

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WWU - 7
King and Ditchdigger

The Oriental Hotel,
Bangkok, Thailand.
January 16, 1959.

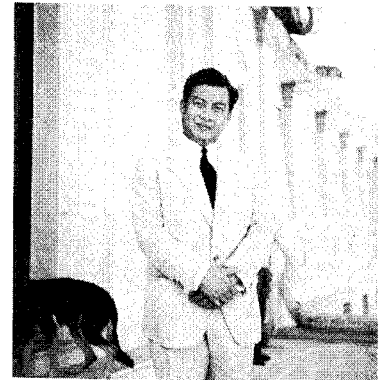
Mr. Walter S. Rogers.
Institute of Current World Affairs.
366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

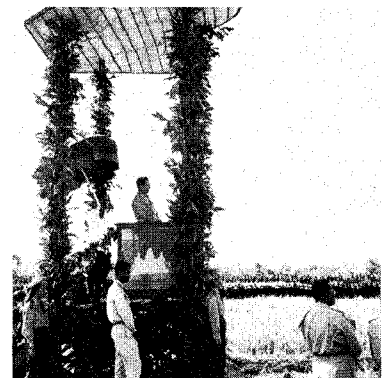
I have just spent five days in the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia, the first all-out neutral on my world tour of the non-aligned countries. I am afraid I have been captivated, not only by Cambodia, but by a fellow named Sihanouk.

His Royal Highness the Prince Sihanouk IS Cambodia. He is his country's ex-King, current Prime Minister and, from what I've seen, its leading ditchdigger. The Prince is now all of 37. By self-acknowledgment, he is an ex-playboy, a leisure-time saxophone player, the father of at least 14, including a daughter who is to be married later this month, and the leader of a people who have a long way to go. Sihanouk is working round-the-clock to make his country a modern, prosperous and happy nation. And in my book he is performing miracles. Sure, he is temperamental. Royal prerogative, I suppose. But he also has the guts to say "thanks, but no thanks" to any country which tries to put conditions on its helping hand to Cambodia. And, financially, he is presenting an anachronism to the Twentieth Century, a national exchequer free of debt, a country which borrows only that which it knows it can repay.

Sihanouk was pulled out of a French lycee in Saigon to become King. His maternal uncle had died. He represented the product of Cambodia's two royal lines. And, more importantly, the French thought they had selected a nice innocuous playboy, similar to their friend Bao Dai in Viet Nam. For quite a while, Sihanouk fulfilled French hopes. Then something happened. Sihanouk found his country floundering between the dying French Indo-China administration and some ambitious Cambodian politicians. He dismissed his Cabinet and became Prime Minister as well as King in 1952. Next he dissolved Parliament and promised that he would secure his country's independence within three years and then put his program before the country for a vote of approval. Nobody took Sihanouk seriously. They assumed that when he quietly left for France one day he was bent on further Parisian pleasure. (He has one



THE PRINCE: In a smiling mood outside his Palace office door: and in the midst of a 45-minute, extemporaneous, get-out-and-work-with-your-hands-exhortation.



Legal Wife and several other ladies of the Court, including the most beautiful one whom he brought with him to the U.S. on his recent goodwill tour.) But King Sihanouk had other ideas: He wanted France to grant his country its freedom. When France didn't listen, the King took off for the U.S. He got to see Secretary of State Dulles and Vice President Nixon. But he failed to persuade them that the fight to kick the Communists out of French Indo-China could come only after independence, not before. The U.S. was not going to ditch its French ally. Sihanouk then took himself back here to Bangkok and made a public announcement that he was forced to exile himself in a neighboring country because France would not let Cambodia's King be King. The French, harassed by Communist insurgents anyway, took this for one week and found it acutely embarrassing. They then proceeded to do something about not only Cambodia, but Indo-China's Laos and Viet Nam components as well. Sihanouk returned to his capital of Phnom-Penh and Cambodia achieved its independence on September 11, 1953. At the 1954 Geneva conference settling the French Indo-China dispute, Cambodia was the only one of the three Indo-China countries to emerge intact. She had her rightful borders and she had all of the invading forces out. Moreover, she had won her independence before the treaty conference; it was not granted to her.



T-SHIRT & SHORTS: Ministers of State first watch, then heave to as H.R.H., the man in the Texas sombrero, starts digging a dam.

But Sihanouk's internal troubles were still not solved and so he decided to hand the Crown over to his father (the quintessence of filial devotion, that) and lead his country as Prime Minister. He organized the Sangkum ~~Reastr~~ Niyum, or "Popular Socialist Community," and was elected in September, 1955 by such acclamation that he captured every member of the National Assembly. His victory in the second election, last March, has been described as even greater, however this might be possible. Sihanouk decided that Cambodia had had ~~ansour~~ experience with political parties so the proper representation was through this national "community." And though he espoused, and espouses, socialism, he puts it under royal patronage in a fairly undoctinaire way.

