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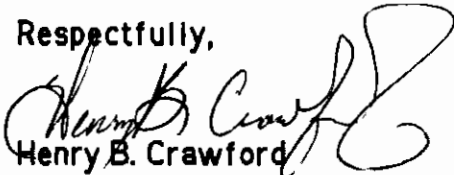
Admiral E. R. Zumwalt, Jr. USN (Ret.)
1500 Wilson Blvd.
Suite 641
Arlington, VA 22209

Dear Admiral:

I received your kind gift of On Watch in the mail today. The book is very much appreciated, and I am sure I will enjoy reading it. I have not forgotten that you wanted a copy of my lecture from the conference. I just finished the revisions last week.

As you may be aware, Jim Reckner is collecting the papers from all participants to be copied and distributed. I am not aware of a specific timetable, therefore, as a convenience to you I have enclosed a copy of my paper with revisions and endnotes. Please accept this as a token of my appreciation and as a memento of our conference.

Respectfully,


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THE BALLGAME IS OVER: The Secret Bombing of Cambodia

by Henry B. Crawford

Museum of Texas Tech University

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In the spring of 1969 President Richard M. Nixon authorized a bombing campaign against communist-held territories in the supposed neutral country of Cambodia. Because of sensitive diplomatic and political considerations, the Administration decided that the bombings were to remain secret. Important military and civilian officials as well as the full body of Congress were not informed about the bombings and were given false reports and doctored data to avoid arousing suspicion.

Cambodia had a very delicate position during the decades preceding and during American combat involvement in Vietnam. Moreover, it was on relatively good relations with some of its neighbors. During this period, Cambodia's leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, made some very important friends in Communist China and in Hanoi.

By the early 1960s The United States was increasing aid to South Vietnam, which was a traditional enemy of Cambodia, causing Sihanouk to fear that war could spill over into his country and threaten its neutrality. In response to the situation, Sihanouk suspended diplomatic relations with the United States. He then looked to China, France, and North Vietnam for allies who could help him maintain his country's existence.¹ He allowed the North Vietnamese to expand its supply routes through Cambodia, forcing indigenous Cambodian populations out. He also allowed the Communists to establish bases and staging areas in his country near the South Vietnamese border.

By 1967 the Communists had fully established its supply depots and staging areas, which the Americans called "sanctuaries," on the Cambodia-South Vietnamese border. These sanctuaries played an important role in the Communist Tet offensive of January, 1968, as well as in routine hit-and-run raids across the border.

The Inauguration of President Nixon on 20 January 1969 opened a new chapter in the Cambodia story. Nixon had campaigned on a peace platform, with the goal of bringing an honorable end to American involvement in the war. As president he would be expected to carry out his promise. The plan he devised had two objectives. First, to sufficiently train and equip the South Vietnamese army so that they could sustain themselves after the Americans leave. The first objective was called "Vietnamization."² Second, to take steps to protect American lives during the crucial period of disengagement. This two-pronged plan was an important component of what was to become known as "The Nixon Doctrine."³ It is the second part of his withdrawal plan which concerns us here.

Communist sanctuaries straddling the border between Cambodia and South Vietnam were perceived as the greatest threat to the withdrawing American troops. General Creighton Abrams, commander of American forces in Vietnam since 1968, recommended B-52 ARC LIGHT strikes against the sanctuaries while the troops withdrew, a kind of aerial rear-guard action. The sanctuaries must have been viewed early on as critical to an allied victory in Vietnam, because this was a proposal which was twice offered to President Johnson, who rejected it each time. It was routine for the military to submit previously rejected proposals to a new president or secretary of defense.⁴ In 1969 the proposal was offered to the White House through Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. Nixon, who was planning a trip

to Europe, gave instructions to postpone "official" discussions on bombing until he returned, but while in Europe, he sent instructions through the top secret communication "back channel" to Laird and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to continue preliminary planning sessions.⁵

The bombing was related to the Vietnam theater of the war in three important ways. First, the target areas were indeed vital to the logistical support network for enemy operations in the south. Second, North Vietnam had refused to use restraint in shipping troops and supplies through Laos and into their bases inside Cambodia. The assumption was that when President Johnson curtailed American bombing activities, Hanoi would reciprocate. North Vietnam, however, did no such thing, and in fact they increased the flow of support into the south. Third, as mentioned before, the bombing was tied directly to Nixon's overall strategy of disengagement.⁶

