

# Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia: Managing his Public Image

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**Abstract**

The Vietnam War was one of the most controversial events of the twentieth century. American involvement in Vietnam began as advisory support for the French, who were trying in vain to reassert colonial control over Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos after the conclusion of World War II. This support gradually but steadily increased, ultimately amounting to the presence of more than 500,000 U.S. combat troops at the height of the war. In March of 1970, longtime Cambodian head of state and self-proclaimed neutralist, Norodom Sihanouk, was removed in a coup by two men friendly to American interests. Shortly after his removal, American and South Vietnamese troops crossed into Cambodia, and began what would become known as the Cambodian incursion. At the intersection of Cambodia, the Vietnam War, and Norodom Sihanouk, there are two prominent American journalists who covered the events in Southeast Asia, Sam Jaffe and William Attwood. Jaffe was the first American journalist to interview Sihanouk, and he and Attwood interviewed Sihanouk in 1968 and maintained an ongoing professional correspondence with him. This paper examines, within the context of the Vietnam War, the relationship that existed between Sihanouk and the two American journalists, both during his time as Cambodian head of state and afterwards.

**Caveat**

The primary sources cited in this paper represent a small segment of the overall literature concerning Sihanouk. A prolific writer and a prominent political figure, Sihanouk had been a force in Cambodian politics for well over fifty years. Thus, the breadth of the literature associated with Norodom Sihanouk, including both what he had written and what has been written about him, cannot adequately be covered in this one essay. Additionally, as Cambodia is a former French colony, some of the correspondence between William Attwood, Sam Jaffe, and Prince Sihanouk was written in French. With a few exceptions, these sources were omitted from this paper. However, where there are citations to correspondence written in French between Sihanouk and the two journalists, they are this author's own translations. Despite these limitations, much of Sihanouk's own writings have been translated into English and are readily accessible.

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# Timeline

1922 – October 31<sup>st</sup> – Norodom Sihanouk born in Phnom Penh

1941 – April 23<sup>rd</sup> - Norodom Sihanouk becomes King of Cambodia

1945 – August – Japanese surrender, World War II ends in Asia

1954 – Spring – Battle of Dien Bien Phu, decisive victory for Viet Minh over French

Colonial forces

1954 – Summer – Geneva Conference, which establishes North and South Vietnam, and neutrality of Cambodia and Laos

1963 – November 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> – Military coup in South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem overthrown and executed

1963 – November 22<sup>nd</sup> – John F. Kennedy assassinated

1964 – August 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> – Gulf of Tonkin Incident, leads to Gulf of Tonkin resolution and American Combat forces in South Vietnam

1968 – January-September – Tet Offensive, massive Viet Cong offensive in South Vietnam

1968 – January-April – Battle of Khe Sanh

1969 – January 20<sup>th</sup> – Richard Nixon becomes President

1969 – March – United States begins bombing Cambodia (codename *Operation Menu*)

1970 – March 18<sup>th</sup> – While in Moscow, Norodom Sihanouk overthrown by General Lon Nol and Prince Sirik Matak

1970 – April 29<sup>th</sup> through July 22<sup>nd</sup> – Cambodia invaded by United States and South Vietnamese forces

1970 – May 4<sup>th</sup> – Kent State shootings, four students killed at anti-war protest

1973 – January – Paris Peace Accords, ends direct American military involvement in Vietnam

1975 – April – Fall of Saigon, end of the Vietnam War

1975 – April – Khmer Rouge forces seize Phnom Penh

1979 – January – Vietnamese Army takes Phnom Penh, Khmer Rouge defeated

## **Introduction**

### ***A brief History of Cambodia and Norodom Sihanouk***

Cambodia is located in Southeast Asia, with Thailand to its west, Vietnam to its east, Laos to the north, and the gulf of Thailand to its south.<sup>1</sup> During the ninth through fourteenth centuries it was home to the powerful kingdom of Angkor, whose people ruled over the vast majority of Southeast Asia from its capitol at Angkor Wat. Despite the proximity of the Thai and Vietnamese people, the primary influence on Cambodian culture came from India, and the Angkor kingdom adopted the Hindu religion since it was visited by Hindu priests and missionaries. This lasted for several centuries until yet another wave of priests came from India - Buddhists. The King of Angkor then converted his whole kingdom to Buddhism, which currently remains the predominant religion in Cambodia.

After the fall of the Angkor kingdom in the fourteenth Century, however, the Cambodian people never reasserted their former power or glory.<sup>2</sup> In what would become a recurring trend, Cambodians felt that they were between a “rock and a hard place” as their neighbors in Thailand and Vietnam began to increase in power and influence and

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<sup>1</sup> Spencer Tucker, ed., Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War : A Political, Social and Military History (Santa Barbra: ABC-CLIO, 1998) 90.

<sup>2</sup> Spencer Tucker 90.

their presence became increasingly unbearable.<sup>3</sup> Cambodia had become a virtual Thai colony, with the Thai king selecting the ruler of Cambodia. Pressures, tension, and animosity continued to build, leading King Norodom of Cambodia to sign a treaty with France in 1863, thereby making Cambodia a French protectorate.<sup>4</sup> France later collectively governed over all of these lands, as well as Vietnam, forming the colony of French Indochina.

