Contents

List of Maps and Illustrations vii
Preface and Acknowledgments xi
List of Acronyms xv

1. Springtime in Cambodia 1
2. Finger in the Dike 16
3. Finger on the Pulse 41
4. Requiem 65
5. Arrested Development 90
6. Trading Places 115
7. Fratricide 134
8. Parity 154
9. Pyrrhic Victories 176
10. Event Horizon 197
11. Dry Rot 215
12. Détente 232
13. Limelight 245
14. Phnom Penh Spring 263
15. White Pigeon 277
16. Paradigm Shift 296
17. Parting Shots 308
18. Aftermath 321

Notes 335
A Note on Sources 393
Index 395
Illustrations

Maps

The Khmer Republic 7
Thai provinces bordering Cambodia 29
The Phnom Penh capital region as of 1973 51
Noncommunist resistance camps on the Battambang border 145
The northwest quadrant of Cambodia 207
Location of key battles in Banteay Meanchey province 288

Photographs

U.S. Ambassador to Laos G. McMurtrie Godley reviews the first battalion of Cambodian troops at PS 18, circa September 1970 27
Lieutenant General Robert Cushman, deputy director of the CIA, reviews Cambodian troops at PS 18, circa November 1970 31
In Tam, prime minister and presidential contender in the Khmer Republic, later the founder of the ANS 42
Brigadier General Lon Non, commander of 3 Division, prepares to leave Cambodia for an extended stay in the United States, 30 April 1973 47
Brigadier General Norodom Chantarangsey, Military Region 2 commander, greets a crowd in 1974 69
Marshal Lon Nol and Lieutenant General Sosthene Fernandez arrive at the first (and only) Armed Forces Day celebration in front of the Phnom Penh railway station, 15 August 1974 71
Brigadier General Dien Del, commander of 2 Division, acts as Grand Marshal for the Armed Forces Day parade, 15 August 1974 72
A final shipment of supplies for the HYTHE outposts is laid out at the U.S. embassy annex in Phnom Penh, late March 1975 77
HYTHE officer Chuck Hafner and his fiancées waiting for evacuation from Pochentong, 7 April 1975 78
Six Khmer Air Force UH-1 choppers abandoned at the Olympic Stadium, April 1975 95
Some of the thirty villagers rescued from Khmer Rouge captivity in Preah Vihear province by anticommunist guerrillas, February 1978 118
Illustrations

Carcasses of PAVN tanks destroyed by the Khmer Rouge in Svay Teap district, Svay Rieng province, during 1978 121
Kong Sileah, the first Moulinaka commander 135
Camp Reahou commanders Van Saren and Andre Ouk Thol (alias Norodom Soryavong), September 1979 138
Moulinaka guerrillas assemble near Nong Chan, late 1979 141
Nhem Sophon, the second Moulinaka commander, circa 1981 155
Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee makes a fact-finding trip to Aranyaprathet, late 1982 165
Badge issued to graduates of Malaysian jungle warfare training 166
Francis Sherry on the border with Dien Del and Sak Sutsakhan 184
CIA Deputy Director of Operations Claire George and Francis Sherry receive a briefing from ANS General Teap Ben, late 1984 185
Nong Chan camp commander Chea Chhut and KPNLF Special Forces commander Pann Thai, July 1984 191
Prince Sihanouk presides over King Men’s funeral at Surin, 13 March 1985 203
A meeting of the JMC, 1986 219
Brian “Doc” Dougherty and Harold James Nicholson at the Hilton, 1985 222
Target practice at Aranyaprathet, 1986: Harold James Nicholson, Jim Parker, and unidentified communications officer 223
Scarf worn by APPCO members, 1987 235
RTA Colonel Nikorn meets with APPCO guerrillas prior to their first deployment, November 1987 237
Hilton members in 1988: Davis Knowlton, Charlie Bulner, Brian Dougherty, and Dennis Elmore 249
RTA Special Colonel Ayupoon and CIA officer Joe Murray during a Working Group dinner, 1989 253
Major Powpong from Task Force 838 poses with a KPNLF team, circa 1988 258
Prince Chakrapong, commander of 5 Brigade, and Duong Khem, commander of 1 Brigade, circa 1988 259
KPNLF guerrillas demonstrate a Chinese-made 120mm mortar on the border, 1988 267
Senior PAVN and SOC officers bid farewell to PAVN units in the Siem Reap provincial capital, September 1989 279
M-113 personnel carriers file past the Royal Palace during what PAVN claimed was its final withdrawal ceremony, 25 September 1989

An SOC T-54 at Banteay Chhmar with its turret blown off by a Carl Gustav rocket, 30 September 1989

Hul Sakada provides instruction on the border for the French LRAC F1 rocket, late 1989

The KPNLF’s White Pigeon radio intercept station at Thmar Puok, November 1989

SOC troops prepare to attack Banteay Srei district, Banteay Meanchey province, 1990

ANS Brigade 6 commander Kien Vang enters a newly captured district capital in the Phnom Kulen vicinity, Siem Reap province, 1990

CIA paramilitary officer Tom Fosmire with Sak Sutsakhan, 1990

CIA Station Chief Billy Huff with a captured SOC T-54 tank at Boeung Trakoun, early 1991

The KPNLF war memorial at Boeung Trakoun, 1991

SOC M-113 armored personnel carriers from Military Region 4 conduct an exercise in Siem Reap province, 1991

A pair of French LRAC F1 rockets was among the ANKI weapons captured at Phnom Srok and put on display in Phnom Penh, 25 March 1991