I had two sessions with the Prince on two successive days. The first was an official audience. The Foreign Ministry car bearing Unna drove through the Palace grounds as guards came to a guns-athrust salute at each crossroads (I always suspected I was a nascent monarchist). I was driven up to the Palace doorway on the stroke of the appointed time, 11:30 a.m. Finding no door, but merely an open entranceway, I did what comes naturally and started to go in to see if anybody was home. I had moved only half a lurch when a fairly sharp nudge

to the ribs from the protocol officer had me back in place. Then the Prince appeared from a side room and beckoned me in. I found him shorter and chubbier than I expected and his high-pitched voice made him seem younger than his 37 years (which, for his responsibilities, are actually quite young enough). My royal gadabouts until now have been limited to handshakes with the Queen and Prince Phillip and I had difficulty believing Her Majesty wasn't straight out of her own Madam Toussard's. Sihanouk was definitely not out of wax. He was terribly polite, terribly humble and terribly sincere. I also got quite a jolt when he said he had waited for me for two days before, but that I hadn't come (I forgot about my original itinerary when I decided to make a detour to Laos). And I found I was being extended a really royal welcome (champagne and confidences over an unhurried hour) because the paper of my affiliation, The Washington Post, turned out to be the one newspaper in America Sihanouk has never been angry with. He feels it understands what he is trying to do for his country. (I gathered that the U.S. Embassy does too. One official told me: "We thoroughly agree with the Cambodian policy of neutrality.")

Sihanouk ducked from being identified with the neutrality views of Nehru and U Nu. He said Cambodia does not want to criticize others but does want to take the course which best suits her own needs. I confess I was too fascinated by Prince, Palace and the prone position of royal waiters proffering up champagne from the very carpet depths to take accurate notes. But in going through the texts of some of his speeches last year before UN and U.S. audiences (He said he writes them in French and then has such associates as Nong Kimny, the Cambodian Ambassador to Washington, translate them into English), I think there are a few thoughts you might be interested in. For instance:

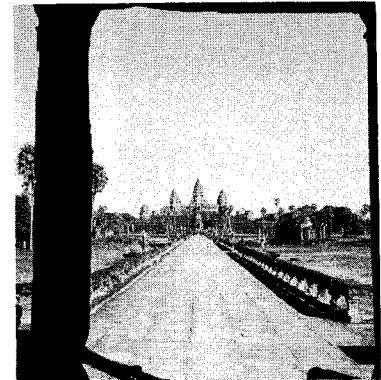
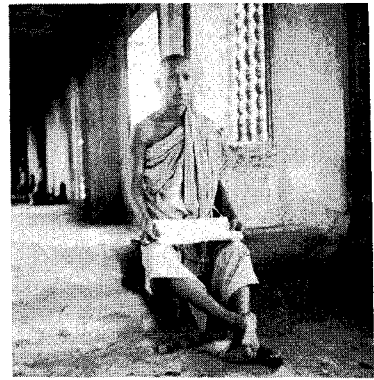
"You who inhabit one-fourth of a continent and know where you stand with the other three-quarters, have difficulty understanding the problem for us of the proximity of giants (Red China and North Viet Nam) who, moving an arm during their sleep, could crush us almost without noticing it...Cambodians, even if they were no longer unlettered, would never believe their country was independent if, on their own soil, they found foreign bases or if part of the armed forces had to be put at the disposition of a command which was not exclusively national...We have proved our ability to defend our independence by absolute non-alignment...Being militarily powerless, with extremely permeable frontiers, our strength can only be our national union. Only neutrality unites us. All other policies would unquestionably disunite our nation, dismember it, make it prey to foreign subversion, firstly communist...We align ourselves no more with the positions of the neutralists than with those of the West or of the members of the 'Socialist bloc.' Our votes in the United Nations are ample evidence. It is thus that, contrary to the neutralistic bloc which abstained, and the Socialists who voted against, we voted for the inscription of the Hungarian tragedy in the agenda of the 13th session of the General Assembly. Contrary to the Western bloc, we voted for examination in the same agenda of the question of the representation of China. In the first case, it was a question of public morality. In the second, it was a question of good sense..."

And further: "I could be an absolute monarch if I wished. I could be a dictator. Since I abdicated, I have refused and I shall always refuse, absolute power. The inexperience of our legislators -- growing pains of a democracy -- sometimes obliges me, before the entreaties of the people, to take the bar to correct mistakes, to curb abuse, to put the democratic machine back in forward motion. When that is done, I relinquish power with joy to one of our politicians. And I hope always -- but vainly to the present -- that

they will leave me in my role of mere adviser to the Nation..."