Upon his return from Europe, the president held several meetings with the National Security Council and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The last meeting, held on 16 March 1969, involved the president, Laird, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State William P. Rogers, and General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Intelligence reports indicated large concentrations of North Vietnamese/Viet Cong (NVA/VC) troops, according to Morton Halperin, a planning assistant on Kissinger's National Security staff.⁷ Military Intelligence had further concluded that the sanctuaries held the headquarters for the Central Office for South Vietnam, or COSVN, the communist "bamboo pentagon."⁸ Brigadier General Douglas Kinnard who worked on the planning of the land incursion into Cambodia a year later, remarked on the seeming overemphasis the administration placed on the COSVN headquarters when interviewed for a television documentary on Vietnam. He further stated that as far as he was

concerned the so-called "bamboo pentagon" was nothing more than "a foxhole and a couple of radios."⁹

As far as justifying the bombing, the meeting group discussed such things as the high rate of American casualties, particularly during the weeks immediately prior to this meeting. The figures for this period seemed to average around 420 per week.¹⁰ Also, the bombing operations from 1965 to 1968 (Operation "Rolling Thunder") seemed to have no appreciable effect on the steady flow of Communist troops and supplies into the South.¹¹ Systematic air strikes against the NVA/VC staging areas and headquarters in Cambodia offered a more effective approach. One consideration which caused much discussion, according to Halperin, was the political status of the still officially neutral Cambodia. Sihanouk's government had allowed the Communists to establish bases along the border early on. Although the Communists had begun to assert a degree of authority in the border territories they occupied and forced out most native Cambodians, the Nixon administration would still be in an awkward position if it approved the bombing of territory which was officially labeled as neutral. The Joint Chiefs argued that since the communists were using the border areas, these areas were in the military theater of operations and could justifiably be bombed.¹²

Secretaries Laird and Rogers opposed the plan. They feared that since the president had been elected on a peace platform, the press and the public would not accept the rationale for widening the war through more bombings.¹³ Nixon agreed with both the military solution and the political objections. He therefore proposed a third option; to bomb but keep it secret. Rogers and Laird agreed and the decision to bomb became unanimous. The president ordered the decision to be passed on to the Pentagon along with a

request for special security precautions. He wanted the bombing to begin the next day if the weather conditions were favorable.¹⁴

The secret bombings of Cambodia were not officially acknowledged until 16 July 1973, but unofficial press reports appeared early in the campaign. On 26 March 1969, just a week after the bombings began, the New York Times reported that certain high State Department officials were "strongly opposed to any military proposals for air or ground raids against [Communist] bases in Cambodia." The report also stated that General Abrams had requested permission to order B-52 strikes against sanctuaries just inside the Cambodian border.¹⁵

Much of what is known about the bombings is based on official Pentagon, State Department, and White House documents and public testimony of those involved. One individual who was close to the operation was Major Hal Knight, a sixteen-year veteran of the Air Force, who supervised the COMBAT SKYSPOT bomber control radar guidance station at Bien Hoa Airbase in South Vietnam.¹⁶ Major knight was among those persons summoned to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee in the summer of 1973. According to his testimony, the secret bombing missions over Cambodia began on the night of 17-18 March 1969, and all subsequent missions were also flown at night to avoid detection.¹⁷ The missions and their corresponding target areas were assigned code names. The target areas, six in all, were called "Breakfast," "Lunch," "Snack," "Dinner," "Supper," and "Dessert." The whole bombing campaign was referred to as the "Menu" operations.¹⁸ The first mission was against the target area "Breakfast," a logistical storage network, officially designated as target area 353, some seventy-five miles east of the Mekong River, and three miles inside the Cambodian border.¹⁹ The B-52 strike was designed to

neutralize the target area completely. The then seventeen-year-old planes had been outfitted to carry conventional 750 pound bombs since the American build-up began in 1965. Each plane could carry thirty tons of bombs and General Abrams could call upon sixty sorties each night to hit a designated target.²⁰

When the order to bomb came through the crews were briefed as always with one exception. Key airmen (pilots and navigators) were told to expect changes in their coordinates. The new directions would guide them into Cambodia.²¹ These men had instructions not to disclose their true destination to the rest of their crews. One cannot help but think, however, that after a few missions the crews would begin to recognize headings and coordinates, and come to know that they were indeed hitting Cambodia without actually being told. It seems that pretty soon the rumor mill would begin turning and the "secret" would no longer be a secret among air and ground crews. The bombers were guided to their target areas by bomber control radar sites called COMBAT SKYSPOT stations. The airborne radar crews received information on a menu target area and prepared charts, forms, and other data necessary to carry out the mission. The information was then fed into a computer which guided the bombers by radar to the pre designated target area and signal the aircraft's on board computer precisely when to release its load of 750-pound iron bombs. The target information passed on to the radar station was delivered secretly by a courier each afternoon before that night's raid. These instructions were fed into computers and transmitted to the bombers en route to their targets.²² The special security procedures needed to keep the missions secret involved an elaborate system of dual bookkeeping, which made it appear that the bombs were falling east of the Cambodian border instead of west. Colonel Ray