Generals Sak and Pann Thai review KPNLF troops at Boueng Trakoun, 1991

General Sak confers an award on General Prum Vith while Dien Del looks on, Boeung Trakoun, 1991

The ANKI chief of operations, General Toan Chay


Co-Prime Ministers Ranariddh and Hun Sen review the Indonesian contingent during the final withdrawal of UNTAC, September 1993

Sihanouk with his North Korean bodyguards arriving at Pochentong, November 1993

A frail General Sak talks with General Pol Saroeun in early April 1994, just weeks prior to his death

Royal Cambodian Air Force Mi-17 prepares to hit Pailin with Russian-made 250-kilo cluster bombs on its weapons pylons, 1994

A Chinese Type 62 light tank captured from the Khmer Rouge at Anlong Veng in 1994
This book has been nearly three decades in the making. To be fair, my focus during the initial decade was toward the war in Laos, where I was documenting a massive and extended paramilitary campaign conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Over the course of interviewing dozens of CIA officers who had served in Laos, I encountered many who had spent shorter stints in neighboring Cambodia. I dutifully jotted down their Cambodian anecdotes and filed them away.

Years later when researching a book on covert operations in North Vietnam, I once more came across CIA officers who had done Cambodian tours. Then when I wrote a book on the CIA operation in Tibet, again I interviewed officers who had Cambodian experience. Collectively, their tales were gaining critical mass.

It is perhaps fitting that I came to writing this book while researching others. After all, it has become cliché to call the conflict in Cambodia a “sideshow.” During the Second Indochina Conflict, this was not an unfair characterization. Although Cambodia sometimes carried the headlines, the battles there were usually secondary to, or in support of, the main struggle in neighboring Vietnam.

This did not remain the case. By the time of the Vietnamese invasion of Democratic Kampuchea in 1978, and the subsequent war through 1991, Cambodia moved from sideshow to center stage. It was the main issue that defined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for more than a decade. It also came to symbolize the faultline between the socialist camps, with China and the Khmer Rouge on one side and the Soviets, with their Vietnamese proxies, on the other.

Throughout this period of events, and for different reasons, the United States had difficulty responding to the troubles in Cambodia. During the 1960s, limits largely followed from Cambodia’s nonaligned foreign policy. During the first half of the 1970s, a larger American role was proscribed by congressional restraints. Then during the 1980s, lingering effects of the Vietnam Syndrome led even the most hawkish members of President Ronald Reagan’s administration to downplay direct involvement in Cambodian affairs.

Enter the CIA. During those times when the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom were constrained with regard to what they could do in Cambodia, CIA covert opera-
tions were a pragmatic and attractive alternative. On several occasions, the CIA cooperated with intelligence counterparts from regional states, who for their own reasons also sought to keep their involvement in Cambodia discrete.

This book attempts to pull back the veil on the CIA’s involvement in Cambodia, first during the Khmer Republic and then after the Vietnamese invasion, when it was largely channeled through the noncommunist Cambodian resistance. Although there are a modest number of titles covering recent Cambodian history, this is the first one to investigate at length CIA operations in that country. And aside from a single monograph in 1991, there are no English-language books on the noncommunist resistance. This book will hopefully be an important source for students of contemporary Southeast Asian history, the Second Indochina Conflict, and CIA paramilitary operations.

In one sense, this is really two separate stories separated by time, though not geography. And perhaps not surprisingly, most of the primary characters—from Cambodian royalty to Thai generals to CIA case officers—maintained their roles throughout these periods. To them, Cambodia might have had chapters spread over a quarter of a decade, but they were always part of a continuing saga. They are treated as such in this book.

Among the many who contributed to this work, I would like to single out some who were especially generous with their help and support. In the United States, thanks go out to Andy Antippas, Alan Armstrong, Kenton Clymer, Doan Huu Dinh, Jim Dunn, Dennis Elmore, Denny Lane, Jim Parker, and Nate Thayer. Warm thanks go to Barry Broman for sharing his thoughts over some delicious bowls of *khao soi*.

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In Cambodia, I have received constant encouragement and help from Chea Chheang, Sieng Lapresse, and Leng Sochea. I would like to thank Hassan Kasem, Hul Sakada, and Kong Thann for their assistance with translations and interviews. My warmest appreciation goes as well to Dien Del, Sam Oum, Hun Phoeung, Tepi Ros, and Riem Sarin, with whom I shared many meals and conversations. I would especially like to thank Dr. Gaffar Peang-Meth and General Suon Samnang for their patient recollections over the years.
The author reserves special thanks to Merle Pribbenow for his remarkable translations and infectious enthusiasm for Southeast Asian military history.

And finally, the author would like to thank his editor, Mike Briggs, for years of support in seeing this through.

Ken Conboy
Jakarta, Indonesia
November 2012
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFIOC</td>
<td>Armed Forces Intelligence Operations Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANKI</td>
<td>National Army for an Independent Cambodia (Armées Nationale pour Khmer Independent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANS</td>
<td>Sihanoukist National Army (Armée Nationale Sihanoukienne)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPCO</td>
<td>Armed Political, Psychological, and Clandestine Operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASA</td>
<td>Army Security Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIRD</td>
<td>Bureau of Intelligence, Research, and Documentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGDK</td>
<td>Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIDG</td>
<td>Civilian Irregular Defense Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COS</td>
<td>Clandestine Operations Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPK</td>
<td>Communist Party of Kampuchea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPT</td>
<td>Communist Party of Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRTs</td>
<td>Commando Raider Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCM</td>
<td>Deputy Chief of Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDRS</td>
<td>Declassified Document Reference System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPPU</td>
<td>Displaced Persons Protection Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRV</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exco</td>
<td>Executive Coordinating Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FANK</td>
<td>National Cambodian Armed Forces (Forces Armées Nationales Khmères) [beginning April 1970]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARK</td>
<td>Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (Forces Armées Royales Khmères) [before April 1970]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBIS</td>
<td>Foreign Broadcast Information Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRUS</td>
<td>Foreign Relations of the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FULRO</td>
<td>United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funcinpec</td>
<td>Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, et Coopératif)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUNK</td>
<td>National United Front of Kampuchea (Front Uni National du Kampuchea)</td>
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Acronyms

