

“Plausible Denial: Eisenhower and the Dap Chhuon Coup”

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This paper, which is based on research for the book *Eisenhower and Cambodia: Diplomacy, Covert Action, and the Origins of the Second Indochina War* (University Press of Kentucky, 2016), discusses the failed attempt to overthrow neutralist prime minister Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1959. More specifically, the paper presents new information and analysis about the origins of US involvement in plotting against Sihanouk and about the role of the US government in the botched attempt to topple him.

The unsuccessful coup is significant for at least two reasons: One, US relations with Sihanouk were severely—if not fatally—damaged not only by the exposure of CIA involvement in the plot, but also by the failure of the US government to provide any explanation for agency operative Victor Matsui’s contacts with the rebels. Two, the unsuccessful coup was part of a larger pattern of counterproductive efforts by the Eisenhower administration to overthrow two other Southeast Asian neutralists: Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma of Laos and President Sukarno of Indonesia.¹

Although a full discussion of the Eisenhower administration’s hostility toward neutralism in Southeast Asia is a topic beyond the scope of this paper, one can safely say that US relations with Sihanouk were not enhanced by a statement he made at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955: Cambodia had joined “the community of neutral nations.”²

The real trouble in US-Cambodia relations began in 1956, when Sihanouk made a “goodwill visit” to the Philippines. He felt pressured to join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and alleged that the CIA had drafted anticommunist remarks his Philippine hosts encouraged him to deliver. When he returned to Cambodia, Sihanouk made a series of speeches attacking the US government. More significantly, he traveled to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), a visit that he viewed as a counterpoise to his trip to the Philippines. The China visit was unsettling to Eisenhower administration officials, for whom non-recognition of the PRC was a central tenet of their foreign policy.

Although a large majority of Cambodians favored Sihanouk’s policy of neutrality, an anticommunist minority was disturbed by the prince’s visit to China. One member of that minority was Colonel Chhuon Mochulpich, better known as Dap Chhuon. A former dissident who rallied to the government in 1949, he was a regional commander who had thus far ruthlessly suppressed all opposition to Sihanouk. In March 1956, however, he wrote a confidential letter to Robert McClintock, the US ambassador to Cambodia, informing the diplomat that he was “awaiting a favorable opportunity to frustrate” Sihanouk’s neutrality policy.³ In a paper drafted after his term as ambassador, McClintock wrote that Dap Chhuon “had expressed a determination to resort to forceful measures rather than to see Cambodia communized.”⁴

The letter to McClintock was the impetus for US deliberations about the possibility of “Sihanouk’s removal.” On April 4, 1956, the CIA prepared a top-secret briefing on Cambodia for the National Security Council (NSC). A key topic was Dap Chhuon’s letter to McClintock. Presumably because of Sihanouk’s domestic political strength, the CIA concluded: “The removal of Sihanouk from Cambodia’s politics in the

near future, far from improving things, would probably bring in a government lacking popular support.”⁵

In August 1956, McClintock wrote a letter to Daniel Anderson, counselor of the US embassy in Saigon, which provides insights into US thinking about Dap Chhuon: “We have been extremely careful to warn Washington that any attempt to bring forward Dap Chhuon as [an] antagonist against Sihanouk must be handled with extreme caution, and I made a specific request to CIA that they stay out of this business unless they receive prior clearance from me.” McClintock added that he and other mission officials in Phnom Penh had given Colonel Edward Lansdale, the ubiquitous cold war intelligence operative, “our tentative appraisal of Dap Chhuon as a possible leader in the event Sihanouk has to be got rid of.”⁶ Although McClintock advocated a cautious approach to what he later called “change from the top,”⁷ others urged bolder action. According to McClintock, Admiral Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “was all steamed up... about utilizing Dap Chhuon as a means of getting rid of Sihanouk.”⁸

The US objective of deposing Sihanouk was indirectly expressed in NSC 5612/1, a statement of policy in Southeast Asia, approved by President Eisenhower in September 1956. The directive’s first course of action for Cambodia called for encouraging “individuals and groups in Cambodia who oppose dealing with the Communist bloc.” Although not mentioned by name, Dap Chhuon was undoubtedly one of the anticommunist “individuals” whom US officials had in mind. Precisely how to “encourage” Sihanouk’s anticommunist opponents was left unsaid. One regional course of action in NSC 5612/1, however, provides at least part of the answer: “Implement as

appropriate covert operations designed to assist in the achievement of U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia.”⁹