Sitton, formerly of the Strategic Air Command worked out the special security measures.²³ According to the plan General Abrams would request two strikes: one would be against a target in South Vietnam, the other against a corresponding target in Cambodia within a few miles of the Vietnam target location or along a similar heading. Since all of the targets in Cambodia were right along the border this would not be very difficult.

On 9 May 1969 the New York Times, citing Nixon Administration sources, said that American B-52 bombers had raided several enemy supply dumps and bases inside Cambodia "for the first time." The story went on to say that the raids had coincided with bombing missions on the Vietnamese side of the border. The source probably identified the "raids" on the Vietnam side with certain false mission reports filed to hide the Cambodian attacks.²⁴ When the New York Times story came out on 9 May, Nixon made the suggestion to Kissinger that the informant could have been someone on the National Security staff. Kissinger replied "I will destroy them!"²⁵ Nixon's reaction was less dramatic, yet nonetheless severe. On 10 May he ordered seventeen wiretaps on National Security Staff officials and members of the news media, which remained until 1971. In 1972 the Supreme Court ruled domestic spying to be illegal unless there was evidence of foreign intelligence activity.²⁶

Requests to bomb targets in Cambodia went from General Abrams in Saigon through the secret "back channel" of communication directly to the Pentagon. Once approved the briefings would be scheduled and soon the crews would take to the air. The missions were flown so that the aircraft would pass over or near the "dummy" target in South Vietnam and hit the real objective in Cambodia. When the crews returned to the base, routine (but false) reports were filed which told of a mission over South Vietnam

instead of Cambodia.²⁷ According to Hal Knight's testimony, the radar crews prepared false reports to be sent back to the Pentagon (It is important to note that General Earl Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated during his testimony that he did not think there was false reporting and that "... no one was ordered to make a false report.")²⁸ On the morning after each raid, Knight took the original secret bombing orders and the computer tape containing the secret data out to a garbage barrel and burned them. He did this in the morning to prevent losing one of the documents in the dark, fearing that it might be found by someone unauthorized to know its contents. After burning the orders, he then phoned a special secure number in Saigon and said "THE BALLGAME IS OVER." This coded phrase was an indication to personnel at the other end that the day's mission had been completed.²⁹

Major Knight was one of several civilian and military officials who were selected to conduct the special security procedures in connection with the bombing. The chain of command in the affair was so narrow that Dr. Robert C. Seamans, the Secretary of the Air Force, and General John Ryan, the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force were not informed about the secret mission.³⁰ Military personnel with a "need to know" were the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the bomber pilots and navigators, the radar crews, and those persons in Washington and Saigon directly connected with the operation.³¹ Several key stateside civilian individuals were informed as well. Among them were principal members of Congress including Senators Richard Russell of Georgia, Everett Dirksen of Illinois, John Stennis of Mississippi, and Barry Goldwater of Arizona. All of these men were members of the Senate Armed Services Committee except Dirksen, who sat on the powerful Senate Judiciary and Finance committees. On the House side, those informed

were Representatives L. Mendel Rivers and Leslie Arends of the House Armed Services Committee, and future president Gerald R. Ford, then House Minority Leader.³² Throughout the fourteen month bombing campaign the American public was regularly being reassured that the neutrality of Cambodia was being respected, and that the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong were the only violators of Cambodian neutrality.