French rule in Cambodia lasted for nearly 80 years, until Japanese forces took over French Indochina in 1940. Following the defeat of the Japanese in World War II, the French reasserted control over their Southeast Asian colonies. At that time, the French also introduced a new Cambodian ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the grandson of King Norodom who had signed the original treaty with France in 1863.<sup>5</sup> The French regarded eighteen year old Prince Norodom Sihanouk as a suitable ally and counted on him to be a malleable “puppet ruler” who would promote French interests.<sup>6</sup> Despite France’s political efforts, trouble was beginning to brew in Southeast Asia which would later boil over into two separate wars. After the conclusion of World War II, Ho Chi Minh found the social and political situation in Vietnam favorable for independence and began his war against the French. This inspired the neighboring Cambodians to believe that it was time for their independence as well. In 1952, Prince Sihanouk began an

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<sup>3</sup> Milton Osborne, Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994) 13.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Kutler, ed., Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 95.

<sup>5</sup> Marie Martin, Cambodia: A Shattered Society, trans. Mark McLeod (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 29.

<sup>6</sup> Milton Osborne, 25.

international campaign for Cambodian independence, and he later went into self-imposed exile in June of 1953, after travelling abroad to promote his cause.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the political pressures in Vietnam and Cambodia, the French Army was fighting a losing battle militarily, and after their cataclysmic defeat at Dien Bien Phu, France relinquished control over all of French Indochina. Although democratic elections were scheduled for Cambodia, Sihanouk would not be allowed to participate because of his status as king. This prompted him to abdicate the throne in an attempt to retain his political power. As the man who secured Cambodian independence, Norodom Sihanouk was elected president in a landslide victory, winning more than 99 percent of the popular vote.<sup>8</sup>

However, things would not always prove to be so favorable for Sihanouk. Throughout the 1960s, politics in Southeast Asia became increasingly complicated and violent. What was at first a low-level insurgency in South Vietnam erupted into the Vietnam War, heightening tensions and bringing one of the world's most powerful armies to the region. Indeed, Viet Cong use of the eastern border regions of Cambodia and Vietnam would prove to be disastrous, as this expanded the war into Cambodia.<sup>9</sup> Between growing domestic pressures and the international pressures of the Vietnam War, Norodom Sihanouk found himself in an increasingly difficult position. In March, 1970, these pressures came to a head. As Sihanouk visited Moscow while returning to Cambodia from his yearly trip to the French Riviera, Lon Nol, Sihanouk's Prime Minister,

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<sup>7</sup> Hal Kosut, ed., Cambodia & the Vietnam War (New York: Facts on File, 1971) 7.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Kamm, preface, Cambodia: Report From A Stricken Land (New York: Arcade, 1998) xv.

<sup>9</sup> J. D. Coleman, Incursion (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) 2.

and Sirik Matak, a member of the Cambodian royal family, overthrew Sihanouk.<sup>10</sup>

Despite his removal from office, the 1970s saw Sihanouk remain a prominent figure in Southeast Asian politics as a high-profile political refugee in both Pyongyang and Beijing.<sup>11</sup>

Sihanouk was an extremely dynamic person, and was portrayed in the global media as seemingly half Cambodian “renaissance man” and half George Washington. Thus, he worked to create the image of him that was portrayed by the world press. Beyond his active involvement in politics and foreign relations, Sihanouk was described as a distinguished film director, scholar, and athlete. Sihanouk appeared to dabble successfully in widely diverse academic, athletic and artistic areas, and had many admirers both within Cambodia and abroad. One such admirer was the scholar Roger M. Smith, who in 1966 wrote: “Prince Sihanouk is not only chief of state, but in a very real sense he is the essential strength, the apex of the popular pyramid in Cambodia.”<sup>12</sup> This sentence sets the overall tone for his paper, *Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia*, which was prepared for the 18<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies and was included in *Asian Survey’s* issue concerning charismatic leadership. Throughout his essay, Smith lavished heavy praise upon “the person” that is Sihanouk, expressly noting his “. . . inexhaustible vitality,” his athletic achievements as “. . . the captain of championship volleyball and

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<sup>10</sup> Edgar O’Balance., The Wars in Vietnam; 1954-1980, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1981) 154.

<sup>11</sup> Osborne, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Smith, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 7, No 6. (Jun., 1967) University of California Press, 353.

basketball teams, and enthusiastic sailor and water skier.”<sup>13</sup> Smith also highlighted some of the Prince’s more academic pursuits, noting his affinity for acting and directing, his study of Cambodian history, and his talents as a jazz musician. However, his praise was not limited to the personal life of Sihanouk, as Smith commended the Prince’s political achievements as well, calling Sihanouk the “Father of [Cambodian] Independence” and touting his formation of the *Sangkum*, a political body that supported Sihanouk’s reforms.

Dick Wilson likewise took a favorable stance on Sihanouk in his 1975 book, *The Neutralization of Southeast Asia*. In his introduction, he championed both Sihanouk’s Cambodia and U Nu’s Burma as “. . . two of the most convincing and authentic examples of neutralism or neutrality in an Asian Context.”<sup>14</sup> While his book’s primary focus was on a plan to designate all of Southeast Asia as neutral - much in the same way that Switzerland is neutral - Wilson nonetheless discussed the specific nations that compose Southeast Asia and many of their characteristics. In discussing Cambodia and Sihanouk, Wilson said: “. . . Cambodia might well have disappeared from the list of twentieth century nation-states . . .yet it has survived . . .due to Chinese support—which in turn was possible . . .by [Sihanouk’s] particularly scrupulous and imaginative policy of neutrality in foreign relations.” Wilson then went on to characterize Sihanouk as: “. . . firmly non-communist” and said that Sihanouk “. . . during his brilliant career managed to irritate almost

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pgs 353-354.