In April 1958, Eisenhower reaffirmed US support for Sihanouk’s opposition by approving NSC 5809, which repeated verbatim earlier policy guidance for Cambodia.¹⁰ Later that year, Sihanouk agreed to establish diplomatic relations with China, which predictably disturbed the United States, Thailand, and South Vietnam. The catalyst for intensified anti-Sihanouk activity was Cambodia’s decision to break diplomatic relations with Thailand. Outraged Thai officials, according to the CIA, became more receptive “to long-standing proposals from [South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh] Diem for a joint effort to remove Sihanouk.”¹¹

The cast of conspirators included Son Ngoc Thanh, a longtime Cambodian dissident and founder of the Khmer Serei, an armed anti-Sihanouk group established in 1957 and based in Thailand and South Vietnam. Another plotter was Sam Sary, a former Sihanouk adviser who was close to US officials in Cambodia. In December 1958, he defected to South Vietnam, bringing “news of [Dap] Chhuon’s plans to Saigon.”¹²

During the first week of January 1959, South Vietnamese, Thai, and Cambodian conspirators discussed the plot in Bangkok. Unfortunately for them, Sihanouk learned about aspects of their plan almost immediately from the Chinese, Soviet, and French embassies in Phnom Penh. The CIA subsequently concluded that all three governments had probably intercepted “insecure” communications between Saigon and Bangkok. The United States also intercepted these messages, but unlike the Chinese, Soviets, and French, did not inform Sihanouk of the plotting.¹³

The intelligence Sihanouk received was incomplete. The prince learned about Sam Sary and Son Ngoc Thanh's participation in the plot but not about Dap Chhuon's. Despite partial exposure of the coup, Dap Chhuon moved forward with his plan to demand the installation of a pro-western government and to threaten Sihanouk with guerrilla warfare. He made his move on February 20, sending a letter to King Norodom Suramarit that declared his "dissidence." Apparently hoping that his fierce reputation would encourage negotiations, if not capitulation, Dap Chhuon was surprised two days later, when a convoy of armored cars and trucks arrived at his headquarters in Siem Reap to arrest him for treason. His rebellion collapsed without a shot being fired, and he fled into the jungle with some of his followers. He was subsequently killed by Sihanouk's troops under circumstances that remain unclear to this day.¹⁴

Cambodian armed forces captured two Vietnamese in Dap Chhuon's villa, as well as gold bars, incriminating documents, and communications equipment. The royal army also seized his brother, Slat Peau. At his treason trial later in the year, he testified that he had received the gold bars from a South Vietnamese agent and a radio from Victor Matsui, a Japanese-American who worked for the CIA under diplomatic cover. The radio, Slat Peau said, allowed Dap Chhuon to communicate with the "American Embassy [in] Phnom Penh" and with the other conspirators.¹⁵ Slat Peau's testimony, likely coerced and arguably unreliable, nonetheless raises questions about the precise role of the US government in the plot.

In a memorandum written some two months after the failed coup, Walter Robertson, assistant secretary of state for far eastern affairs, declared: "We maintained intermittent confidential contact with Dap Chhuon, but refused his request for help and

emphatically urged him not to undertake illegal action against Sihanouk.”¹⁶ William Colby, then the new CIA deputy chief of station in Saigon, wrote in his memoirs that the agency sought to dissuade Vietnamese and Thai plotters from a coup that “we felt was unlikely to succeed and would only exacerbate the problems of dealing with Sihanouk. But to be certain that we would know what was happening among the coup-makers, CIA had recruited an agent on the Cambodian general’s staff, and had given him a radio with which to keep us informed. And we were indeed informed.”¹⁷

There is, however, persuasive evidence that Robertson and Colby understated US involvement in the plot. The claims that the CIA merely reported on Dap Chhuon’s activities and that the US government tried to stop the coup appear to be a cover story for a more complicated reality. William Trimble, US ambassador to Cambodia and the official most responsible for damage control after the debacle, recalled that the CIA played an active role in the conspiracy. In an oral history interview, he said: “The CIA Station Chief in Phnom Penh had been instructed to establish contact with Dap Chhuon... and to provide him through a South Vietnam intermediary with a sum in gold.”¹⁸

