-6/80," Carter Papers.

Donald McHenry, who represented the United States at United Nations, and others. Those who favored seating DK argued that it was important not to alienate China and America's friends in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), who also opposed Vietnam's actions in Cambodia. "We made the only decision consistent with our overall national interests," wrote Vance.⁹⁶ It was, however, an embarrassing position, clearly at odds with Carter's professed devotion to human rights. As Bloomfield put it, "[T]he technical grounds for our role have proved extraordinarily difficult to explain to the concerned lay public. U.S. policy toward Kampuchean representation in the UN has become highly controversial in U.S. domestic politics."⁹⁷

Now the issue was about to emerge again. This time, there was even more sympathy within the administration for a change in policy. In the State Department, Holbrooke advised the new Secretary of State, Edmund Muskie, that it was premature to decide the credentials question. Within the NSC, Bloomfield argued forcefully for keeping the UN seat vacant, on the grounds that neither the PRK nor DK had a legitimate claim to represent Cambodia. "There is just too great a gulf between our expedient policy [of supporting DK representation] on the one hand, and the moral posture frequently enunciated by the president, featuring frequent denunciations of the Pol Pot-Khmer Rouge as the most genocidal since Adolph Hitler," he wrote to Brzezinski. If Pol Pot actually controlled Cambodia, he went on, then "we would have to hold our nose and accept its technical legitimacy." But the Khmer Rouge controlled almost no territory and, according to U.S. intelligence reports, had "virtually no political support within Kampuchea."⁹⁸ Furthermore, supporting the Khmer Rouge made it difficult to carry on relief activities within Cambodia.

Roger W. Sullivan, another of Brzezinski's assistants at the NSC, disagreed. Calling Holbrooke's position "indefensible," Sullivan wanted the United States to continue to stand staunchly behind ASEAN and China. Any hint of American wavering, he said, would be read by all parties as indicating that the United States had decided to accommodate itself to Vietnamese rule in Cambodia. Sullivan said nothing at all about how adopting this position might affect the delivery of relief supplies inside Cambodia.⁹⁹ Not surprisingly, Brzezinski—presumably with Carter's blessing—opted for the status quo. Although a formal decision had not yet been taken on American policy toward the Cambodian UN seat, there was little question about what the United States would do.

96. Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York, 1983), 126–27.

97. Bloomfield to Brzezinski, 16 June 1980, Brzezinski–Subject File, Box 23, Folder "Meetings: Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski 5/80–6/80," Carter Papers.

98. Bloomfield to Brzezinski, 16 June 1980, Brzezinski–Subject File, Box 23, Folder "Meetings: Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski 5/80–6/80," Carter Papers.

99. Roger W. Sullivan to Brzezinski, 16 June 1980, Brzezinski–Subject File, Box 23, Folder "Meetings: Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski 5/80–6/80," Carter Papers; Sullivan to Brzezinski, 17 June 1980, Brzezinski–Subject File, Box 23, Folder "Meetings: Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski 5/80–6/80," Carter Papers.

With the UN vote scheduled for September, important humanitarian and religious organizations lobbied furiously for a change in American policy. The National Council of Churches, the United Church Board for World Ministries, the United Church of Christ, and the Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, among others, sent strong letters to President Carter and other administration officials admonishing them not to vote again to seat the Khmer Rouge. All of them threw back at Carter his famous words that the Pol Pot regime was the “worst violator of human rights in the world.” Even more significant, politically, was the position of the International Rescue Committee. The IRC’s executive committee voted unanimously to support an open seat at the United Nations, despite the fact that its executive director, Leo Cherne, was a strong administration supporter.

Several congressional representatives echoed such sentiments, as did Sam Brown, a Carter appointee who directed ACTION (the domestic peace corps). Brown sent last-minute appeals to the president and Secretary Muskie imploring them to reconsider the decision to support the Khmer Rouge at the United Nations. “It is wrong substantively and can only further alienate many people who are already concerned about the consistency in U.S. policy,” he wrote. “This decision is the most fundamental test of our commitment to human rights. In a broader sense, it is a test of the morality and integrity of all our actions abroad.”¹⁰⁰ The NSC did not forward Brown’s letter on to the president, nor did Brzezinski sign a proposed reply to Brown that had been prepared for him. A few days later, the United States joined ASEAN and China in voting again to seat the Khmer Rouge in the United Nations.