GRUNK Royal Nation United Government of Kampuchea
(Gouvernement Royal d'Union Nationale du Kampuchea)

JCS Joint Chiefs of Staff

JMC Joint Military Command

KEG Khmer Emergency Group

Khmer Rouge the Cambodian Communist movement

KISA Khmer Information and Security Agency

KKK Khmer Kampuchea Krom

KPNLAF Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces (Forces Armées Nationale de Libération du Peuple Khmer)

KPNLF Khmer People's National Liberation Front

KPRP Khmer People's Revolutionary Party

MACV U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam

MACVSOG [U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam] Special Operations Group

Moulinaka National Movement for the Liberation of Kampuchea
(Mouvement pour la Libération Nationale du Kampuchea)

OMZ operational military zone

PARU Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit

PAVN People's Army of Vietnam

PCCS Provisional Central Committee of Salvation

Permico Permanent Military Committee for Cooperation

PLANA Department of Planning and Analysis

PRC People's Republic of China

PRG Provisional Revolutionary Government

PRK People's Republic of Kampuchea

PRKAF PRK Armed Forces

PS Pakse Site

RCAF Royal Cambodian Armed Forces

RTA Royal Thai Army

SAS Special Air Service

SEATO Southeast Asia Treaty Organization

SEPES Social and Political Studies Service (Service des Etudes Politiques et Sociales)

SGU Special Guerrilla Unit

SID Security and Intelligence Division

SNC Supreme National Council

SOC State of Cambodia
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SRV</td>
<td>Socialist Republic of Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOC</td>
<td>Tactical Operations Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAMIC</td>
<td>United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNTAC</td>
<td>United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>U.S. Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSF</td>
<td>U.S. Army Special Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Cong</td>
<td>National Liberation Front [Vietnam]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPAF</td>
<td>Vietnam People’s Air Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>WSAG</td>
<td>Washington Special Action Group</td>
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The Cambodian Wars
In the water, crocodiles; on land, tigers. So goes the Khmer proverb that describes the historically rough neighborhood found on mainland Southeast Asia, the neighborhood where a litany of Cambodian fiefdoms found themselves wedged between a figurative rock and a hard place. At the start of the Middle Ages, a few of these principalities in the Mekong Delta, growing rich while brokering trade between China and India, congealed for a time into the Hindu kingdom of Funan. Then in the seventh century, some Cambodian royals added more real estate around the Dangrek Mountains and briefly united as the Kingdom of Chenla.

But it was not until the start of the ninth century that a Khmer Empire beat back encroaching neighbors and rose to regional domination across Southeast Asia. Showing their mettle, legions of Cambodian infantry, cavalry, and war elephants pushed north to Vientiane and south to the Kra Isthmus. To the east, they held at bay their perennial rivals in what is now central and southern Vietnam.

The centerpiece of the Khmer Empire was the capital of Angkor. Roughly the size of Los Angeles, Angkor supported half a million residents at a time when Tokyo was still only a village. Its irrigation system extended 25 kilometers from the city’s center, allowing for three crops a year. And its magnificent temples—erected by thousands of coolies at the behest of kings that purported divine lineage—remain the largest religious buildings ever constructed.

Through the fourteenth century, the Khmer basked in such opulence. Part of the empire’s staying power resided in Angkor’s strategic location: With enemies channeled up the Mekong, they were relatively easy to interdict. Part, too, was grounded in the adulation ladled upon the king; as a self-professed intermediary with the gods, he mobilized the masses to build vast elevated reservoirs, cut extensive irrigation channels, realize grand palaces and temples, and fill the expanding ranks of his infantry.

But as with all empires, rot eventually set in. Theories abound for the decline of Angkor’s glory. Excessive manpower was siphoned off for the army, goes one, and away from more substantive economic endeavors. The road network built around Angkor proved a double-edged sword, goes another, as it abetted movement of the enemy as much as it did Khmer troops. Perhaps the biggest reason, however, was the adoption of Theravada Buddhism as the state religion; with its emphasis on introspection and inner Truth, it undercut dedication to the god-
kings and their megaprojects. Angkor’s infrastructure, especially its irrigation system, eventually fell into disrepair, and productivity plummeted.

To the west, Ayutthaya, a Thai kingdom that was exceptionally savvy toward foreign traders, was on the ascent. Sensing weakness in the faltering Khmer, the Thai surged east in 1431 and sacked Angkor. The Khmer capital, once the gold standard for urban sprawl prior to the Industrial Revolution, was abandoned to the jungle.

After that, history was less than kind to the Cambodians. From the heights of Angkorian splendor, the Khmer entered into one of Southeast Asia’s longest unbroken losing streaks. Situated on the fault line between surging Thai and Vietnamese states, Cambodia leached territory—and dignity—for the next four centuries as it was reduced to a vassal of one or the other, or both.

