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COLUMN LEFT / ROBERT SCHEER

In the Dock With Pol Pot: Uncle Sam

An immoral connivance between China and the U.S. allowed killing fields to flourish.

June 24, 1997 | ROBERT SCHEER | Robert Scheer is a Times contributing editor. E-mail: rscheer@aol.com

SIEM REAP — Up here in the northwest corner of Cambodia, 40 miles from where Pol Pot was cornered, there is no escaping the genocidal legacy of the man. Until recently, his Khmer Rouge controlled much of this area, and the evidence of their work abounds: the maimed beggars, the local killing field, the land mines that make most of the temples inaccessible, the knowledge that smiling Buddha heads from the famed ruins around Angkor Wat were smashed to be used in building roads.

But it is also strange to be watching televised international news reports that depict Pol Pot as an aberrant force, a monster of his own creation. Does no one recall or care that Pol Pot's continued ability to wreak havoc for two decades is a direct result of an immoral connivance between China and the U.S.? Or is it just too inconvenient to remember this as the media get set to celebrate the return of Hong Kong to the rule of Beijing?

What hypocrisy for Madeleine Albright to now proclaim that "we will be seeking to make sure that there is international justice carried out against this major war criminal." Pol Pot's major war crimes were committed between 1975 and 1979 and the U.S. government knew the full extent of that horror during all the ensuing years in which it tried to bring him back to power as part of the U.S.-China sponsored coalition.

Pol Pot was the "Cambodia card" that the Chinese played against Vietnam while the U.S. played the China card. The Chinese Cultural Revolution was the inspiration for Pol Pot's emptying Phnom Penh of its inhabitants. During that bloody reign of terror from 1975 to 1979, Pol Pot caused the death of one out of five Cambodians.

Yet even after the mayhem was brought to an end by the Vietnamese invasion of the country in 1979, when the world learned the full extent of the crimes committed, the Chinese insisted that Pol Pot's government in exile be recognized as the legitimate representative of Cambodia at the United Nations. Every U.S. administration during the next 13 years endorsed the Chinese line, and it was the U.S. that forced the opposition coalition led by Prince Sihanouk to form a partnership with the bloodstained Khmer Rouge.

President Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski has admitted, "I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot. . . . Pol Pot was an abomination. We could never support him but China could." But the U.S. did support Pol Pot covertly, including whitewashing his crimes. As Ben Kiernan points out in an indispensable Yale University Law School monograph entitled "Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia," the CIA in May of 1980 "denied that there had been any executions in the last two years of

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the Pol Pot regime." In fact, half a million innocent people were killed during that period. Even well after the "killing fields" were unearthed, the U.S. continued to legitimize the Khmer Rouge, voting at the U.N. Geneva Conference in 1981 to defeat an ASEAN proposal that the Khmer Rouge be disarmed.

So extreme was the U.S. antipathy to Hanoi, so cynical its relationship with China, that the commission of war crimes by the Khmer Rouge failed to matter. Indeed our government first authored the instability in Cambodia that prepared the conditions for the takeover by Pol Pot as a well-documented "sideshow" of the war in Vietnam. By 1970, the U.S. had undermined the neutral and popular government of Prince Sihanouk, putting the accommodating Lon Nol in power. Then, in 1973, Nixon unleashed the intensive bombing of Cambodia. As French scholar Serge Thion wrote, if Pol Pot is ever brought to account for his war crimes, "He would remind us that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger concentrated U.S. air power on his country and destroyed around 600,000 lives in the process. Would they sit in the same dock?"

No one will ever be able to make sense of Nixon's unrelenting hostility toward Vietnamese communism at the same moment that he was cozying up to the Chinese Communists who certainly represented a more repressive and expansionist version of the creed. And not just Nixon. After decades of prattling about saving Vietnam from communism, the U.S. thought it unobjectionable when Communist China invaded Vietnam to punish Hanoi for overthrowing the Pol Pot regime. "I do not understand why some people want to remove Pol Pot," Deng Xiaoping said in 1984. "It is true that he made some mistakes in the past but now he is leading the fight against the Vietnamese aggressors."

It is unfortunately not a surprise after Tiananmen Square to hear Deng defend mass murder as a mistake. But it is shocking that those who claimed to speak in the name of the free world did the same.

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