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## American Press Coverage of Genocide in Cambodia: The “Ideological Blinders” that Led to a Failure in Public Responsibility

Amelia Evans

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The overthrow of longtime authoritarian ruler Hosni Mubarak in Egypt has already been distinguished as 2011’s political event to remember. Americans watched, on the edge of their seats, as events unfolded in Cairo. Faced with the censorship of the print press, Egyptian protestors spread their message through social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. The Egyptian government’s attempts to shut down the Internet in Egypt proved fruitless—too much information had already flooded the nation. In a post-9/11 world, Americans are more concerned than ever about the state of the Middle East, and have depended on the media to keep them informed. Revolutionized by the worldwide expansion of the Internet, the media now have a greater, and less regulated stake than ever in matters of national security. The media have always played a key role in the functioning of American democracy, carrying the responsibility to not only inform the public, but to also keep the government in check by serving as a “watchdog.” The traditional American press, however, has failed to fulfill its responsibilities at some critical points in history. In one particularly egregious case, that press failed to investigate one of the worst instances of genocide since the Holocaust.

On 17 April 1975, “Year Zero” began in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> The Khmer Rouge, an extreme communist guerilla group led by the infamous Pol Pot, overtook the capital, Phnom Penh, and launched a four-year killing spree.<sup>2</sup> The capital’s two million inhabitants were forcibly evacuated to the countryside, where some were “fortunate” enough to be put to work in the rice fields. Buddhist monks and ethnic minorities were marked for elimination. Anyone who was deemed “contaminated” by western ideals was executed in the “killing fields,” but not before being tortured. Educated Cambodian citizens had to feign ignorance to survive. Children, believed by the Khmer Rouge to be “uncontaminated,” were brainwashed to become the brutal regime’s executioners. Those Cambodians who were not killed point blank faced starvation and exhaustion as forced laborers in the countryside. In the few dark years that the Khmer Rouge ruled over Cambodia, an estimated 1.2 to 2.3 million Cambodians—more than one-fifth of the country’s population—died at the hands of the merciless communist extremists who proclaimed, “To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss.”<sup>3</sup>

The haunting story of the Cambodian genocide raises the question, where was the United States while

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all this was happening? Why was the public not protesting in outrage? The simple answer is that the public did not know anything was wrong. The situation in Cambodia was rarely covered in American news publications, and when stories did appear, they were usually short, at the back of the international news section, and rarely mentioned genocide of any sort.<sup>4</sup> In *"A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide"* (2002), Samantha Power attributes the absence of coverage on the Khmer Rouge to "Southeast Asia fatigue," as do most other historians on the subject. A careful analysis of the relevant articles from American periodicals from 1974 to 1990 reveals that this is not a sufficient explanation. This particular media malfeasance was also the result of American journalism being too political.

Cambodian correspondent Nate Thayer begins to hint at this idea in "Freelancers' Vital Role in International Reporting" (2001). Citing the absence of mainstream coverage on Cambodia and Afghanistan in the 1990s and 2000s, Thayer asserts, "a press free from the influence of any government" serves as "the backbone of international [news] coverage."<sup>5</sup> Thayer focuses on the influence of commercial interests on journalism, however, and fails to explicitly address the equally significant influence of political bias on what journalists do and do not report. This essay shows that strong bipartisan influences significantly contrib-

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<sup>4</sup>Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide"* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 110-11.

<sup>5</sup>Nate Thayer, "Freelancers' Vital Role in International Reporting," *Nieman Reports* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 28. EBSCOhost.

uted to the American media's failure to fulfill its public responsibility in the case of the Cambodian genocide.

To understand why the American media should have ever been interested in the Khmer Rouge requires a brief summary of the United States' complex relationship with Cambodia. Cambodia is often forgotten in discussions of the Vietnam War, even though the small Southeast Asian nation's role in the conflict changed the course of history. Despite being declared a "neutral" country during the war between the United States and the Vietcong, Cambodia was a target for American bombers because its proximity to Vietnam made it a key part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. "Operation Menu" began 9 March 1969, although some historians claim that the bombing began as early as 1965.<sup>6</sup> From 1969 to 1973, Operations Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, and Dessert followed Operation Menu. During those five years, according to the Department of Defense, Cambodia became the "most heavily bombed country" in history.<sup>7</sup> The American bombing of Cambodia resulted in from 150,000 to as many as 500,000 Cambodian civilian fatalities.<sup>8</sup>