Ironically it was the French, who had arrived in Indochina and declared protectorate status over Cambodia in 1863, that provided a reprieve. Recognizing the benefit of a buffer between its lucrative Vietnamese holdings and the expansion-minded Thai, France spared Cambodia from further territorial erosion and fixed its borders to an area roughly the size of Oklahoma.1

As far as protectorates go, Cambodia offered the French few headaches. Eighty percent of the populace were peasants who, more often than not owning their own plots of land, appeared genuinely content. Of the minority that lived in urban centers, ethnic Chinese, and to a lesser extent ethnic Vietnamese, dominated the business sector; Cambodians themselves placed a distant third.

Perched at the top of all this was the Cambodian monarch and his court. Kings had long since devolved into little more than figureheads, with true power residing in the French resident-general. When King Sisowath Monivong died in April 1941, however, the French saw special urgency in finding a suitable successor. This was because by that time Nazi Germany had installed the puppet Vichy government in France. The Vichy regime, which tacitly controlled France’s Indochinese colonies, was in turn beholden to Germany’s Axis partner, Imperial Japan. With such a tenuous toehold over its Southeast Asian territories, the French understandably desired the next Cambodian king to be especially malleable.

Eventually getting the nod was Monivong’s grandson, eighteen-year-old Norodom Sihanouk. He was a good choice on two accounts. First, Sihanouk—with a father from the Norodoms and mother from the Sisowaths—reconciled the two royal houses that were in perpetual competition. Second, the youthful royal, who was attending high school in Saigon at the time, was said to most enjoy philosophy and music. Such benign interests, calculated the French, pointed toward a monarch with little backbone.
Initially, Sihanouk lived up to such low expectations. In 1945, when the Japanese shunted aside the Vichy and pressured Cambodia to declare independence near the close of World War II, the king was agreeable. A few months later, when the French returned to Indochina and professed their intent to reclaim their Asian colonies, Sihanouk just as quickly returned to the fold.

Shortly thereafter, however, Sihanouk began to show a nationalist streak and act against typecast. As background to this, by the close of the 1940s a violent independence struggle against the French had started to gain momentum in Vietnam. Although guerrillas of various political persuasions had also taken root in Cambodia, they rarely resorted to violence, and at no point did they ever seriously threaten French hold. This did not deter the emboldened Sihanouk, who began agitating for France’s departure not only from Cambodia but also from all of Indochina.

Confronted by Sihanouk’s shrill orating, the French opted for a surprising yet pragmatic retreat. In November 1953, they embraced the king’s demands and summarily granted Cambodia its independence ahead of all the other Indochinese states. By appeasing Sihanouk in this manner, the French felt they could retain Cambodia’s goodwill while simultaneously redoubling efforts at defeating the far more serious communist insurgency spreading across the Vietnamese countryside. In the end, the French did remain on cordial terms with Sihanouk, but they were still forced to make a humiliating departure from the rest of Indochina the next year.

Following France’s withdrawal, the political landscape of mainland Southeast Asia was fluid. Vietnam was partitioned near the 17th Parallel between a communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north and a pro-West Republic of Vietnam in the south; elections to reunite the two were supposed to take place in 1956 but did not occur, setting the stage for the superpowers’ proxy conflict. Laos was ostensibly neutral with a royal family symbolically on top, but communist and noncommunist factions remained very much vying for control underneath.

In Cambodia, the situation was somewhat less confusing as Sihanouk consolidated his grip over the kingdom. On a personal level, the monarch, who had married six women over eight years and had twelve children with four of them, had settled down with his seventh consort by 1955. On a professional level, Sihanouk abdicated that same year and handed the crown to his father. Now demoted to a prince and with a freer hand to enter politics, he served short, almost annual stints as prime minister and formed his own party, which won all ninety-one National Assembly seats in a cooked 1955 election.
From that point onward, Sihanouk’s idiosyncrasies grew more pronounced. A man of impossibly thin skin, Sihanouk was increasingly convinced of his own indispensability. As a U.S. military officer assigned to Phnom Penh wrote in January 1964:

A highly emotional individual, he had an insatiable appetite for praise, and appeared incapable of tolerating criticism. When under the spell of his own voice, he was prone to making ill-considered statements which later came back to plague him. . . . He has been a shrewd politician and consummate actor, capable of changing his mood to fit the moment.  

Sihanouk’s moods changed so often, in fact, that it became cliche to call him mercurial. One result of this was a penchant for cutting diplomatic relations with noncommunist neighbors. By 1961, he had twice closed the embassy in Bangkok; in 1963 he severed relations with Saigon; and in May 1965 he broke ties with Washington. 

By contrast, and despite lip service to maintaining nonaligned status, Sihanouk had little problem courting the socialist world. By the mid-1960s, he counted among his closest allies the DRV, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and North Korea. He also saw common cause with Indonesia’s Sukarno, a fellow self-declared neutralist who took pleasure tweaking the nose of the West.

On some occasions, Cambodia’s left-leaning nonalignment was obnoxious but otherwise benign. In 1962, for example, Sihanouk and Sukarno took exception to the apolitical nature of the Olympics and formed an alternative international sporting competition—the Games of the Newly Emerging Forces—that openly embraced (largely socialist) politics. The following year, Sihanouk delivered a speech during which he implied that the assassinated President John Kennedy was languishing in hell.

Far more serious was Cambodia’s internecine role in the Vietnam War. Since the early 1960s, the DRV’s armed forces, known as the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), had been striking at South Vietnam from Cambodian border sanctuaries. Through sins of omission, Phnom Penh elected not to interfere with this affront to its national sovereignty. It also took the extra step of condemning, and sometimes interdicting, any attempts by the United States or South Vietnam to pursue communist guerrillas into their Cambodian havens.