<sup>14</sup> Dick Wilson, *The Neutralization of Southeast Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1975) xiv.

everyone and yet . . . [retained] the ultimate respect and recognition of the major powers—the United States, the USSR and China—as well as Thailand and Vietnam.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Wilson regarded Sihanouk very highly both politically and personally, and held up Sihanouk as one of the great “neutralists” whenever appropriate or applicable.

Malcolm Caldwell, a British scholar and writer was another staunch supporter of Norodom Sihanouk. For instance, he and Lek Tan published *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War* in 1973, a book that was very favorable toward Sihanouk. Throughout their book, Caldwell and Tan derided President Nixon and the United States for its incursion into Cambodia and its associated bombing, including statements such as: “The misery and destruction [of Cambodia] for which Nixon and Kissinger bear direct responsibility are crimes that can never be forgotten.”<sup>16</sup> They claimed that there was no proof that the Viet Cong were receiving weapons or other material through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville, and denied the existence of staging camps close to Cambodia’s border with Vietnam.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to his criticisms of the US incursion, Caldwell was also very supportive of the “person” of Norodom Sihanouk. In a different essay, he simultaneously supported Sihanouk and criticized the US and one of the men who ousted Sihanouk, Lon

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<sup>15</sup> Dick Wilson, 91-92.

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Caldwell and Lek Tan, *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973) xi.

<sup>17</sup> According to Caldwell, Sihanouk invited the International Control Commission to supervise the port of Sihanoukville after American allegations that the port was being used to supply Vietnamese Communists surfaced. Caldwell, 148.

Nol, saying: “. . . there was US ‘aid’ – ‘aid’ which created a whole class of ‘dollar addicts,’ whose painful withdrawal symptoms when Sihanouk rejected it in 1963 could only be assuaged by calling back the Americans, overthrowing the legitimate government, and unleashing all hell upon the rural people.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, many prominent writers reached a global audience with their admiration for both the personal and leadership characteristics of Norodom Sihanouk. While Smith’s article lacks a critical analysis of Sihanouk and his rule, it does provide for an additional dimension into the Prince’s personal life. Instead of focusing on “Sihanouk, head of state,” it focuses on “Sihanouk, the person.” Although this inevitably involves some of the Prince’s political policies, it is largely a public relations “puff piece” which does little other than inflate the image of Norodom Sihanouk.

Similarly, Dick Wilson and Malcolm Caldwell wrote about Sihanouk roughly a decade after Smith’s article was published, and after much had changed in Southeast Asia. Whereas Smith was writing about a jet-setting Prince who enjoyed directing movies and sailing while concurrently dealing with some “unpleasantness” in neighboring South Vietnam, ten years later Wilson and Caldwell wrote about Sihanouk as a recently deposed head of state from a country teetering on the brink of the abyss. Although both Wilson and Caldwell were cognizant of the same Sihanouk who enjoyed the French Riviera, they nevertheless also saw him as a very dynamic and important political figure. While Wilson would argue less passionately than Caldwell, both men would lay much of the blame for Sihanouk’s removal from office on the United States and the Vietnam War rather than on Sihanouk’s own conduct.

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<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Caldwell, Malcolm Caldwell’s Southeast Asia (Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1979) 31.

Some of his praise was no doubt due to his actual personal qualities and his political prowess; nevertheless, Sihanouk, like any other public figure, was supremely conscious of the way in which he was presented. Thus, even his supposedly private actions appeared to support his neutrality and “peacemaker” persona. As early as 1963, it was evident that Sihanouk was against the American presence in Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> However, when a young American, “Rocky” Versace went missing in South Vietnam, his mother, Tere Rios Versace, appealed directly to Sihanouk for his intercession – and Sihanouk took the opportunity to burnish his image.

Versace wrote to Sihanouk on two separate occasions—September 3 and October 17, 1965. In both of her letters, Versace provided some information on her son “. . . Roque had been in Vietnam for almost two years, and had come to love the people very much. He had decided that he could serve them better as a priest than as a soldier. He was coming home to resign from the army and begin his studies for the priesthood.”<sup>20</sup> While trying to paint her son’s military service in a positive way and garner support for his return, Versace also played up Sihanouk’s benevolence, saying things like: “I have heard so often of you as a ruler with wisdom and

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<sup>19</sup> In November and December, 1963, both Cambodia and the United States recalled their respective ambassadors. Cambodia also closed its embassy in the United States. Kosut, 17-18.