The United States Senate became concerned about the bombings after Major Knight wrote to Senator William Proxmire in January 1973 for clarification of a policy on border operations. As a principal operative in the bombing campaign, The Major had problem. On the one hand he was obligated to obey orders from superiors, according to Article 92 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. In accordance with Article 107 of that same code, he was forbidden to falsify records. Obviously he had a dilemma, because to carry out his orders he was disobeying Article 107, and to refrain from falsifying records he would be in violation of Article 92. He wrote to Senator Proxmire for advice. The Senator referred the matter to the Senate Armed Services Committee. The Committee wanted to know more about the bombing operations and asked Major Knight to testify on what he knew.³³

The United States House of Representatives also became interested in the secret bombings. On 30 July 1974, after a lengthy investigation and debate, the House Judiciary Committee voted on the following article:

In his conduct of the office of President of the United States, Richard M. Nixon, in violation of his constitutional oath, authorized, ordered, and ratified the concealment from the Congress of the facts, and the submission to the Congress of false and misleading statements concerning the existence, scope, and nature of American bombing operations in Cambodia, in derogation of the power of the Congress to declare war; and

by such conduct warrants impeachment, and trial, and removal from office.³⁴

It is obvious that the concern of the Judiciary Committee was not the bombing raids on neutral Cambodia, but that Congress itself was not informed of the raids.

The significance of the article is paramount, as it was the first call for the impeachment of President Nixon by a congressional committee. The resolution passed the Judiciary Committee, but not unanimously. Illinois Representative Thomas F. Railsback, a member of the committee, voted against the article, and later suggested that the reason it failed in the full House was that Congress could not realistically prosecute the president for actions in that war which other presidents since Eisenhower had gotten away with.³⁵ A direct result of the Congressional hearings, however, was a repeal of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, removing all war-making powers from the president and placing them back into the hands of Congress. Several additional articles concerning alleged improprieties of the Nixon Administration were voted upon and reported to the full body of the House of Representatives. When the smoke cleared it became evident that Nixon's only option was to resign, lest he become the first president to suffer a successful impeachment.

As to the overall effectiveness of the bombing campaign, General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee by saying that "the enemy was forced to shift his forces and disperse his supplies over a greater area, imposing increased hardships on him. Extensive loss of personnel and material inflicted on the enemy saved American lives."³⁶ After the Senate hearings in 1973, the Nixon Administration produced figures showing a drop in

casualties among troops stationed along the border.³⁷ One might theorize, however, that the figures do not reflect the effect of the bombing entirely; that another factor may have been the withdrawal of troops from the border areas during the same period. On the other hand, Pentagon tallies showed that monthly casualties increased during the first six months of the bombing, perhaps being partly reflective of losses among the air crews themselves.

Statistics on tonnage are more conclusive than the casualty figures. In 3,695 sorties from 18 March 1969 to 1 May 1970, the Air Force dropped 108,837 tons of bombs on Cambodia. By 26 May 1970, the last day of MENU, 4,308 B-52 sorties had been flown dropping a grand total of 120,578 tons of bombs on Cambodia's border regions.³⁸ According to a former B-52 pilot, the tonnage figures are not excessive when one considers that the average payload of a B-52D, the model used in Vietnam from 1966 until 1972, was around 60,000 pounds. Each bomber could carry forty-two 750-pound bombs internally and an additional twenty-four on external wing racks.³⁹ Senator Harold Hughes of Iowa estimated the total cost of the Secret bombing campaign to be around 158 million dollars.⁴⁰

Mission costs and bomb tonnages are important, but even more significant is the central issue; the question of Cambodia's neutrality. It is known that there were Communist sanctuaries along the Cambodian border, in fact straddling the boundary between that country and South Vietnam. Sihanouk himself had allowed some border areas to be occupied by Vietnamese Communists.⁴¹ According to Henry A. Kissinger, in a television interview, the President did not have the right to attack a neutral country. But, Kissinger added, the primary question was whether or not the president had "...the right to react against concentrations of enemy troops that have

already occupied neutral territory for a number of years, having established themselves there, having expelled the local populations there, and were launching raids from that territory against American positions."⁴² This was the diplomatic dilemma facing the Administration.

Furthermore, there was the political position of Prince Sihanouk, who walked a fine line between entities much more powerful than himself. There seemed to be little Sihanouk could do about the sanctuaries, even if he wanted to. What he did was simply to make the best of a bad situation by allowing the Vietnamese to use Cambodian border areas, while secretly allowing the Americans to bomb them.