In November 1965, Cambodia crossed the line and laid the groundwork for sins of commission. That month, the head of the Cambodian army, Lieutenant General Lon Nol, flew to Beijing to confirm a secret treaty already approved by
Sihanouk for use of Sihanoukville’s port to transship Chinese arms and supplies to PAVN sanctuaries along the border. Chinese shipments were passing through Sihanoukville by the following year; these were carried by the Hak Ly Trucking Company, a Phnom Penh–based entity that was actually led by an officer from PAVN’s General Rear Services Department. In return, the Cambodian military received at least 10 percent of all weapons shipments, as well as hefty port and transportation fees. The Cambodians also reportedly allowed PAVN to make use of a military hospital in Kompong Cham.

On the economic front, Sihanouk’s policies were no less slanted and, in hindsight, misguided. Much of Cambodia’s nonagrarian sectors were nationalized; what little private sector that remained was stifled by Sihanouk’s own shocking neglect and blind eye toward rampant corruption—which in many cases was tied to the family of his seventh wife. Worse, American largesse—amounting to nearly $410 million in economic grant aid from 1955 to 1963, plus another $84 million in military assistance—came to a halt after U.S. aid was summarily renounced in November 1963; this shortfall was never filled by similar levels of assistance extended by Cambodia’s socialist allies.

As the Cambodian economy faltered, so, too, did Sihanouk’s apparent grasp on reality. Between 1966 and 1969, the prince spent inordinate amounts of time writing scripts, composing music, and sometimes acting in nine extremely amateurish films. Showing his skewed priorities, he mobilized air force helicopters during the filming of one, forcing a one-day delay in the evacuation of casualties during a border clash with Thailand. As Cambodia’s educated class tried to hide their embarrassment, he organized international film festivals in Phnom Penh during 1968 and 1969—and awarded himself the grand prize both times.

There were other excesses as well. Showing little sense for conserving limited government resources, Sihanouk pushed for ten new universities or campuses to be built around the country—despite some of them never having more than 100 students apiece. And even when crucial government decisions had to be made, every other year he took extended leave of his kingdom for a rest cure on the French Riviera.

Yet despite economic stagnation, severely limited political expression, and Sihanouk’s mounting personal quirks, there was no denying the prince remained popular in some quarters. Topping this list was the Cambodian peasantry. Such adulation was, in a sense, hard to explain. In his domestic speeches the prince would often refer to the Cambodian farmer in paternalistic tones that were pandering at best, insulting at worst. Moreover, when farmers rose up in 1967 after the government imposed stringent—and disadvantageous—regulations affect-
ing rice sales, Sihanouk sent paratroopers to Battambang province to brutally quell the uprising. This seemed to matter little, however, as the peasantry continued to adore the accessible prince.

On an international level, too, it was sometimes difficult to fathom Sihanouk’s appeal among socialist nations. After all, his periodic crackdowns on Cambodia’s leftist intellectuals and politicians had sent them by the end of the 1960s to the grave or fleeing into the jungle. Also, Sihanouk’s bourgeois proclivities should theoretically have made him fair game for condemnation among socialist ideologues. But reflecting Cold War pragmatism, the affable prince remained in their good graces.¹²

Others, not surprisingly, were less forgiving. Cambodian businessmen increasingly saw little benefit from Sihanouk’s nationalization efforts that suppressed commerce and lined the pockets of his entourage. And while Sihanouk had long made little secret of his contempt for the urban elite, by the close of the decade the educated class was returning the sentiment. Some royals, especially the ambitious Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, had even gone from trusted allies to guarded rivals.

Sitting on the fence was Sihanouk’s enigmatic military chief, Lon Nol. The son of a minor government official from Prey Veng province, Lon Nol was a Khmer Krom, a reference to the ethnic Khmer found in the lower reaches of the Mekong Delta. Split by shifting borders, the bulk of the Khmer Krom lived inside Cambodia, but a half-million more could be found on the Vietnamese side of the frontier. Historically the Khmer Krom had been afforded better access to French education and, as Lon Nol could attest, had landed government posts disproportionate to their numbers.

Lon Nol hardly fit the stereotype of a military man. Quiet, unpretentious, and an uninspiring orator, he had initially entered the police force under the French colonial administration. After rising through the police ranks, he was named a provincial governor and later joined Sihanouk as a novice politician when the king began agitating for independence. It was not until 1952, at age thirty-nine, that Lon Nol transferred to the kingdom’s fledgling army and was on hand the following December when a Khmer military column was sent to Battambang on one of its first postindependence forays. The French were actually in charge of the operation but, catering to Sihanouk’s ego, allowed him to take command on paper. In the end, the French kept the enemy at a distance and the battle was a nonevent, barely rating as a skirmish. But showing tact, Lon Nol wrote up an after-action account that glowinglly praised Sihanouk’s supposed military prowess.¹³
From that point forward, Sihanouk allowed Lon Nol’s career to go from strength to strength. In 1955, he was named army chief; five years later, he became chief of the General Staff as well as defense minister. Adding hats outside of the armed forces, he was chosen deputy premier in 1963 and in 1966 did a brief turn as prime minister.

As with other senior officials, Lon Nol owed all to the prince. Still, the general had quietly built his own constituencies. As he himself started out as a lowly government functionary, he held a positive rating among civil servants. The monks, too, favored him—even though his take on Buddhism was heavily laced with mysticism and the supernatural. Not surprisingly, soldiers liked Lon Nol, especially given his folksy, unassuming lifestyle. He was even something of a populist, his dark-bronze complexion much closer to the color of the peasantry than to that of the other, paler members of the Sino-Khmer elite.14

Hedging Cold War bets, Lon Nol had courted favor among foreign nations as
well. When Sihanouk slammed the door on further U.S. military aid in late 1963, the general showed diplomatic savvy when he warmly thanked members of the American mission for their efforts, then expressed hope that U.S. assistance would again flow in the future. The very next year, however, he flew to China to secretly authorize communist military supplies to transit Sihanoukville. While there, he vowed to the Chinese that he would use his military to combat any U.S. aggression against Cambodia.