<sup>20</sup> Tere Versace to Norodom Sihanouk, 3 September 1965. Box 2, Folder 2. Tere Rios Versace Collection. MSS268. Library & Archives. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

imagination. . .” and “When Doctor Bernard Fall told me that it would be permissible to write you, Sir, it was the first light of hope in a sorrowing two years.”<sup>21</sup>

Sihanouk appeared very sympathetic to Mrs. Versace: “It was with profound sadness that, on my return from abroad, I learnt about your letter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1965, [requesting that I should approach the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front in favour of your son who had been captured] the news of whose tragic fate has reached me in the meantime, and has pained me deeply.”<sup>22</sup> However, he was also very critical of American actions in the region: “I doubt whether my appeal, would have been successful for, as you can well imagine, one can hardly expect to find clemency at the NLF’s door after all that has been done by the US government to impose such a merciless war on the Vietnamese resistance.”<sup>23</sup> While their correspondence was brief— two letters from Mrs. Versace and a response from Sihanouk, it presents an interesting light on the situation. In an October 6, 1964 letter, Robert E. Lee, Acting Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations wrote to Senator Leverett Saltonstall that in a press release, “. . . the Chief of State of Cambodia has offered the services of the Cambodian Red Cross for the purpose of putting American prisoners of the Viet Cong in touch with their families.”<sup>24</sup> Lee went on to report that there had been no confirmation that Sihanouk made such an offer (in May of 1964), yet it nonetheless represents an important theme about Sihanouk and his

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Norodom Sihanouk to Tere Versace, 3 November 1965. Box 2, Folder 2. Tere Rios Versace Collection.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Lee to Leverett Saltonstall, 6 October 1964. Box 1, Folder 10. Tere Rios Versace Collection.

actions that affected his public perception. A later letter notes that “. . . there has been no confirmation that Prince Sihanouk did, in fact, make such an offer. We have made several approaches to the Cambodian Red Cross, both through Geneva and directly in Phnom Penh, but there has been unfortunately no result to date.”<sup>25</sup> By suggesting that the Cambodian branch of the Red Cross act as an intermediary in allowing families to contact their POW relatives (sons, husbands, brothers, fathers), Sihanouk not only obtained favorable publicity in the U.S. but maintained his appearance of neutrality. In presenting himself as a great neutralist, Sihanouk would benefit in many different respects. For instance, this not only provided him with the “moral high-ground” on the Vietnam War, but also allowed him to be very critical of the conflict. Additionally, presenting himself and Cambodia as non-aligned served to garner much sympathy for Sihanouk and Cambodia. Certainly, these acts also allowed Sihanouk to construct a favorable image for himself both nationally and internationally.

Thus, many scholars accepted Sihanouk’s claim that he and Cambodia pursued “neutral policies” in relation to the events surrounding them. In a 1979 interview with German scholars, Sihanouk states “[I] did not serve Sihanouk but served Cambodia. Lon Nol betrayed Cambodia. My Cambodia was independent and neutral, but Lon Nol changed it into a dependent and non-neutral Cambodia, a pro-American and even a satellite, a neo-colony of the USA.”<sup>26</sup> While one’s view on their

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Lee to William Proxmire, 20 October 1964. Box 1, Folder 10. Tere Rios Versace Collection.

<sup>26</sup> Schier, Peter and Schier-Oum, Manola., Prince Sihanouk on Cambodia: Interviews and Talks with Prince Norodom Sihanouk (Hamburg: Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde Hamburg, 1980.) 13.

actual neutrality largely depends on the expert and side one listens to, Caldwell, Wilson and other observers accepted Sihanouk's claims and maintain that Cambodia and Sihanouk were neutral. Others, such as Herring, however, imply that this was not the case. Any general survey of the Vietnam War mentions the Ho Chi Minh trail, which was an overland route by which the Viet Cong supplied their attacks on South Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, however, it has been suggested that there was a so-called "Sihanouk Trail" that was also used to support the Vietcong war effort against the Americans.<sup>28</sup> Probably the most damning evidence refuting Sihanouk's and Cambodian neutrality was the fact that the Viet Cong used the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville as a means to accept shipments of weaponry.<sup>29</sup> Whether or not Sihanouk or Cambodia could have prevented (or even tacitly or overtly permitted these actions), the fact remains that a large segment of America was vehemently opposed to the U.S. incursion into Cambodia. While some of this likely originates from the preexisting anti-war movement, it was undoubtedly also influenced by the notion of Cambodian neutrality. Norodom Sihanouk, through his own writings, scholars of similar persuasions, and members of the press carefully cultivated an image of neutrality.

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<sup>27</sup> Herring, Inside of back cover.

<sup>28</sup> O'Balance, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Coleman, 85.

## **Context: The Vietnam War**

While the United States had been involved in Vietnam in one way or another since the early 1950s, American involvement took a completely different form after the Gulf of Tonkin incidents of August 2 and 4, 1964. On the second of these fateful nights, two United States Navy destroyers, the *USS Maddox* and *USS Turner Joy*, were allegedly attacked in international waters by North Vietnamese torpedo boats.<sup>30</sup> Despite sketchy details surrounding these events, this attack led to the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on August 7, 1964, which allowed President Johnson to use “all necessary measures” to resist aggression in Vietnam.<sup>31</sup> The vague wording of the resolution had two important effects: it allowed the President to manage events in Vietnam as he saw fit, and it also opened the door for US forces to engage communist forces and North Vietnam. Indeed, because of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, American forces that had been limited to a few thousand advisors in the early 1960s swelled to 565,000 combat troops by 1968.<sup>32</sup>

By the time Richard Nixon was elected president in November 1968, the United States had been fighting in Vietnam for nearly four years, with no end in sight. Along with other domestic issues like the civil rights movement, by 1969 a

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<sup>30</sup> Herring, 142.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Lawrence, The Vietnam War: A Concise International History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 86.