As the United States finally began to withdraw from Southeast Asia in 1973, Cambodia was left to fend for itself. The Khmer Rouge, previously a small guerilla group with no real support, capitalized on Cambodia's politically vulnerable state. Cambodians frustrated

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with the United States' constant violations of neutrality, and the continuing unsatisfactory rule of the American-backed leader Lon Nol, joined forces with Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized the capital, encountering little resistance. As historian Ben Kiernan asserts, the United States' destabilization of Cambodia "was probably the most important single factor" in the rise of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>9</sup>

The American media, generally left leaning, should have had a field day with this information. The left's disillusionment with the American government in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate, however, led many journalists to dismiss, not just ignore, accounts of Khmer Rouge atrocities. In September 1975, the directors of the Antiwar Indochina Resource Center declared that any reports on the Khmer Rouge were examples of "conservative 'mythmaking,'" exaggerated to serve as Cold War propaganda.<sup>10</sup> In the words of genocide historian Samantha Power, "The Nixon and Ford administrations had cried wolf one too many times in Southeast Asia."<sup>11</sup>

Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's 1977 article, "Distortions at Fourth Hand," published in the left-leaning publication *The Nation*, exemplifies the

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<sup>9</sup> Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 16, in Scott Laderman, "Burying Capability: *The Killing Fields* (1984), US Foreign Policy, and the Political Limits of Film-Making in Reagan-Era America," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 30, no.2 (June 2010), 208.

<sup>10</sup> Power, *America and the Age of Genocide*, 112-13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

perspective of the left in regards to Cambodia during the 1970s. Although Chomsky and Herman acknowledge that Cambodia was facing a time of extreme suffering, they criticize less ideologically driven publications like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Time* for reporting Khmer Rouge crimes for which “there is no independent confirmatory evidence.”<sup>12</sup> Citing other liberal publications like *The Economist*, Chomsky and Herman declare that the evidence suggests, “Executions have numbered at most in the thousands.”<sup>13</sup> They even go so far as to claim, “The ‘slaughter’ by the Khmer Rouge is a...*New York Times* creation.”<sup>14</sup>

Many other liberal journalists shared Chomsky and Herman’s skepticism, noting any inconsistent numbers “sometimes in a self-satisfied tone.”<sup>15</sup> Douglas Zoloth Foster’s “Photos of ‘Horror’ in Cambodia: Fake or Real?” which appeared in *The Columbia Journalism Review* in 1978, explores the debate over the lack of information about the Khmer Rouge. Foster’s article specifically addresses controversial photos of “dubious standing” published in *The Washington Post* on 8 April 1977 and in the 21 November 1977 issue of *Time*.<sup>16</sup> As Foster explains, critics raised questions about the authenticity of the photos when publishers could not provide full disclosure about the source of the photos,

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and admitted that they were only published “in good faith.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, all American accounts of what was going on in Cambodia were only speculative because the Khmer Rouge was incredibly secretive, successfully cutting off most of the country from any outside contact.<sup>18</sup> The difficulty journalists faced in getting a firsthand look at the Khmer Rouge, as Power explains, “gave those inclined to look away further excuse for doing so.”<sup>19</sup>

A 14 June 1975 unsigned editorial from *The Nation* shows that leftist journalists significantly encouraged their American readers to be skeptical of reports of genocide as well. The author of this editorial, “Blood-Bath Talks,” is adamant that “the American people were propagandized about the menace of unrestrained slaughter in Indochina.”<sup>20</sup> The writer accuses the American government of seeking to stimulate “racist and ideological fears” by using alarmist reports from intelligence officials, reports that, conveniently, could never be proven.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the writer points out, “No one could prove there was no blood bath—it is always impossible to prove a prediction.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the American left in general had completely lost faith in American intelligence, and was especially distrustful of the American right, which interpreted events in Cambodia as the result of failing to defeat the “real enemy,” Vietnam.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Power, *America and the Age of Genocide*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>20</sup> “Blood-Bath Talks,” Editorial, *Nation* 220, no. 23 (14 June 1975): 707. EBSCOhost.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Chomsky and Herman also criticize less ideologically driven publications and the American right for failing to highlight “the crucial U.S. role, direct and indirect, in the torment, [however limited] that Cambodia has suffered.”<sup>23</sup> The United States, not the Khmer Rouge, is the real perpetrator in Cambodia according to Chomsky, Herman, and other leftists. Chomsky and Herman declare that the real crime at hand is the “all-too-typical reporting which excises from history the American role in turning peaceful Cambodia into a land of massacre, starvation and disease.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the United States’ actions did, undeniably, lift the Khmer Rouge up to power. By focusing on a grudge with the American government, however, journalists on the left failed to recognize the real horror at hand.