When needed, Lon Nol could also be a calculating schemer. He reportedly kept extensive dossiers at his home about friends and foes alike. He also showed skill at fomenting trouble in neighboring South Vietnam. Back in 1959, Sihanouk, fuming over Saigon’s support of Cambodian rebels, ordered his army chief to strike back in kind. Lon Nol’s response was nuanced and unconventional. Using a handful of trusted army associates, he organized two underground organizations opposed to the South Vietnamese regime. The first, the Front de Libération du Champa (Champa Liberation Front), was established in 1960 ostensibly to support the rights of the ethnic Cham and highland tribes that had once constituted the formidable Kingdom of Champa. The Cham has since been reduced to pockets strung between Cambodia’s Kompong Cham province (where they were primarily Muslim) and central Vietnam (where many were Hindu).

Although there is no evidence any ethnic Cham took up arms against the Saigon authorities, the highland tribes, which populated the mountainous spine running down South Vietnam, were a different matter. With discrete moral support coming from Phnom Penh, tribesmen from the Champa front staged a series of armed uprisings against the Saigon government in late 1964.

The second underground organization created by Lon Nol in 1960 sought to stir discontent among the Khmer Krom living in South Vietnam’s Mekong Delta. Using the nom de guerre Chau Dara, Lon Nol named himself leader of the Front de Libération du Kampuchea Krom (Khmer Krom Liberation Front), also known as the White Scarves. This underground movement openly agitated for ethnic Cambodians in the lower Mekong to secede from Saigon’s rule. With prompting from Chau Dara, the Front recruited sympathizers among the ethnic Cambodian population in the Delta; these members occasionally crossed the border to report their findings to Cambodian government handlers. What’s more, an armed wing known as the Khmer Kampuchea Krom (KKK) took root at the instigation of Lon Nol; KKK guerrillas mounted sporadic attacks in the Delta through the mid-1960s, though the movement had devolved into little more than a handful of bandits by that decade’s end.
Throughout that time, Lon Nol gave every indication he was loyal to Sihanouk. “He was a staunch royalist,” confirmed Dien Del, the general’s aide-de-camp during the early 1960s, “and he was especially respectful toward Queen Kos-samak.”

But by 1969, change was in the offing. For years Sihanouk had been staging a highwire act both among international players and domestic politicians. Although it was increasingly apparent he did not have the requisite skills needed to pull off such risky brinkmanship, the prince did not seem to have problems with polarizing the Cambodian body politic or driving neighboring states beyond frustration. The moribund Cambodian economy, however, was something that could no longer be overlooked. Making matters worse, the kingdom’s economic crisis sharpened in July due to expectations of a bad harvest.

Out of options, Sihanouk did the unthinkable—he relinquished center stage. Acquiescing to a vote by the National Assembly in August, he watched as Lon Nol was chosen to become prime minister for a second time. Even more remarkable was the assembly’s selection for deputy premier: Sisowath Sirik Matak, the urbane prince whose great-grandfather had been king near the start of the century. Although from different social strata—Lon Nol was born to a minor government official, Sirik Matak was born into privilege near the palace—they had been friends ever since attending the same high school in Saigon. Both entered the civil service, both eventually became governors, and both joined the same political party during Cambodia’s tame independence struggle. After that, both gravitated toward the military, with Sihanouk naming Sirik Matak as the first defense minister after independence.

Despite similar career paths, the two could not have had more different personalities. Lon Nol was the inscrutable Asian, emotions kept in check while he obediently did mental gymnastics to keep pace with Sihanouk’s fluctuating diplomatic whims. Sirik Matak was more sophisticated and opinionated, taking vocal exception to Sihanouk’s skewed nonalignment. Not surprising given Sihanouk’s inability to weather criticism, he eventually shunted off his cousin to a string of ambassadorial postings in Beijing, Manila, and Tokyo.

Now that he was back in Phnom Penh and wielding real influence in government, Sirik Matak pounced on the opportunity for change. Long an advocate of renewing U.S. aid and expanding commerce, he almost immediately laid out a program to denationalize and deregulate the economy from the stifling state controls imposed by Sihanouk.

Changes were also forthcoming in foreign policy. To be fair, Sihanouk had already started easing his nonaligned policies back toward the center. In January
1969, for example, he had allowed the army to launch sporadic attacks against PAVN and Cambodian communist guerrillas in the remote northeastern province of Ratanakiri. Then, in August, he had normalized diplomatic relations with the United States after a four-year hiatus. That same month, he held frank discussions with U.S. Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield and admitted that the biggest threat to Cambodia was Vietnamese communists violating its borders.

This last admission was more than a little disingenuous. After all, it was Sihanouk who had not only tolerated the Vietnamese border sanctuaries for years but also approved Chinese military supplies transiting Sihanoukville on the way to the sanctuaries. Those supplies were still flowing as of mid-1969, with regular Sunday coordination sessions in Phnom Penh between members of PAVN and the Cambodian army. Senior military officers, including Lon Nol, were reportedly lining their pockets with the generous proceeds from resultant port fees.