<sup>32</sup> James M. Morris, America’s Armed Forces: A History, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1996) 340.

powerful, united anti-war movement had formed. Nixon realized that the war was unpopular, and actively tried to find ways to bring the war to an end. However, he also knew that an immediate withdrawal would not be acceptable either, as it would tarnish American prestige abroad and a negotiated peace would weaken American stature. These factors led President Nixon to come up with the policy of “Vietnamization,” which was the gradual replacement of American troops with Vietnamese forces.<sup>33</sup> After considering all of these factors, the United States expanded the war into Cambodia in the expectation that quick success there would create an environment where Vietnamization could succeed.

In 1969, President Nixon authorized “Operation Menu,” a secret and illegal bombing campaign targeting the Viet Cong that were in Cambodian territory. Operation Menu was a massive undertaking, involving thousands of sorties and the dropping of millions of pounds of bombs. While there were some positive military results regarding the North Vietnamese, Operation Menu also had consequences for and brought about changes in Cambodia. On March 18, 1970, Prince Sihanouk was removed from power by his Prime Minister, Lon Nol.<sup>34</sup> Although events surrounding the coup are hazy at best, what is known is that shortly after Sihanouk’s ouster, South Vietnam conducted - with the authorization of the United States - cross border raids against communists in Cambodia, and the United States was quick to

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<sup>33</sup> Herring, 282.

<sup>34</sup> Kosut, 9.

recognize Nol's new government.<sup>35</sup> However, all of this was a prelude to the most dramatic action yet: the invasion of Cambodia by the armies of South Vietnam and the United States on April 29, 1970.<sup>36</sup>

The invasion of Cambodia was relatively short, lasting roughly three months, yet it had very mixed results. In the short-term, it created some setbacks for the Vietcong, disrupting their supply lines and driving them from their border sanctuaries. Estimates released by the United States and South Vietnam claimed the confiscation of 10,898 AK-47s and sub-machine guns, 1,269 mortars, 184 vehicles, 1,505 tons of ammunition, and nearly 3,000 tons of rice, with the loss of 140 Americans and 472 Vietnamese.<sup>37</sup> Other estimates claim that 338 Americans and 866 South Vietnamese were killed, 1,529 Americans and 3,724 South Vietnamese were wounded, with the Communist losses numbering 14,488 killed and 1,427 captured.<sup>38</sup> Despite these seemingly overwhelming successes, the Cambodian incursion would prove to be very costly to the U.S. in the long run.

The incursion expanded the anti-war movement and was the impetus for widespread protests across the United States. Indeed, after the Cambodian incursion there was widespread disruption on numerous college campuses, including (but not limited to) Princeton University, Pennsylvania State University,

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<sup>35</sup> Herring, 290.

<sup>36</sup> Kosut, 71.

<sup>37</sup> O'Balance, 157.

<sup>38</sup> Kosut, 120.

the University of Wisconsin in Madison and the University of Georgia.<sup>39</sup> Tragically, four student protesters were killed by National Guard troops at Kent State University in Ohio<sup>40</sup> and two more at students were killed at Jackson State College in Mississippi.<sup>41</sup>

However, the repercussions for Cambodia were tragic as well. Most prominently, the bombing and military incursion into Cambodia resulted in injury and death for many Cambodians. Also, Vietcong backed communist rebels (the Khmer Rouge) were forced from the eastern fringe of Cambodia towards Phnom Penh, establishing new sanctuaries that would not be eliminated by the United States and could not be removed by Lon Nol's army.<sup>42</sup> The invasion and bombing was also used by the Communists to spread anti-American propaganda and garner support for groups like the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge.

While his removal from office and the invasion of his country were dramatic personal setbacks, Sihanouk remained a force in Cambodian politics for years thereafter. Sihanouk was not only a high profile political refugee, but a force that had to be reckoned with for quite some time in Cambodian politics. This was in part due to the dubious circumstances surrounding his removal, the unpopularity of Lon

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<sup>39</sup> Kosut., 146.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>41</sup> Herring, 293.

<sup>42</sup> O'Balance, 158.

Nol, the United States, and the Vietnam War, and also the popular, neutral image he had created for himself.

### **Cultivation of Image with Jaffe and Attwood**

Sam Jaffe was a prominent news broadcaster and journalist for ABC and CBS, specializing in coverage of Russia and the Far East; his reports were widely disseminated throughout the United States during an era with only three major national television networks.<sup>43</sup> From 1965 through 1968, Jaffe was stationed in Hong Kong, and he frequently toured Southeast Asia and reported on the Vietnam War.<sup>44</sup> While covering the Vietnam War, Jaffe assessed the war in many different ways, both firsthand and through correspondence with people involved with the war like the Chief of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam.<sup>45</sup> However, one of the highlights of his coverage of the War was his July 6, 1966 interview with Norodom Sihanouk. American involvement in Vietnam was rapidly increasing at the

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<sup>43</sup> ABC News Year End Tour 1966 pamphlet (presented 19 December 66 at Fairmont Hotel) Box 1, Folder 1. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972. MSS 178AF. Library & Archives. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>44</sup> Around the World Program (Dallas Council on World Affairs/Around the World Dinner with ABC News T.V. and Radio Correspondents, Tuesday 11 January 1966) Box 1, Folder 1. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972.