Trimble’s recollection is consistent with comments by Roger Hilsman that were captured on President John F. Kennedy’s secret recording system in 1963. When Kennedy asked if the story about CIA involvement in the Dap Chhuon coup were true, Hilsman replied: “Yes, sir, it is true.” Kennedy repeated the question, asking “CIA did do it?” Hilsman answered, “Sure, they supplied some money, and, uh, they were involved in a plot against Sihanouk back before this administration.”¹⁹ Hilsman, a former director of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), was assistant secretary of state for far eastern affairs when he said this to Kennedy. Like his previous

assignment at INR, Hilsman's position as assistant secretary offered abundant insights into CIA operations in Southeast Asia.²⁰

The recollections of James Lilley, a CIA case officer in Cambodia who later served as the American ambassador in Beijing, also indicate an active US role in the conspiracy. "This was set up by a Japanese-American guy attached to our Station there," said Lilley, observing the official ban on naming CIA personnel whose employment has not been acknowledged by the agency. "This was the so-called 'Dap Chhuon' plot centered in Siem Reap. The Cambodian authorities exposed the operation. In this operation we were working with the South Vietnamese."²¹

The conflicting claims about the degree of US involvement in the coup could be resolved by more enlightened declassification of nearly sixty-year-old government documents. There is, however, a theory that accommodates the differing accounts of Robertson and Colby, on the one hand, and those of Trimble, Hilsman, and Lilley, on the other: Sometime in early 1959, senior officials in Washington agreed to provide deniable covert assistance—gold bars, radio equipment, and other support—to South Vietnam and Dap Chhuon. Although there is no "smoking gun" document currently available that proves this conclusion, there is evidence that US officials believed Dap Chhuon's plot could succeed.²² Moreover, there is a declassified document with the text of a State Department cable to Elbridge Durbrow, the US ambassador to South Vietnam. Dated February 2, 1959, the cable was transmitted to Saigon via CIA channels, a more secure means for State Department discussions of covert activities. Aware of the disastrous implications of a failed coup, department officials instructed Durbrow to "*be prepared* [to] approach President Diem on short notice" if, in the ambassador's "opinion," South

Vietnam's "activities [were] endangering [the] situation [in] Cambodia." Durbrow should then emphasize to Diem, "[The] US cannot see [the] chance for [a] successful coup [in] Cambodia under present conditions."²³

In other words, in early February, Durbrow was given discretionary authority to intervene with Diem and attempt to pull the plug on the coup if it appeared unpromising. According to Carl Strom, then the US ambassador to Cambodia, Durbrow did not exercise this authority until February 14—after the delivery of the gold and communications gear to Dap Chhuon and after "Diem was irremediably committed."²⁴ A last-minute US effort to abort the coup would be consistent with the accounts of Robertson and Colby stressing efforts to discourage the move against Sihanouk *and* with the statements by Trimble, Hilsman, and Lilley describing covert American assistance to the conspiracy.

Sihanouk emerged from the failed coup with enhanced prestige, forcing the Eisenhower administration to conclude that covert intervention in Cambodia's internal affairs had been "an obstacle to the pursuit of our objectives."²⁵ Many years later, Trimble summarized this conclusion more bluntly: "The Dap Chhuon operation was stupid, very stupid."²⁶

In 1960 the policy directive for Cambodia was amended, in the words of an NSC staffer, "to eliminate language which might provide a basis for further abortive coup plots."²⁷ Although acknowledging the prince's popularity and political power, the new policy of attempting to get along with Sihanouk did not mean that senior Eisenhower administration officials viewed him with any more sympathy. In a background briefing

for the NSC, Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles said, “We continue to have to deal with Sihanouk who is a difficult character.”²⁸

¹ For a detailed discussion about the plots against Souvanna and Phoui, see William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954–1961* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012). *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1958–1960, XVII, Indonesia*, provides a relatively candid documentary depiction of covert US support for the 1958 rebellion. Also see Audrey R. Kahin & George McT. Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (The New Press, 1995).

² A. Doak Barnett, “Asia and Africa in Session: Random Notes on the Asian-African Conference,” American Universities Field Staff, May 18, 1955, p. 8, www.icwa.org.

