

[Watry on Rust, 'Eisenhower and Cambodia: Diplomacy, Covert Action, and the Origins of the Second Indochina War'](#)

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William J. Rust. *Eisenhower and Cambodia: Diplomacy, Covert Action, and the Origins of the Second Indochina War*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016. 374 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-6742-8.

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

Sihanouk and the United States in the 1950s

In *Eisenhower and Cambodia: Diplomacy, Covert Action, and the Origins of the Second Indochina War*, William J. Rust argues that the Dwight Eisenhower administration's diplomatic and CIA interventions in the internal politics of Cambodia to oppose Norodom Sihanouk's policy of Cold War "neutrality" proved not only unsuccessful, but completely counterproductive to the long-term interests of the United States. The author writes, "Plots against Sihanouk, the US government playing 'footsie' with Sihanouk's noncommunist opposition, and the doctrine of plausible denial are prominent themes in this book" (p. 3). Rust also carefully examines the role of the leaders of South Vietnam and Thailand in these attempted coups meant to remove Sihanouk from power.

Rust is certainly well qualified to be writing about the history of Cambodia and Southeast Asia in the 1950s. Previously, he published *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961* (2012) and *So Much to Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Policy in Laos* (2014). Rust offers a thoroughly researched history of the relationship between the United States and Cambodia during the Eisenhower years. He does rely heavily, almost exclusively, on US sources in his very detailed analysis of Eisenhower's foreign policy in Cambodia. Rust is excellent in reporting on the process of American policymaking and how Sihanouk and the Cambodians reacted to American policy. The great problem, as the author fully recognizes, is that many American documents from both the State Department and the CIA are still classified more than sixty years later. In short, his research involves incomplete documents, making Eisenhower appear more mysterious than he really is. Clearly, Eisenhower used obfuscation, misdirection, and lying to cover his tracks in foreign affairs. This makes it very difficult to accept his public and even private statements, memos, and writings at face value. Actions, however, speak much louder than words and more research in foreign archives in Great Britain and France could have diminished some of the mysteries with regard to Eisenhower's policies in Cambodia.

Sihanouk began a serious campaign for Cambodian independence from France in 1953. He visited with both Vice President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in Washington hoping that the United States would support Cambodian independence. Sihanouk's disappointment with the responses from both men stemmed from their sole concern over communism in the region. Eisenhower refused to meet with Sihanouk, reserving these types of unpleasant tasks for the vice president. Rust argues, "The comments from Dulles and Nixon reflected the US consensus

emphasizing the power of communist ideology in international relations while paying scant attention to the history, people, and politics of individual countries, in particular those in Asia” (p. 18). He implies that the Eisenhower administration did not understand the real needs of Cambodia. Nonetheless, Cambodia did achieve control over the military by October 1953.

In 1954, the Geneva Conference tried to deal with the complex problems of French Indochina. Rust states, “The conclusion of the Geneva conference was the high point of US approval of Sihanouk and his government. Dulles admired the ‘spunk’ of the Cambodians ‘in holding out for full freedom of action’” (p. 47). However, the Geneva agreements led to serious differences in the interpretation of the agreements by the Cambodians, the French, and the Americans, particularly with respect to military assistance. By 1955, “Prince Sihanouk publicly confirmed that Cambodia had joined ‘the community of neutral nations’” (p. 68). Sihanouk’s radical move to “neutrality” further endangered Cambodia’s already rocky relationship with the United States. After the Bandung Conference, John Foster Dulles stepped up his attacks against the neutralism favored by both Jawaharlal Nehru and Sihanouk. By 1956, Sihanouk began to criticize US foreign policy publicly and even praised the Chinese leadership of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam and Sarit Thanarat of Thailand both concluded that Sihanouk was pro-communist and anti-American.

The State Department began looking at Dap Chhuon, Sihanouk’s interior minister, as a possible alternative to Sihanouk. In the summer of 1957, Sihanouk in a speech stated, “The Americans are not pleased with me because I follow a program of neutrality which doesn’t make them happy, it is contrary to their policy. They want to overthrow me, and they have given the task of eliminating me to the Democrats” (p. 135). Sihanouk skillfully portrayed Cambodian proponents of democracy as unfaithful to the monarchy and employed violence against them. Rust documents in great detail how Sihanouk’s policy of neutrality invited covert activities by operatives in Thailand, South Vietnam, and the CIA to try to overthrow him in 1959. The author writes, “At almost the same time the Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Thai conspirators were in Bangkok planning their coup, Sihanouk learned about aspects of the plot from the Chinese, Soviet, and French embassies in Phnom Penh” (pp. 173-174). Dap Chhuon led a coup attempt and was killed in March 1959. A bomb detonated in the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh on August 31, 1959, killing three people. All of these events resulted in Sihanouk distrusting the leaders of the United States, South Vietnam, and Thailand. He became far friendlier with the Chinese. Rust also indicates how these fiascoes by the conspirators and the CIA mirrored comparable events in Laos in 1958 and 1960, and South Vietnam in 1963. Eisenhower’s reply to all of the plots can be summed up in one quotation to Sihanouk: “I wish to assure you most emphatically that the Government of the United States is in no way supporting any efforts to overthrow the Monarchy or the duly constituted Government of Cambodia. Any claims to the contrary, whatever the source, are without the slightest foundation” (p. 198).

Rust tells a fascinating story filled with political and military intrigue and covert action. Although Eisenhower’s name is in the title, this book is really about Prince Sihanouk, who appears as a Cambodian nationalist without scruples and without ideology and a man whose ultimate loyalty is to hanging on to power by any means necessary. It is not surprising that the American ambassadors at the time found him objectionable, unreasonable, and probably a little bit crazy. Rust does an incredible job of re-creating the interactions of the Americans with the Cambodians. Still, what is really required is more analysis of whether all of the machinations by both the Americans and the Cambodians were really necessary. The British believed the Americans to be totally misguided about

Southeast Asia. They thought Cambodia was never worth defending in the Cold War because Eisenhower's Domino Theory made absolutely no sense. Everything the United States did in Cambodia in the 1950s appears in retrospect, as a waste of time, effort, and money, while only complicating matters more for Americans in Vietnam in the 1960s.

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