<sup>45</sup> Sam Jaffe to Dang Quang Minh, 26 July 1965. Box 1, Folder 3. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972.

Dang Quang Minh to Sam Jaffe, 29 November 1965. Box 1, Folder 3. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972.

time, and an interview with someone like Sihanouk was a great boost for a journalist.

With the interview as a foundation, Jaffe would build a relationship and correspondence with Prince Sihanouk. Shortly after his July 1966 interview, Jaffe received a letter (in French, my translation) from Sihanouk, praising Jaffe's film as "... interesting and objective..." as well as an acknowledgement that Sihanouk "Knows perfectly that Jaffe was not responsible for the accompanying commentary."<sup>46</sup>

Much like Jaffe, William Attwood, editor for LOOK Magazine, was a very accomplished journalist with extensive experience with foreign affairs—he was the ambassador to Guinea and later Kenya in the early 1960s. While serving as editor of LOOK Magazine, Attwood began a correspondence and relationship with Norodom Sihanouk. In fact, they became cordial enough that Sihanouk sent notes for a book he was considering writing to Attwood to seek his impressions.<sup>47</sup>

## **Significance**

Because of his relationship with the press, Sihanouk was able to construct a positive, neutralist image for himself. For instance, Sam Jaffe's 1966 interview with

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<sup>46</sup> Norodom Sihanouk to Sam Jaffe, 15 September 1966. Box 1, Folder 3. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972.

<sup>47</sup> William Attwood to Donald McHenry, 26 January 1979. Box 13, Folder 5. William Attwood Papers, 1940-1984. Library & Archives. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

Sihanouk proved beneficial for both men—Jaffe had the tremendous honor of being the first western journalist to interview Prince Sihanouk,<sup>48</sup> while Sihanouk was able to access a wider audience through ABC reporter Sam Jaffe. While a journalist interviewing a head of state is not unprecedented, within the context of the Vietnam War this was a very significant event. It was the first western interview of Sihanouk, the man who was tirelessly attempting to keep his nation out of the growing conflict of the Vietnam War. Stated another way, Jaffe was allowed unprecedented access to a foreign head of state who was intimately involved with one of the major news stories at the time.

Both Sihanouk and Jaffe were able to help each other and help themselves at the same time. Because Jaffe was able to meet in person with Sihanouk, he had intimate contact with a very influential and important individual in the context of his coverage of the Vietnam War. By allowing this contact, Sihanouk was able to “package” and present his views and opinions to the American public through Jaffe. For instance, in his interview of Sihanouk, Jaffe asked Sihanouk, point blank, if “. . . it is possible that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese are infiltrating into Cambodia without your knowledge?”<sup>49</sup> A question like this allowed Sihanouk to state his position, as well as defend his actions. Throughout the interview, Sihanouk outlined his position as best he could: Cambodia was a Neutral state, but the Cambodian

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<sup>48</sup> ABC News Year End Tour 1966 pamphlet (presented 19 December 66 at Fairmont Hotel) Box 1, Folder 1. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972.

<sup>49</sup> Sam Jaffe interview with Norodom Sihanouk, “ABC Scope” August 11 August 1966. Box 1, Folder 9. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972.

border with Vietnam was inherently porous and Cambodia was a small nation susceptible to foreign influences. In his ABC scope piece, "The Vietnam War," Jaffe painted a very sympathetic and positive view of Sihanouk, highlighted with statements such as "Those who know Sihanouk are amazed not only by his political skill but by his immense popularity with his people."<sup>50</sup>

In comparison, Attwood had a far more substantial and long lasting relationship with Sihanouk. Sam Jaffe was the first foreign reporter to interview the Prince, but Attwood made arrangements to interview the Prince shortly thereafter, in 1967. However, after suffering a heart attack, Attwood needed to postpone his interview until early 1968.<sup>51</sup> Once the men had met face-to-face, they kept in regular contact. Due to his position in *LOOK Magazine*, and later, *Newsday*, Attwood had an established readership that could be used to attract sympathy for Sihanouk. In a September 9, 1970 telegraph, Attwood writes to Sihanouk saying that he is leaving *LOOK* to become president of *Newsday*, "... which is one of the five largest evening newspapers in America."<sup>52</sup> By touting the reach of his publications, Attwood demonstrated that he would be able to provide a massive audience for Sihanouk and his views: "[A]s you know, major articles appearing in *Newsday* – such as my interview with you in Peking – are distributed through the *Los Angeles Times*–

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<sup>50</sup> Sam Jaffe, July 1966. "ABC Scope: The Vietnam War." Box 1, Folder 9. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972.

