Bombs Over Cambodia: New Light on US Air War

Taylor Owen, Ben Kiernan

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Cambodian bombing survivor, Kampong Thom

The Kampong Thom Bombings

Maps showing bombing pattern created by Taylor Owen

On December 9, 1970, US President Richard Nixon telephoned his national-security adviser, Henry Kissinger, to discuss the ongoing bombing of Cambodia. This sideshow to the war in Vietnam, begun in 1965 under the Johnson administration, had already seen 475,515 tons of ordnance dropped on Cambodia, which had been a neutral kingdom until nine months before the phone call, when pro-US General Lon Nol seized power. The first intense series of bombings, the Menu campaign on Vietnamese targets in Cambodia's border areas — which American commanders labeled Breakfast, Lunch, Supper, Dinner, Dessert, and Snack — had concluded in May, 1970 shortly after the coup.

Nixon was facing growing congressional opposition to his Indochina policy. A joint US–South Vietnam ground invasion of Cambodia in May and June of 1970 had failed to root out Vietnamese Communists, and Nixon now wanted to covertly escalate the air attacks, which were aimed at destroying the mobile headquarters of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army (vc/nva) in the Cambodian jungle. After telling Kissinger that the US Air Force was being unimaginative, Nixon demanded more bombing, deeper into the country: "They have got to go in there and I mean really go in . . . I want everything that can fly to go in there and crack the hell out of them. There is no limitation on mileage and there is no limitation on budget. Is that clear?"

Kissinger knew that this order ignored Nixon's promise to Congress that US planes would remain within thirty kilometres of the Vietnamese border, his own assurances to the public that bombing would not take place within a kilometre of any village, and military assessments stating that air strikes were like poking a beehive with a stick. He responded hesitantly: "The problem is, Mr. President, the Air Force is designed to fight an air battle against the Soviet Union. They are not designed for this war . . . in fact, they are not designed for any war we are likely to have to fight."

"Anything that flies, on anything that moves"

Five minutes after his conversation with Nixon ended, Kissinger called General Alexander Haig to relay the new orders from the president: "He wants a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. He doesn't want to hear anything. It's an order, it's to be done. Anything that flies, on anything that moves. You got that?" The response from Haig, barely audible on tape, sounds like laughter.

The US bombing of Cambodia remains a divisive and iconic topic. It was a mobilizing issue for the antiwar movement and is still cited regularly as an example of American war crimes. Writers such as Noam Chomsky, Christopher Hitchens, and William Shawcross condemned the bombing and the foreign policy it symbolized.

In the years since the Vietnam War, something of a consensus has emerged on the extent of US

involvement in Cambodia. The details are controversial, but the narrative begins on March 18, 1969, when the United States launched the Menu campaign. The joint US–South Vietnam ground offensive followed. For the next three years, the United States continued with air strikes under Nixon's orders, hitting deep inside Cambodia's borders, first to root out the Viet Cong (VC)/North Vietnam Army (NVA) and later to protect the Lon Nol regime from growing numbers of Cambodian Communist forces. Congress cut funding for the war and imposed an end to the bombing on August 15, 1973, amid calls for Nixon's impeachment for his deceit in escalating the campaign.

The Secret Bombing of 1965

Thanks to the Air Force database, we now know that the US bombardment started three-and-a-half years earlier, in 1965, under the Johnson administration. What happened in 1969 was not the start of bombings in Cambodia but the escalation into carpetbombing. From 1965 to 1968, 2,565 sorties took place over Cambodia, with 214 tons of bombs dropped. These early strikes were likely designed to support the nearly two thousand secret ground incursions conducted by the CIA and US Special Forces during that period. B-52s — long range bombers capable of carrying very heavy loads — were not deployed, whether out of concern for Cambodian lives or the country's neutrality, or because carpet bombing was believed to be of limited strategic value.

Nixon decided on a different course, and beginning in 1969 the Air Force deployed B-52s over Cambodia. The new rationale for the bombings was that they would keep enemy forces at bay long enough to allow the United States to withdraw from Vietnam. Former US General Theodore Mataxis depicted the move as "a holding action . . . . The troika's going down the road and the wolves are closing in, and so you throw them something off and let them chew it." The result was that Cambodians essentially became cannon fodder to protect American lives.

The last phase of the bombing, from February to August 1973, was designed to stop the Khmer Rouge's advance on the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. The United States, fearing that the first Southeast Asian domino was about to fall, began a massive escalation of the air war — an unprecedented B-52 bombardment that focused on the heavily populated area around Phnom Penh but left few regions of the country untouched. The extent of this bombardment has only now come to light.

Exceeding the World War II Payload

The data released by Clinton shows the total payload dropped during these years to be nearly five times greater than the generally accepted figure. To put the revised total of 2,756,941 tons into perspective, the Allies dropped just over 2 million tons of bombs during all of World War II, including the bombs that struck Hiroshima and Nagasaki: 15,000 and 20,000 tons, respectively. Cambodia may well be the most heavily bombed country in history.

A single B-52d "Big Belly" payload consists of up to 108 225-kilogram or 42 340-kilogram bombs, which are dropped on a target area of approximately 500 by 1,500 metres. In many cases, Cambodian villages were hit with dozens of payloads over the course of several hours. The result was near-total destruction. One US official stated at the time, "We had been told, as had everybody . . . that those carpetbombing attacks by B-52s were totally devastating, that nothing could survive." Previously, it was estimated that between 50,000 and 150,000 Cambodian civilians were killed by the bombing. Given the fivefold increase in tonnage revealed by the database, the number of casualties is surely higher.