But now with Lon Nol and Sirik Matak at the helm, Phnom Penh signaled an even tougher line toward communism. Some of the steps taken were discrete. In September, for example, Lon Nol sent an emissary to make secret contact with Sihanouk’s bête noire, Son Ngoc Thanh. A fellow Khmer Krom five years Lon Nol’s senior, Son Ngoc Thanh made an early mark by establishing the first Khmer-language newspaper in 1936. A proponent of right-wing politics, he quickly soured toward the monarchy and became an opponent of Sihanouk upon his coronation.

By the time of World War II, Son Ngoc Thanh had worked his way to the top of Cambodia’s small political elite. When Imperial Japan pressured Sihanouk to abruptly declare independence from France in 1945, he even briefly served as prime minister. This did not sit well when the French returned after the war; they promptly arrested him as a collaborator before packing him off to exile in Paris. After a decent interval, Son Ngoc Thanh was allowed to return to Phnom Penh. If the French thought he was suitably chastened during exile, they were mistaken. He soon took to the jungle, where he became a leader among the assortment of insurgents opposed to French rule. He remained there after independence, molding his loyal guerrillas—which came to be known as the Khmer Serei, or Free Cambodians—into an armed anticommunist movement opposed to Sihanouk’s royal government.

As insurgencies go, the Khmer Serei were a tame bunch that never seriously threatened Phnom Penh. Operating from South Vietnam, Son Ngoc Thanh fielded two pockets of guerrillas: one strung along the South Vietnamese border—which consisted largely of Khmer Krom—and the other just inside Thai-
land along the Dangrek Mountains. After a dormant period, they grew marginally more active in 1963 following an injection of covert military aid from Saigon and Bangkok. They also ran a pair of weak radio transmitters that sniped at Sihanouk over the airwaves.

Even though largely ineffectual, the Khmer Serei left Sihanouk livid and prone to overreaction. In November 1963, for example, a Khmer Serei member was lured to Phnom Penh with a safe conduct pass—only to be arrested and locked in a cage at the National Assembly. Sihanouk later had his slow execution filmed—it lasted more than 15 minutes—and made it required viewing in cinemas for a month.

Sihanouk’s hysterics aside, the Khmer Serei ranks were plunging into a downward spiral. This was largely due to economic realities. In search of proper employment, hundreds of members joined the paramilitary forces of the South Vietnamese government. Most of the remainder, especially those in the Dangrek Mountains, began defecting in droves to the Cambodian government during the first half of 1969 and were inducted into the army.

By the time Lon Nol contacted Son Ngoc Thanh in September 1969, the Khmer Serei had ceased to be an irritant. Still, it was a step rife with symbolism: Despite being vilified by Sihanouk for decades, and indeed sentenced to death in absentia, Cambodia’s highest profile anticommunist now appeared to be mending fences with Phnom Penh’s new management.

Other steps taken by Lon Nol’s government were equally substantial. By October 1969, Cambodian militiamen were initiating occasional attacks against Vietnamese communist units—dubbed “armed bandits” in the Cambodian media—in places like Kandal, the province adjacent to Phnom Penh. The following month, Sirik Matak, ignoring the counsel of Sihanouk, ordered a wider military operation in Ratanakiri. Located in the triborder region where Laos, South Vietnam, and Cambodia converged, Ratanakiri was significant for a couple of reasons. First, the majority of its sparse population comprised tribesmen that largely operated outside of Phnom Penh’s writ; many, in fact, were sympathetic to Cambodia’s small but growing armed communist movement. Second, offshoots of the Ho Chi Minh Trail logistical corridor fed from Laos into PAVN cache sites spread across the jungles of Ratanakiri. Between the tribesmen and PAVN troops, Phnom Penh’s grip over the province was shaky at best.

The military operation into Ratanakiri intended to address both issues. Not only would the troops literally plant the flag, and thus extend the central government’s influence, but more important they would begin to plot the size and
locations of PAVN units. Dispatched for this mission would be three tactical
groups assembled from the ranks of some of the army’s best infantry battalions,
as well as armor and paratroopers.  

Ironically, among the tactical group commanders was Lieutenant Colonel Um
Savuth. One of the country’s first airborne officers, Savuth had married an attrac-
tive Eurasian woman—only to be driven to drink over her suspected dalliances.
During one such binge, he decided to re-create the William Tell legend by hav-
ing a junior officer shoot a can off his head. The officer, understandably nerv-
ous, missed his mark and instead sent the shot into Savuth’s cranium. Though
he survived, he was forced to walk with a cane and keep the alcohol flowing to
dull the pain.  

Despite his physical impediment and frequent inebriation, Savuth remained
a skilled officer and was promoted to head the Brigade de Palaise, the strategic
Palace Brigade that guarded Phnom Penh. As a confidante of Lon Nol, he was
also given the sensitive assignment of cochairing the Special Transportation
Committee that coordinated the PAVN supplies that flowed through
Sihanoukville. Now, after ably abetting the PAVN logistical corridor for more than
three years, he was selected to spearhead one of the tactical groups mobilizing
against the Vietnamese.  

As had been the case with the Cambodian troops that entered Ratanakiri at
the beginning of the year, the tactical groups inevitably clashed with the PAVN
interlopers. Small numbers of casualties were inflicted on both sides, and some
Vietnamese prisoners were taken.  

Upping the ante, the Cambodian government
cut an airfield at Labang Siek and began staging a handful of interdiction runs
with its fleet of aging fighter-bombers.  

Although PAVN was under orders to
avoid instigating any confrontations with the Cambodian military, Moscow was
sufficiently irate with Phnom Penh that it halted the flow of spare parts and
ammunition for the MiG-17 fighters it had given Cambodia earlier in the decade.