<sup>51</sup> Patricia Broun to Or Kosalak, 29 September 1967. Box 13, Folder 3. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

<sup>52</sup> William Attwood to Norodom Sihanouk, 9 September 1970. Box 13, Folder 1. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

*Washington Post* news service to more than 350 subscribing newspapers in the U.S., Canada and Europe. Therefore, your views would receive wide circulation.”<sup>53</sup>

To use a modern term, these men were “networking,” or forming relationships that would be helpful in the future. This is not to say that they were engaging in a *quid pro quo* arrangement, but rather that they would be able to help each other out in the course of their careers. Sihanouk, within the context of the Vietnam War, was a very prominent and influential figure. He felt marginalized, and there were few better ways to publicize his story than by offering to give interviews with prominent journalists whose reports would be widely disseminated before an American and even world audience. This way, he was able to get his story before the people who could help him. Conversely, the journalists were all too happy to advance their careers by getting an exclusive interview –rather than merely participating in a larger press conference open to multiple journalists and news outlets- with such an important figure as Norodom Sihanouk. Thus, the relationship between these two broadcasters and Sihanouk was mutually beneficial: Sihanouk was able to build support for himself and his cause, and the two reporters gained in professional stature by reporting on their intimate and exclusive contact with a prominent foreign head of state.

In addition to any rise in Sihanouk’s stature as a leader and Jaffe’s and Attwood’s reputations as journalists, however, these relationships offered

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<sup>53</sup> William Attwood to Norodom Sihanouk, 11 February 1975. Box 13, Folder 2. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

additional benefits to all three men. When several reporters were later taken prisoner by the Viet Cong, Attwood appealed to Sihanouk for his help in securing their release: “. . . I am addressing this message to you [Sihanouk] on their behalf in the hope that you can exert your influence to effect their release.”<sup>54</sup> Sihanouk replied “. . . I have done everything possible and will continue to do everything I can to have the missing reporters found and have them freed if found.”<sup>55</sup> While this was no doubt influenced by their amicable relationship, it is clear that there was a perception of Sihanouk as a benevolent, neutral, humanitarian. Indeed, Sihanouk’s response to Attwood was the basis for a news release with the title: “Sihanouk wants Newsmen Freed if found,” further demonstrating the benevolent nature of Prince Sihanouk.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Sihanouk again appeared as a neutral humanitarian intermediary and Attwood again demonstrated his relationship and influence over Sihanouk. Similarly, while their contact was sporadic, both Sihanouk and Jaffe maintained a positive, professional relationship that had further benefits for Jaffe.

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<sup>54</sup> William Attwood to Norodom Sihanouk, undated. Box 13, Folder 1. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

<sup>55</sup> Norodom Sihanouk to William Attwood, undated. Box 13, Folio 1. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

<sup>56</sup> Richard S. Collins, 15 June 1970. “Sihanouk Wants Newsmen Freed If Found” Cowles Communications, Inc. New York, NY. Box 13, Folio 1. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

For instance, when Jaffe wanted to go to North Vietnam, Sihanouk interceded and petitioned the government of North Vietnam to allow Jaffe's visit.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, the reciprocal benefits from these relationships extended even further to the opportunities they created with other powerful individuals. Thus, after conducting an interview with Sihanouk, Attwood forwarded copies of his notes to the Assistant Secretary of State, William Bundy, and Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana. Both of these government leaders were grateful to Attwood, and Mansfield offered to meet with Attwood in Washington.<sup>58</sup> While this was likely a rhetorical pleasantry, it nevertheless established contacts for Attwood with a powerful man in Washington. Thus, the journalists' relationships with Sihanouk opened additional doors to them.

### **Conclusion:**

For much of his life, Norodom Sihanouk found himself in a very difficult situation. Born into Cambodian royalty, he began his public life at the age of 18 when he was installed as a puppet ruler. He used his experiences with French colonialism as a positive, essentially a formative period for his independent aspirations. After securing Cambodian independence from the French in 1954, Sihanouk and Cambodia were the continued subjects of further domination, by both regional

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<sup>57</sup> Norodom Sihanouk to Sam Jaffe, 11 April 1973. Box 1, Folder 3. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972.

<sup>58</sup> Mike Mansfield to William Attwood, 20 March 1968. Box 13, Folder 5. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

powers like Vietnam and international powers like the United States. While his policies and actions were somewhat mixed, and at times weakened his position, Sihanouk's actions during the Vietnam War period were largely neutral. By holding up the 1954 Geneva Conventions, as well as his own writings, Sihanouk tried repeatedly to present a neutral stance.

One relatively accessible and potentially influential means of garnering support for himself, as well as for Cambodian neutrality, was through American journalists. As the Vietnam War grew and expanded next to him, Sihanouk could not help trying—by any means possible—to gather support for himself and Cambodia in an attempt to keep his relatively weak nation from being dominated once again. By allowing interviews with American journalists like Sam Jaffe and William Attwood, Sihanouk was able to present his position to the American public. Beyond this however, Sihanouk also actively vied to remain a figure in Cambodian politics. Upon his removal from office in March 1970, Sihanouk occasionally led various Cambodian “governments in exile” and attempted to craft various positive images of himself. In his 1980 book, *War and Hope*, Sihanouk paternalistically dedicates the book to “. . . my beloved Khmer people. . .”<sup>59</sup> In the years after Nol and Matak's coup, Sihanouk began to refer to himself as “Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia,” both in his correspondence with Attwood and in his own writings. By choosing this new “identity” for himself, there were two main benefits to Sihanouk. First, he was able to distance himself from the ugliness and controversy surrounding Lon Nol and Sirik

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<sup>59</sup> Sihanouk, Norodom, *War and Hope: The Case for Cambodia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) dedication page.