Still another factor was that the Cambodian border was not as well defined as one may think. Vietnam air power scholar Earl Tilford wrote that one could never be absolutely sure where the border was located, and as a result of the confusion, each country tended to claim territory a kilometer or two on either side of the line.⁴³ Prior to the commencement of the secret bombings, American tactical aircraft routinely pursued the enemy across the Cambodian "border" and delivered ordinance upon enemy positions. Whether or not our bombs were hitting Cambodia or Vietnam may have been merely an academic question in most cases. The B-52 ARC LIGHT strikes in 1969-1970, on the other hand, were conceived as clandestine operations from the beginning, and the Air Force "made a definite effort to conceal the true nature of the missions" from the Congress and other government officials who perhaps should have been informed.⁴⁴ The practice of pursuing an enemy across international borders, just as the United States Army had done a century earlier in its campaigns against Comanche and Apache Indians, has often been viewed as a necessary evil. One can only sympathize with those who bear the heavy responsibility and

frustration involved in conducting military operations in close proximity to international boundaries, and hope that the principles of the United States Constitution are observed whenever such military action is deemed vitally necessary to maintaining our national security.

NOTES

¹Steven Cohen, ed. Vietnam: Anthology and Guide to "A Television History." (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 264.

²Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, (New York: Viking Press, 1983), p. 593.

³*Ibid.*, p. 594.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 591; CBS News, "American Dream, American Nightmare," 1979, Harry Reasoner; Morton Halperin, Top Secret: National Security and the Right to Know, (Washington: New Republic Press, 1977), p. 15; U. S. Congress, Senate, Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate. The Bombing of Cambodia, S. A. S. C., 93rd Congress, 1st Session, July 16, 23, 25, 26, 30; August 7, 8, 9, 1973, pp. 140-141.

⁵Richard Nixon, RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), p. 380.

⁶Earl Tilford, Setup: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why, (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University Press, 1991) p. 195.

⁷Halperin, Top Secret, p. 15; William Shawcross, Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 26.

⁸*Ibid.*, Halperin; CBS News, "American Dream, American Nightmare."

⁹PBS, "Vietnam: A Television History," 1983.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, Nixon, RN, p. 381. The figure 420 is an average of 336, 453, and 351, American casualty totals for the three previous weeks, respectively.

¹¹Earl Tilford gives an excellent critical assessment of "Rolling Thunder" in Setup, pp. 89-163.

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- 12Ibid., Halperin, Top Secret, p. 15.
- 13Ibid., Nixon, RN, p. 380.
- 14Ibid.
- 15New York Times, 26 March 1969, p. 5.
- 16US Congress, Senate Hearings, p. 2.
- 17Ibid., p.482; "Bombing Cover-up," TIME, 30 July 1973, p. 22.
- 18Ibid., U. S. Congress, Senate Hearings p. 482-487.
- 19Ibid., Tilford, Setup, p. 195-196.
- 20Ibid., Shawcross, Sideshow, p. 23; U. S. Congress, Senate Hearings, p. 139.
- 21Ibid., U. S. Congress, Senate Hearings, pp. 137, 483.
- 22Ibid., p. 485.
- 23Ibid., Tilford, Setup, p. 196.
- 24Ibid., New York Times, 9 May 1969, p. 1.
- 25Ibid., CBS News, "American Dream, American Nightmare."
- 26Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Imperial Presidency, (Boston, Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1973) p. 257.
- 27Ibid., U. S. Congress, Senate Hearings, pp. 132, 483-485.
- 28Ibid., p. 139.
- 29Ibid., pp. 8-9.
- 30Ibid., pp. 90, 99.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

32 "Whose Right to Know? Secret Bombing," New Republic, 1 September 1973, p. 11; U. S. Congress, Senate Hearings p. 143; Official Congressional Directory, 91st Congress, 1st session, (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1969), pp. 253, 266, and 377.

33 U. S. Congress, Senate Hearings, pp. 2-7.

34 *Ibid.*, C. B. S. News, "American Dream, American Nightmare."

35 Personal interview with Representative Thomas Railsback (R-III), (Member of the House Judiciary Committee in 1974), 9 December 1983.

36 U. S. Congress, Senate Hearings, pp. 133, 137.

37 "President Nixon Explains his Decision on Indochina," US News & World Report, 10 September 1973, p. 342.

38 U. S. Congress, Senate, "Bombing Operations in Cambodia," Brief to the House Judiciary Committee on the Secret War in Cambodia as Constituting an Impeachable Offense, (Washington: 1974), p. 2.

39 Personal interview with Paul Martin, Curator at the Fort Bliss Museum, and former B-52 combat pilot; William G. Holder, Boeing B52 Stratofortress, (Fallbrook, Calif.: Aero Publishers, 1975), p. 86.

40 U. S. Congress, Brief to the House, p. A.

41 Karnow, Vietnam: A History, pp. 589-590.

42 *Ibid.*, PBS, "Vietnam: A Television History."

43 *Ibid.*, Tilford, Setup, p. 194.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 195