Effectively sidelined, Sihanouk had no choice but to watch his kingdom veer
farther away from its erstwhile socialist allies. All of this had apparently taken a
toll on his health, as the fatigued prince decided during the first week of January
1970 that it was the right time to take his customary extended medicinal cure on
the French Riviera. Before boarding his plane for France, he assured his coun-
trymen over the radio that he would be back by April in time to plow the “first
furrow of the agricultural year.”  

This promise proved overly optimistic. In the prince’s absence, decades of
pent-up frustration over his misguided rule came to the fore and the ranks of
anti-Sihanouk conspirators began to swell. Taking the lead was the brooding, ambitious Sirik Matak. Lon Nol, who returned from his own extended medical treatment in France on 18 February, was also agreeable (albeit more cautiously) to Sihanouk’s ouster.

The day after Lon Nol’s return, another conspirator, In Tam, was enticed into taking a key step. With a career path not unlike Lon Nol and Sirik Matak, the portly In Tam had risen through the police ranks before switching to politics (he was elected to the National Assembly in 1966) and serving time as a governor. Though he was derided for occasionally displaying a wicked temper in public, he was renowned for his scrupulous honesty. Probably because of this, Sirik Matak on 19 February tapped In Tam to form a commission in the assembly to weed out corruption. Immediately, four assemblymen, all pro-Sihanoukists, were implicated in smuggling and drummed out of office. One of the resultant openings was filled by In Tam himself, who thereafter became deputy president of the assembly. This was critical because if Sihanouk were to be dismissed in a vote of no-confidence, the assembly president would replace the prince as chief of state and In Tam would become president of the assembly.

With that vital procedural step out of the way, the conspirators ratcheted up pressure against the Vietnamese communists and, by association, Sihanouk. In late February, plans were hatched to stage anti-Vietnamese demonstrations in the border province of Svay Rieng. This hardly needed any prompting. As one of Cambodia’s driest and most impoverished provinces, its populace was renowned for their socially crass, often martial nature. And as they had had to endure the presence of PAVN sanctuaries—and resultant cross-border attacks from South Vietnam—for the better part of a decade, they were begging to lash out at the squatters. Aided by students driven in from Phnom Penh, Svay Rieng residents on 8 March initiated three days of raucous anti-Vietnamese protests.

This was tame compared to what happened next. On 11 March, Sirik Matak arranged for a large student rally, spearheaded by four dozen soldiers, which resulted in the sacking of the embassies of the DRV and communist Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of the Republic of Vietnam. Not willing to ease up, the following day Lon Nol publicly demanded—unrealistically—that all PAVN sanctuaries be vacated within three days. Sirik Matak, meantime, nullified trade agreements with the PRG.

Frightened of getting caught in the backlash, army officers who had been close to PAVN grew worried. One lieutenant colonel who had coordinated the Sihanoukville shipments hid all of his private vehicles except one jeep parked in
Monitoring events from France, Sihanouk was devastated. Heading from the Riviera to Paris, he addressed a small audience at the Cambodian embassy. In a vintage moment of rage, the prince vented against the government he left behind in Phnom Penh, going so far as to say he would put most of the leadership to death upon his return. Though he had shown himself capable of flashes of brutality against regime opponents in the past, these latest comments could most likely be written off as hyperbole. Trouble was, they were tape-recorded and a copy reached Cambodia—and Lon Nol’s ear—by the end of the second week of March.

Compounding matters, Sihanouk made another critical misstep. On 13 March, after initially hinting that he was going to curtail his trip and come home quickly, he instead decided to reroute his return journey with five days each in the Soviet Union and PRC. This would delay his landing in Phnom Penh—originally scheduled for 18 March—by an additional six days. Still a believer in his own brinkmanship and indispensability, Sihanouk intended to use his Moscow and Beijing visits to urge both countries to pressure Hanoi to reduce its PAVN presence in Cambodia. And in a late bit of wishful thinking, the prince was reportedly considering asking Moscow to provide Cambodia with a squadron of MiG-21 jets. Even a novice student of international diplomacy could predict he was likely to be disappointed on all counts.

Worse for Sihanouk, his delay allowed his opponents more time to conspire. With their plan nearly reaching full boil, In Tam and his fellow assemblymen on 16 March made an initial, rather timid attempt to sanction Sihanouk. By this point, virtually no effort was being made to camouflage their intent to seek Sihanouk’s ouster. Rising to her son’s defense, Queen Kossamak summoned Lon Nol and Sirik Matak that same day and ordered the two to cease their scheming. Despite Lon Nol’s reverence toward the queen, her plea fell on deaf ears.

That night, Oum Mannorine, the chief of police and Sihanouk’s brother-in-law, began an eleventh-hour attempt to mobilize diehard royalists. Word leaked from their camp, however, and Lon Nol, for once showing gritty determination, moved decisively over the course of 17 March to detain more than two-dozen high-ranking Sihanouk sympathizers in the armed forces and government.

The next day, the National Assembly took its cue. During a morning plenary session, they railed against the prince, ladling charges of corruption against him and his cohorts. Immediately after lunch, they held a secret ballot to determine
whether Sihanouk should be removed as chief of state. When the tally was
counted, the results were unanimous: Sihanouk was out of a job. In accordance
with provisions contained in the 1960 constitution, he was temporarily replaced
by President of the Assembly Cheng Heng pending an election. Though the move
was to be commonly described as a coup d’état in the media, the overthrow fol-
lowed legislative procedures and was more accurately an engineered vote of no-
confidence.

Sihanouk, of course, did not see it that way. He was en route to the Moscow
airport when Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin broke news of the putsch. Boarding
his flight for Beijing via Siberia, Sihanouk was seething. With no more tightropes
to walk, the gloves were about to come off.