Matak's coup and the Khmer Rouge. Second, by referring to himself as "Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia," Sihanouk was able to present himself as transcending politics and government. Sihanouk was meant to be the personification of Cambodia. Interestingly, Sihanouk always saw himself as being a figure in Cambodian politics, and this is evidenced by a letter written to Attwood on royal letterhead with "Chef de l'Etat du Cambodge" ("Chief of State of Cambodia") crossed out.<sup>60</sup> While this is a simple, handwritten note to a friend and colleague, it is full of symbolism in reflecting his "real" but no longer publicly recognized role. In his book, *War and Hope*, Sihanouk lists the reasons the United States failed in their invasion of Cambodia, the first of which is President Nixon, Lon Nol, and Sirik Matak underestimating Sihanouk.<sup>61</sup> He goes on to detail how, even after his removal, how "Sihanouk loyalists" were a major factor in Cambodian politics. Once again, this is a product of both his self-image and of reality. In fact, Attwood notes in an August 1973 letter that after the United States has stopped bombing in Southeast Asia (withdrawal of American troops) "[E]vents will now move rapidly, and there is a growing realization here that you will be playing a major role in these events – something a few of us have always believed even in the early days of your exile."<sup>62</sup> Thus, even after his removal from office, Sihanouk saw Attwood and Jaffe as

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<sup>60</sup> Norodom Sihanouk to William Attwood, 29 October 1980. Box 13, Folder 2. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

<sup>61</sup> Sihanouk, 31.

<sup>62</sup> William Attwood to Norodom Sihanouk, 15 August 1973. Box 13, Folder 2. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

resources for his political restoration. He clearly gained from his relationship with the two prominent journalists.

Much the same can be said for Attwood and Jaffe. Their job as journalists is to get a story, and to present that story. During the 1960s, few stories were as “big” as the Vietnam War and the controversy that surrounded it. By interviewing a powerful player involved in the Vietnam War, Jaffe and Attwood presented a new and unique story. For instance, Attwood was able to arrange for Sihanouk to publish “. . . roughly 5,000 words” in LOOK Magazine while also “. . . offer[ing] entire 8,500 words of interview. . .to all major American Newspapers and foreign publications.”<sup>63</sup> Once again, both Sihanouk and Attwood gained from this exchange. Attwood’s magazine would publish the excerpts, and Sihanouk would have a large forum to present his position and thoughts.

Like anyone of his stature and prominence, Sihanouk was very conscious with the way in which things were presented. As discussed by Osborne and others, Sihanouk very carefully sculpted an image of himself for public view: he swam, directed motion pictures, played volleyball, and engaged in various other vigorous activities. He wanted to be viewed as both the Cambodian “Leonardo da Vinci” and the father of Cambodian independence. Thus, in a February 12, 1968 letter, Attwood outlines how Sihanouk was indignant that Martin Herz, an American diplomat (and later director at Georgetown University’s Institute for the Study of

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<sup>63</sup> William Attwood to Norodom Sihanouk, 9 September 1970. Box 13, Folder 1. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

Diplomacy) gave credit for Cambodian independence not to Sihanouk, but rather to a political rival. According to the shorthand notes taken by Attwood's wife, Sihanouk stated that "I cannot forgive Herz for what he wrote in his book (*A Short History of Cambodia from the Days of Angkor to the Present (1958)*). . . Herz had the nerve to say I usurp the credit. . . No, Herz and I are enemies for life."<sup>64</sup> While some of his anger may be justified, there is no doubt that Sihanouk saw how this could potentially call into question some of his personal accomplishments and his persona.

Despite all of the obstacles and hardship that Sihanouk encountered during the course of his life, he claims that he tried to chart his own path for both Cambodia and himself. Often, this required that Sihanouk make incredibly difficult decisions about matters that were seemingly out of his hands. For instance, it was understood by all parties concerned (both North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, and the United States) that the Viet Cong were using eastern Cambodia as a means to transport materials and as a staging ground for attacks against South Vietnam. Being fiercely independent and anti-communist, there is no doubt that Sihanouk did not desire to have Viet Cong guerillas in his territory, yet he acknowledged that there was nothing that he could do to prevent it: "With some 10,000 men along the Cambodian-Vietnamese frontiers, how do you expect us to make it waterproof

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<sup>64</sup> William Attwood to William Bundy, 12 February 1968. Box 13, Folder 5. William Attwood Collection, 1940-1984.

against the Vietcong, when with all your [American] combined forces and extraordinary weight of material, you cannot do it?"<sup>65</sup>

In the end, Sihanouk worked tirelessly to craft a positive image for himself and Cambodia against a series of events that overshadowed his country and over which he had no control. In doing so, he (either knowingly or unknowingly) enlisted journalists such as Jaffe and Attwood to (either wittingly or unwittingly) aid his cause. These relationships were not entirely one-sided, however, as both Jaffe and Attwood gained personally from their relationships with Sihanouk as well. Thus, in a very real sense, Sihanouk, Jaffe and Attwood all gained from their relationships with each other.

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<sup>65</sup> Sam Jaffe, interview with Norodom Sihanouk transcript. August 11, 1966. Box 1, Folio 9. Sam Jaffe Collection, 1947-1972.

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