American journalists on the right were not without fault either. In his memoir, *Prince of Darkness: 50 Years Reporting in Washington*, Robert Novak, a conservative journalist for *The Wall Street Journal*, admits that when he was in Cambodia in 1970, he and other journalists already “saw an endless procession of dead bodies—thousands of them—floating down the river.”<sup>25</sup> Novak and his colleagues “thus learned of a genocidal slaughter in the process.” The bodies he saw were those of ethnic Vietnamese, a minority in Cambo-

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dia. Novak attributes the killings to Lon Nol's "exhorting the populace to patriotic fervor against intruding Communist Vietnamese troops." "The populace," Novak explains, "turned on their...[ethnic] Vietnamese neighbors." The beginning genocide went underreported, in part, because the victims were Vietnamese, a people that Americans, especially right-wing Americans, identified as the enemy.

It should be noted that articles recognizing Khmer Rouge atrocities did appear more often in conservative publications like *The National Review* than in liberal periodicals.<sup>26</sup> In one 1977 unsigned editorial in *The National Review*, a writer openly criticizes left-leaning journalists for focusing on the fault of the United States and the corruption of the American-backed Lon Nol government, rather than the crimes of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>27</sup> In general, however, conservative journalists, like most government officials, saw the Khmer Rouge merely as an extension of the "real enemy": Vietnam.<sup>28</sup> In other words, conservatives did not see the Khmer Rouge as being any more threatening than any other communists. In the words of Samantha Power, "the myth of monolithic communism died hard."<sup>29</sup> In the larger context of the Cold War, conservatives saw the Khmer Rouge guerillas as much less of a threat than Vietnam and the Soviet Union.

So while the left explicitly dismissed Khmer Rouge crimes, the right simply ignored them. After Vietnam overtook Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979, ending the

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<sup>26</sup> As revealed by searches on EBSCOhost.

<sup>27</sup> "Exit Laughing," Editorial, *National Review* 29, no. 20 (14 Oct. 1977), 1164. EBSCOhost.

<sup>28</sup> Power, *America and the Age of Genocide*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

Khmer Rouge's reign of terror, right-wing Americans actually spoke out in support of the recently ousted Khmer Rouge. Foreign service officer Charles Twining dolefully explained: "Those of us who knew about the Khmer Rouge cheered, but we quickly realized that everyone else just heard it as 'Vietnam, our enemy, has taken over Cambodia.'"<sup>30</sup> Indeed, "no voices cried out to support Vietnam."<sup>31</sup> Instead, right-wing activists like Jack Wheeler advocated in 1984 that the return of the Khmer Rouge would actually be a good thing for the world. Should the Soviet-backed Vietnam fail in Cambodia, Wheeler argued, then perhaps there would be "a 'reverse domino effect,' a toppling of Soviet dominos, one after the other."<sup>32</sup> Then, as the right hoped, the United States could gain an even bigger edge in the Cold War.

Articles were few and far between about the Khmer Rouge becoming "a U.S. ally twice removed," receiving millions in indirect aid after Vietnam invaded in 1979.<sup>33</sup> As Power reveals, "For neither the first nor the last time, geopolitics trumped genocide. Interests trumped indignation."<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, the American media facilitated these events. Blinded by political

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grudges, both the left and right failed to recognize a new kind of genocide unlike any other in the world's history. This new genocide has been classified as "auto-genocide," where people kill their very own; as CBS correspondent Jarrett Murphy succinctly states, this applied to what happened in Cambodia because "Cambodians did the killing and the dying."<sup>35</sup>

A critical point for the American press came in 1974, with Elizabeth Becker's *Washington Post* article, "Who Are the Khmer Rouge?" Becker was the first journalist to report on the Khmer Rouge in the mainstream media. Although Becker's article did not warn of genocide explicitly, it did "suggest that life under [Khmer Rouge] rule would not be fun."<sup>36</sup> The reception to Becker's article highlights the danger of strong bipartisan influences in the American media. Unsurprisingly, the right reacted to her article with accusations that Becker naively believed the Khmer Rouge was not just a puppet of Vietnam. Vietnam, conservatives emphasized, should still be the real concern.<sup>37</sup> On the other end of the political spectrum, the left claimed that Becker's article was based on the hysteric warnings of the Central Intelligence Agency, an organization not to be trusted. Although Becker's article was a relatively good example of objective, factual reporting based on eyewitness accounts, the beginning of an investigation into the truth about the Khmer Rouge was lost to a political grudge match.

