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Remembering Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos

by **Sichan Siv**
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Spring 2010 marks the 35th anniversary of the fall of Cambodia and South Vietnam to communism. In a recent speech at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Mich., to commemorate the sad anniversary, I mentioned a pivotal date: April 10, 1975.

While in Cambodia, I listened to President Ford's address to the joint session of Congress through the Voice of America. My heart sank when I heard him say: "The situation in South Vietnam and Cambodia has reached a critical phase requiring immediate and positive decisions by this government. The options before us are few and the time is very short." I quoted this in my memoir *Golden Bones* (HarperCollins, 2008).

In his recently published book *An American Amnesia* (Beaufort Press, 2010), Bruce Herschensohn speaks to this date more extensively, including President Ford's request for "Congress to appropriate without delay \$722 million for emergency military assistance and an initial sum of \$250 million for economic and humanitarian aid for South Vietnam." Herschensohn concludes his quotes with the following paragraphs from Ford's speech:

"In Cambodia, the situation is tragic. And yet, for the past three months, the beleaguered people of Phnom Penh have fought on, hoping against hope that the United States would not desert them, but instead provide the arms and ammunition they so badly needed. In January, I requested food and ammunition for the brave Cambodians, and I regret to say that as of this evening, it may soon be too late... Let no potential adversary believe that our difficulties or our debates mean a slackening of our national will. We will stand by our friends, we will honor our commitments, and will uphold our country's principle." But we didn't, adds Herschensohn.

Ford's address was one of the most difficult he had ever delivered. On the copy of the speech that he read, he added his own hand-written words to begin the speech: "I stand before you tonight after many agonizing hours and solemn prayers for guidance by the Almighty."

An American Amnesia starts on January 23, 1973 in the corridors of the White House, where Bruce Herschensohn was working for President Nixon. He describes the cheerful mood in the executive compound after the peace agreement had been signed in Paris by the United States, its ally South Vietnam, Communist North Vietnam, and the Vietcong, known as the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

It was more than a cease-fire, Herschensohn points out. It called for the United States and North Vietnam, a.k.a. the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, to respect the right of the South Vietnamese people to self-determination. Following articles urged all parties to settle issues through negotiations and avoid armed conflicts and acts of reprisal, to insure democratic liberties, including freedom of speech, etc.

Cambodia and Laos were barely mentioned in the Accords; not until chapter 20, article 20. (I was a high school teacher in Phnom Penh and working at a conference of Southeast Asian nations on January 23, 1973. In all naïveté, I was happy that Cambodia was mentioned at all).

Without referring to North Vietnam and the Vietcong, who had occupied Cambodia's eastern parts

since the mid sixties, the accords stated: "Foreign countries shall put an end to all military activities in Cambodia and Laos, totally withdraw from and refrain from reintroducing into these two countries troops, military advisers and military personnel, armaments, munitions and war material. The internal affairs of Cambodia and Laos shall be settled by the people of each of these countries without foreign interference."

These all sounded idealistic and wishful. There was hardly any provision to penalize the offenders of these articles. If anything, it was like trying to give speeding tickets at the Indy 500.

Obviously, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had no intention of respecting the accords. Two years later they ran their tanks through Saigon and took over South Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge went even farther by immediately turning Cambodia into a land of blood and tears, where some two million people died. It was said there were only two kinds of people: those who had died and those who would die.

After 12 Congresses and five Presidents (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford), Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam fell to the Communists. Who lost them?

An American Amnesia details the role of the 94th Congress which came to Washington after the November 5, 1974 post-Watergate landslide. It brought 291 Democrats and 144 Republicans to the House, 61 Democrats and 39 Republicans to the Senate. When it convened on January 3, 1975, President Ford became no more than a caretaker. The Democratically controlled Congress, along with the biased media, the anti-U.S. and pro-North Vietnam protesters (Jane Fonda, Ramsey Clark, and the like) made President Ford's job at best challenging and at worst impossible.

Nixon probably said it best in 1969: "Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that."

Herschensohn's chapter on "Hotel Journalism" is very telling about "cocktail reporting," a tendency of anti-war journalists who filed stories from hotel bars based on propaganda fed by communist sympathizers. Incidentally, I was at one of those hotels, Le Royal in Phnom Penh, with my brother on April 17, 1975 when the Khmer Rouge came in and opened the darkest chapter of Cambodia's history.

Bruce Herschensohn does an excellent job in painting the reality of this period, exposing the biased press and the overtly pro-Communist anti-war movement, and saluting the real heroes (Bud Day, John McCain, Jim Stockdale). He debunks many myths about the Vietnam War which he refers to as the Southeast Asian War.

President Reagan once quoted a Russian proverb: "Trust, but verify." I would add, "For Communists and dictators, never trust, and always verify."

Bruce Herschensohn's *American Amnesia* is a must read for those interested in this critical period of history.

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