The United States also continued to support the Khmer Rouge with humanitarian assistance. Everyone knew that the Khmer Rouge survived only because of food they received from the international community, aid that the Thais, in particular, insisted they must have, but aid that the United States also supported. Sihanouk deplored this. Writing to Carter in April 1980, Sihanouk stated that the Cambodians along the Thai border were “humiliated slaves” at the mercy of various Cambodian warlords. In a statement that must have been particularly embarrassing to the administration, Sihanouk charged that aid supplies along the border were being diverted away from the starving people. “The humanitarian aid (that of UNICEF, the Red Cross, etc.) which was destined for them has been in large part diverted by those ‘war lords,’ by the ‘government,’ and by the Cambodian ‘resistance,’ protected by China and Thailand,” he wrote, correctly characterizing the situation.¹⁰¹

100. Sam Brown to Edmund Muskie, 8 October 1980, WHCF: International Organizations, Box IT-8, Folder “IT86, 1/1/80–1/20/81,” Carter Papers.

101. Sihanouk’s letter is in Leonard Woodcock, U.S. Embassy Beijing, to Secretary of State, 7 April 1980, telegram 3134, WHCF–Country Files, CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers. In his lengthy reply (indicating the American interest in keeping open a channel of communication to Sihanouk), Holbrooke did not address this issue, except to express the American view that “international relief should go to all Khmer in need throughout Kampuchea and on

The feeding program along the border unquestionably resuscitated the Khmer Rouge (and also helped build up the less important, noncommunist resistance groups), thus paving the way for much stronger armed resistance against the PRK during the 1980s. The best humanitarian argument in favor of this was that one could not simply ignore the thousands of civilians, including children, in the Khmer Rouge camps. But the United States and others might have attempted to pressure the Thais to disarm the Khmer Rouge. "I have asked myself a thousand times whether that is what we should have done," said Ambassador Abramowitz in 1980. He listed a number of reasons why disarming the Khmer Rouge had not been pursued, including that the Thais and the Chinese were friends of the United States and that they had far greater interests in Southeast Asia than did the United States. But the primary reason was that "we thought the Vietnamese were wrong in Cambodia."¹⁰²

Instead of disarming the Khmer Rouge, the Carter administration secretly supported Thai and Chinese efforts to provide military assistance to them. The Chinese had determined to rebuild the Khmer Rouge almost from the moment they were driven out of Phnom Penh. Just exactly when the United States decided to support them is not yet clear. But by the early summer of 1980, the policy been in place for some time, for in June Sullivan became alarmed that some State Department officials were urging that the United States vote against the Khmer Rouge at the United Nations and distance itself from ASEAN and Chinese policy on this issue. "There is confusion over our policy toward Pol Pot and his resistance forces," Sullivan wrote to Brzezinski. Sullivan indicated that Brzezinski had long encouraged the Thais and Chinese to provide enough support to the Khmer Rouge to make life difficult for the Vietnamese. But, Sullivan went on, the State Department now appeared to favor a new policy of opposition "to the DK forces" and was not encouraging other countries to support the Khmer Rouge. As a result, the Chinese and the Thais were "particularly confused and alarmed." If the United States was now discouraging "the Thais from cooperating with China in support of Pol Pot forces, then we are moving from a difference of tactics to a conflict of major interest," Sullivan wrote. He urged Brzezinski to be sure that Muskie made it clear to the Chinese "that we do not seek to discourage the Thais from supporting the DK resistance forces. On the contrary, as you told [Thai Foreign Minister] Sitthi [Savetsila], we do not want the Vietnamese to consolidate their control if we can prevent it and, if we cannot prevent it, we want it to be a protracted and expensive business for them."¹⁰³ The next day, Brzezinski, Muskie, and Secretary of

the border without regard to political considerations" and that the United States was working with relief agencies to "ensure that this principle is respected to the extent possible." Richard Holbrooke to Sihanouk, 18 April 1980, WHCF-Country Files, CO 81, Box CO-40, Carter Papers.

102. Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, 355.