³ CIA, *Current Intelligence Bulletin*, April 1, 1956, www.foia.cia.gov.

⁴ McClintock, “United States Policy Toward Cambodia,” May 8, 1957, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group (RG) 59, Entry A1 3120, box 6.

⁵ CIA, “NSC Briefing,” April 4, 1956, NARA, CIA Records Search Tool (CREST).

⁶ McClintock to Anderson, August 22, 1956, NARA, RG 84, Entry P 840, box 1.

⁷ McClintock to Kenneth Young, October 11, 1956, NARA, RG 59, Central Decimal File (CDF), 1955–1959, box 3354.

⁸ McClintock to Anderson, August 22, 1956.

⁹ NSC 5612/1, September 5, 1956, *United States–Vietnam Relations (USVR), 1945–1967, Part-V-B-3d*, pp. 1086–1092, www.archives.gov.

¹⁰ NSC 5809, April 2, 1958, *FRUS, 1958-1960, XVI*, d. 12.

¹¹ CIA, “Subversion,” *National Intelligence Survey (NIS), Cambodia*, 1965, pp. 18-21, NARA, RG 472, Cambodian Background Files, 1955–1972, box 57.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John Taylor, “Prince Sihanouk and the New Order in Southeast Asia,” CIA, 1964, p. 48, www.foia.cia.gov.

¹⁴ CIA, “Subversion,” *NIS, Cambodia*, 1965, p. 18; State Dept. to Phnom Penh, March 4, 1959, NARA, RG 59, CDF, 1955–1959, box 2627.

¹⁵ Trimble to State Dept., October 3, 1959, NARA, RG 59, CDF, 1955–1959, box 3356.

¹⁶ Robertson to Christian Herter, May 7, 1959, NARA, RG 59, CDF, 1955–1959, box 3355.

¹⁷ William Colby, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA*. (Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 150.

¹⁸ Trimble, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, February 24, 1990, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection (FAOHC), www.loc.gov. An earlier oral history interview with Trimble was conducted by Dennis J. O’Brien for the John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL) in 1969. Trimble’s remarks about Dap Chhuon have been heavily redacted. In January 2015, a Mandatory Declassification Review request for the interview was filed. That request is still under review.

¹⁹ Kennedy-Hilsman conversation, November 20, 1963, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), Telephone Recordings: Dictation Belt 34. (Also available at www.millercenter.org.) The Kennedy Library identifies neither Hilsman nor the date of the telephone conversation. A draft memorandum of conversation paraphrasing the telephone call (JFKL, Roger Hilsman Papers, box 1) confirms Hilsman’s identity.

²⁰ For example, Hilsman was the State Department official who authorized CIA-sponsored paramilitary operations from South Vietnam into Laos. (Hilsman to Dean Rusk, November 18, 1963, JFKL, National Security Files, box 320.)

²¹ Lilley, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, May 21, 1998, FAOHC, www.loc.gov.

²² In his monograph for the CIA, Taylor commented on international perceptions of the likelihood of Dap Chhuon's coup succeeding: "The only Western power which assumed from the first that the plot would fail was France." In other words, it appears that at some point the US government thought the plot could succeed. Further evidence that Washington perceived strength in the conspiracy is a statement in a CIA briefing for the NSC after Dap Chhuon's coup was crushed: "Although [the] plotters had considerable assets in [the] aggregate, they never coalesced." (CIA, "NSC Briefing," March 11, 1959, NARA, CREST.)

²³ Herbert Keppand to Ralph Sliffman, February 2, 1959, NARA, RG 59, Entry A1 3120, box 6. Italics added.

²⁴ Strom to Trimble, September 8, 1959, William C. Trimble Papers, Princeton University, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, box 3.

²⁵ Operations Coordinating Board (OCB), "Special Report on Southeast Asia," February 10, 1960, *USVR*, *V-B-3d*, p. 212.

²⁶ Trimble, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, February 24, 1990.

²⁷ Kenneth Landon to Bromley Smith, January 27, 1960, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, White House Office Files, NSC Staff Series, OCB Secretariat Series, box 7.

²⁸ Memorandum of conversation, July 21, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, XVI, d. 64.