The Cambodian bombing campaign had two unintended side effects that ultimately combined to produce the very domino effect that the Vietnam War was supposed to prevent. First, the bombing forced the Vietnamese Communists deeper and deeper into Cambodia, bringing them

into greater contact with Khmer Rouge insurgents. Second, the bombs drove ordinary Cambodians into the arms of the Khmer Rouge, a group that seemed initially to have slim prospects of revolutionary success.

Pol Pot himself described the Khmer Rouge during that period as "fewer than five thousand poorly armed guerrillas . . . scattered across the Cambodian landscape, uncertain about their strategy, tactics, loyalty, and leaders."

Years after the war ended, journalist Bruce Palling asked Chhit Do, a former Khmer Rouge officer, if his forces had used the bombing as anti-American propaganda. Chhit Do replied:

"Every time after there had been bombing, they would take the people to see the craters, to see how big and deep the craters were, to see how the earth had been gouged out and scorched . . . . The ordinary people sometimes literally shit in their pants when the big bombs and shells came. Their minds just froze up and they would wander around mute for three or four days. Terrified and half crazy, the people were ready to believe what they were told. It was because of their dissatisfaction with the bombing that they kept on co-operating with the Khmer Rouge, joining up with the Khmer Rouge, sending their children off to go with them. . . . Sometimes the bombs fell and hit little children, and their fathers would be all for the Khmer Rouge."

A Cambodian witness responded to an earlier publication of this article by writing:

> "I could not agree with you more based on my experiences during the bombing in Takeo around 1972. The bombings were [spreading] further into towns and villages. My parents' house was hit by the bombs, and we had to move to the opposite side of the country. We had known [that] almost the entire village that survived from the bombings had joined forces with the Khmer Rouge."

The Nixon administration knew that the Khmer Rouge was winning over peasants. The CIA's Directorate of Operations, after investigations south of Phnom Penh, reported in May 1973 that the Communists were "using damage caused by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda," and that such propaganda was "effective." But this does not seem to have registered as a primary strategic U.S. concern.

"They are murderous thugs, but we won't let that stand in our way"

The Nixon administration kept the air war secret for so long that debate over its impact came far too late. It wasn't until 1973 that Congress, angered by the destruction the campaign had caused and the systematic deception that had masked it, legislated a halt to the bombing of Cambodia. By then, the political as well as the social damage was already done. Having grown to more than two hundred thousand troops and militia forces by 1973, the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh two years later. They went on to subject Cambodia to a Maoist agrarian revolution and a genocide in which 1.7 million people perished. Now the burgeoning US-China alliance led Washington to quietly support the Khmer Rouge regime. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told Thailand's foreign minister on November 26, 1975, "You should also tell the Cambodians that we will be friends with them. They are murderous thugs, but we won't let that stand in our way."

The Nixon Doctrine had relied on the notion that the United States could supply an allied regime with the resources needed to withstand internal or external challenges while the US withdrew its ground troops or, in some cases, simply remained at arm's length. In Vietnam, this meant building up the ground-fighting capability of South Vietnamese forces while American units slowly disengaged. In Cambodia, Washington gave military aid to prop up Lon Nol's regime from 1970 to 1975 while the US Air Force conducted its massive aerial bombardment.

Kissinger's 2nd 'Rule of Engagement' for the

bombing of Cambodia: "No strikes within one kilometre of a village":

The Bombing of Trapeang Veng

Maps showing bombing pattern created by Taylor Owen

Bombing Iraq

US policy in Iraq may yet undergo a similar shift. Bombing is likely to play a key role in a continued U.S. occupation. Moreover, as Seymour Hersh reported in the New Yorker in December 2005, a key element of any drawdown of American troops will be their replacement with air power. "We just want to change the mix of the forces doing the fighting — Iraqi infantry with American support and greater use of air power," said Patrick Clawson, the deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. [2]

Critics argue that a shift to air power will cause even greater numbers of civilian casualties, which in turn will benefit the insurgency in Iraq. Andrew Brookes, the former director of air power studies at the Royal Air Force's advanced staff college, told Hersh, "Don't believe that air power is a solution to the problems inside Iraq at all. Replacing boots on the ground with air power didn't work in Vietnam, did it? "

It's true that air strikes are generally more accurate now than they were during the war in Indochina, so in theory, at least, unidentified targets should be hit less frequently and civilian casualties should be lower. In addition, many of the indiscriminate bombardment tactics used in the past, such as those that destroyed much of Tokyo and killed 100,000 of its citizens in a single night, are no longer deemed morally acceptable. Yet lessons from Cambodia's agony remain unlearned. Civilian deaths have been the norm during the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, as they were during the bombing of Lebanon by Israeli forces over the summer. As in Cambodia, insurgencies are the likely beneficiaries. To cite one example, on January 13, 2006, an aerial strike by a US Predator drone on a village in a border area of Pakistan killed eighteen civilians, including five women and five children. The deaths undermined the positive sentiments that may have been created by the billions of dollars in aid that had flowed into that part of Pakistan after the massive earthquake months earlier. A key question remains: along with its humanitarian and moral hazards, is bombing worth the strategic risk?

If the Cambodian experience teaches us anything, it is that miscalculation of the consequences of civilian casualties stems partly from a failure to understand how insurgencies thrive. The motives that lead locals to help such movements don't fit into strategic rationales like the ones set forth by Kissinger and Nixon. Those whose lives have been ruined don't care about the geopolitics behind bomb attacks; they tend to blame the attackers. The failure of the American campaign in Cambodia lay not only in the civilian death toll during the unprecedented bombing, but also in its aftermath, when the Khmer Rouge regime rose up from the bomb craters, with tragic results. The dynamics in Iraq, or even Afghanistan, could be similar.

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Notes:

[1] The New York Times, May 3 and 10, 2007.

[2] Seymour Hersh, "Up in the Air. Where is the Iraq war headed next?" The New Yorker, Dec 5, 2005.