103. Sullivan to Brzezinski, 16 June 1980, Brzezinski-Subject File, Box 23, Folder "Meetings: Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski 5/80-6/80," Carter Papers.

Defense Harold Brown agreed that the United States was “not against military aid by the Chinese to the Cambodian rebels.”¹⁰⁴

The revelation that the United States actually wanted the Chinese and Thais to assist the Khmer Rouge militarily as a means of putting pressure on Vietnam lends support to those who charged, at the time, that the United States helped structure the international relief effort in such a way that it intentionally helped the Khmer Rouge.¹⁰⁵ Administration supporters resented this kind of criticism. But the Carter administration *had* decided to encourage China and Thailand to support the Khmer Rouge remnants—even to supply them with weapons—and to use Pol Pot’s forces as a counter to the Vietnamese, who had liberated Cambodia from their clutches. Although the administration could not ignore the humanitarian outcry and thus did provide some assistance through the PRK (under strict guidelines), its fundamental orientation was geopolitical, as the critics charged. The United States was engaged in a worldwide struggle with the Soviet Union, which had raised international tensions to the boiling point by invading Afghanistan. Carter had responded with his boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games. The Soviet Union supported Vietnam, and thus the administration—in particular, Brzezinski—viewed the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia as an extension of Soviet influence detrimental to the interests of the United States and its allies. The United States piously condemned the Vietnamese invasion on the principle of noninterference, but it was the geopolitical factors that really mattered.¹⁰⁶

Brzezinski’s proudest accomplishment was the normalization of relations with China and the subsequent American tilt toward Beijing. China, which was engaged in a bitter ideological struggle with the Soviet Union, had supported the Khmer Rouge (in spite of Pol Pot’s genocidal policy toward the ethnic

104. Brzezinski to David Aaron and Les Denend, 17 June 1980, Brzezinski Donated Material: Subject File 01/1977-01/1981, Box 23, Folder “Meetings–Muskie/Brown/ Brzezinski, 5/80-6/80.”

105. One of the first to make this charge at the time was British journalist John Pilger. Pilger was remarkably prescient in stating that he thought that the United States would insist that the Khmer Rouge’s image be cleaned up and that they come back in “in the guise of a ‘non-aligned’ coalition.” Two years later, the United States helped engineer the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, a “coalition” controlled by the Khmer Rouge. John Pilger, “America’s Second War in Indochina: Only the Allies are New,” *New Statesman*, 1 August 1980, 10–15. Ambassador Abramowitz tried to discredit Pilger’s piece with a lengthy response to the *New Statesman*. He pointed out a number of specific errors but did not refute the notion that the United States wanted the Khmer Rouge to survive so that it could challenge the Vietnamese. Ambramowitz, U.S. Embassy Bangkok, to U.S. Embassy London, 12 September 1980, telegram 41685, WHCF: National Security-Defense, Box ND-38, Folder “Executive. ND 16/CO1, Indochina 2/1/80-1/20/81,” Carter Papers. A similarly critical appraisal came from Edward Rasen, a journalist who had spent nearly two months inside Cambodia for the American Broadcasting Company. Clipping, Edward Rasen, “Stop the Cambodian Genocide,” *Penthouse* [September 1980], in WHCF: National Security-Defense, Box ND-38, Folder “Executive. ND 16/CO1, Indochina 2/1/80-1/20/81,” Carter Papers.

106. Within a few months of the Vietnamese invasion, the United States had welcomed Tanzania’s invasion of Uganda, which had overthrown another genocidal dictator, Idi Amin.

Chinese living in Cambodia) and had deplored the Vietnamese invasion. Like the United States, China viewed this as an unacceptable extension of Soviet power. Unable to remove the Vietnamese by persuasion and a limited invasion into Vietnam itself, therefore, the Chinese, working with the Thais, set about resuscitating the Khmer Rouge, in the hope that they would eventually be able to force the Vietnamese out. The United States explicitly encouraged them and, at the very least, assisted the Khmer Rouge with relief aid.

From time to time and place to place, the defense of human rights was a significant feature of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy. But it was not a primary consideration for National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, and, to the extent that Carter allowed Brzezinski to formulate foreign policy, the defense of human rights faded as a central administration concern. Nowhere was this more clearly seen than in Cambodia.