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<sup>35</sup> James Murphy, "Remembering the Killing Fields," *CBS News*, 15 April 2000, <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/04/15/world/main184477.shtml>> (25 Jan. 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Power, *America and the Age of Genocide*, 99.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

William Safire hits the mark in his 1979 *New York Times* essay, "The Blame Passers." He notes that as more evidence emerged in support of the claim that genocide was occurring in Cambodia, many journalists became "frantic."<sup>38</sup> "Too many people fear being blamed themselves for a horror they did not foresee, and are desperately launching a pre-emptive media strike against those they fear will be their accusers," Safire explains. Addressing both the left and the right as "blame passers," he issues the challenge, "No longer can the murder of millions be attributed to gentle Cambodian leaders we 'brutalized;' no longer can the persecution of the boat people be blamed in any way on American non-recognition of Hanoi." The bottom line, Safire charges, is that "the blame belongs to the murderers." Indeed, the press wasted time trying to place the blame on anyone other than Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge officials. The blame game within the American media got in the way of seeing the true horror at hand.

In "Distortions at Fourth Hand," Chomsky and Herman unintentionally provide insight into the mistakes of the American press regarding Cambodia. Accusing writers of *The Christian Science Monitor* and other less ideologically driven publications of "[selecting] what they wanted to believe," when reporting Khmer Rouge atrocities, Chomsky and Herman fail to realize that they made that exact mistake themselves.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Chomsky and Herman mistakenly grouped

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more neutral publications together with those on the right, suggesting that both moderates and conservatives consciously elected to deemphasize the role of the United States in Cambodia's suffering. The reality is that emphasizing the fault of the United States also did no good. Instead, domestic finger pointing by both sides detracted from any action that might have been taken against the Khmer Rouge. Less ideologically driven publications were not wrong in sticking to reporting the most pressing news.

Like Thayer, Noam and Chomsky claim that it is a "fair generalization" that less ideologically driven publications prioritize commercial interests to reach the widest audience, and should therefore not be taken too seriously.<sup>40</sup> Although this point carries some truth, it detracts from the real lesson of the mistakes of the American press during the Cambodian genocide: political grudges obscure the truth. Noam and Chomsky actually articulate this problem with the phrase, "ideological blinders," but they did not recognize its role in their own biased reporting.<sup>41</sup>

As the case of the Cambodian genocide shows, the consequences of the media's mistakes based in political bias can be severe. Although less ideologically driven publications created some awareness of Cambodia's plight during the 1970s, the bipartisan nature of journalism ultimately overpowered any influence these more moderate publications might have had. The American media should adopt the slogan of the worldwide anti-genocide campaign, and proclaim, "Never again." As a key element of American democracy, all

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 789.

media, including the print press, has an obligation to not allow a particular political opinion to dictate its coverage and subvert the truth. It is critical that the media, including the new social media, report dispassionately because it is only through thorough, objective reporting that the government is held most accountable. Such reporting can give rise to significant policy changes. Government officials respect, even fear, the power of the media to hold them accountable for their actions. The media carries a great public responsibility. Beyond that, however, the press also carries a moral responsibility, an obligation to demand help for those who cannot advocate for themselves. Journalists should remember the killing fields, and put aside political vendettas in order to focus on real injustice.

American readers should also learn from the press's failed response to the rise of the Khmer Rouge. Readers need to be ever vigilant concerning the source of their news, and consider what motives the person reporting it might have. This lesson is especially relevant in the Internet age, when anyone can go online and write what he or she wishes. There are fewer and fewer filters for bias, more potential than ever for news to be presented only through the perspectives of those on the furthest ends of the political spectrum. At the same time, this wide variety of unfiltered viewpoints has the potential to serve as the remedy to, as well as the cause of, political problems, as in the recent case of Egypt. Ultimately, the public must be aware that it now has an increased responsibility for discernment in evaluating media accounts, and in holding the media accountable. These lessons

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in combination might even one day put an early stop to a future genocide.

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