And further: "It is said that I pocket American aid only to smile in return. This is too great a compliment to suppose that I am so charming as to make such austere people as your Secretaries of Treasury and State lose their sense of balance...Your military, economic and technical aid, I can assure you, is welcome in our small, still under-developed country. Though you do not ask it, and we offer nothing in return, you must know that we are profoundly grateful...We cannot 'align' ourselves with you, moreover, you have not asked us to do so. But be assured that we are not aligned, not even secretly favoring any other power...I am convinced that the best defense against Communism, as President Mao Tse Tung himself admitted to me, is to give the people better realization and satisfaction of their wants and needs than Communism could offer..."

This last thought, I believe, is very uppermost in the Prince's current thinking. He has been disturbed with the disinclination of Cambodia's civil service (recructacle of the country's top-trained personnel) to work with their hands. So after a trip last year to Peking he decided to give the royal imprimatur to a few of the Communists' own tricks. Public officials are now expected to work with their hands at least 15 days out of each year. And the Prince is leading the way by pitching in himself. I got up at 4:30 one morning for a 125-mile drive to Kompong Trach in the South of Cambodia near the Viet Nam border. I arrived just as Sihanouk, in military uniform, mounted the steps of the royal pagoda to tell the assembled officials, army and countryfolk why he thought it was a good thing for everybody to dig in and help conserve Kampong Trach's water supply with a new irrigation dam. The Prince went on for 45 minutes without text. Girl scouts keeled over. Generals wiped their perspiring foreheads. But the Prince went on exhorting and exhorting, fists flying, voice rising. I am told that this was one of his short numbers; sometimes he goes on for several hours. Anyway, when he decided he had said all that was necessary, he stepped down, embarrassed me no end by heading right over to shake hands, and only then paid his respects to an assemblage of Buddhist monks, their shaved heads and saffron robes protected from the sun by a large tent. After the amenities, the Prince retired to a special pavillion, reappeared in T-shirt, shorts and Texas sombrero, grabbed a shovel and pitched in. In between puffs, he kept instructing his Minister of Public Works to explain to me how far the dam would extend and the good



ANGKOR WAT: A monk interrupted in his Buddhist chants; the grand entrance to the Khmer King's tomb; and one of the five towers where English butterfly catchers flutter.

work it would do. There were five Ministers there and they were to stay on for the required 15 days. The Prince, meanwhile, would move on to another project. He told me he is now going out most every day of each week. And as I left for a fast drive back to Phnom-Penh and the plane to Siem Reap, Sihanouk called out: "Thank you for coming, Representative from Washington!" It was really an exhilarating experience. I had only one regret: On the work project of the preceding two days, the Ambassadors from Soviet Russia, Red China and Czechoslovakia had all shown up at the crack of dawn, picked up shovels and heaved to it. I was dying to photograph an East vs. West diplomatic ditch-digging contest. But no such luck.

I forgot to mention that after my audience in Phnom-Penh I was given a solo tour of the Palace grounds. I saw the magnificent Throne Room which has two almost ceiling-high carved gold thrones (the Queen's, quite properly, is placed 25 feet or so behind the King's); the Preah Keo Marakat, or Silver Pagoda, where the floor is made of plates of pure silver and the various Buddhist statues are described by the kilos of solid gold they weigh, and the karats of diamonds and emeralds with which they are festooned. I kept hearing the guide mention "Cadeaux de Napoleon Trois." Apparently Napoleon III, when he took over Cambodia in the last century (actually, Cambodia welcomed him as Thailand was about to swallow her up), decided to sweeten things by dispatching no end of jewel boxes and a full-scale mid-Nineteenth Century French town house, which still stands in the midst of the Palace grounds' cobra-eaved pavillions.

It was quite a contrast to go from the much-lived-in Palace at Phnom-Penh to Siem Reap, an hour's flight northwest, and the ruins of Angkor Wat. Actually this enormous stone edifice (the square moat supposedly measures a mile on each side) was not a palace, but the tomb of a Khmer king who devoted his lifetime, 1000 years ago, to supervising his elegant demise. Angkor's murals and colonnades have been well advertised. But the crowning point, for me at least, was to puff up the almost vertical steps to the very highest towers of the wat and there come across a middle-aged English couple flourishing huge nets. "Looking for bats?" I inquired. "No butterflies," the lady said with complete nonchalance. There'll always be an England.

I smiled less at another encounter in Siem Reap, the newer Cambodian town which has been built at the edge of the jungle and its ruins of times past. I wanted to mail home two small wooden boxes and allowed a half hour for redtape before the scheduled afternoon tour to the ruins of Angkor Thom, the old city proper. As at Laos, my French failed miserably. I shuffled between customs house and postoffice, English and gesticulations. I finally got the assembled officialdom to accept my boxes, but only after a French school teacher, cycling by, stopped to interpret. When it was all over (1½ hours later and, of course, after the tour had departed), the Frenchman explained to me that mine were the first packages the Postoffice crew had ever dispatched to America.

I am writing this from Bangkok because I wanted to hear the Thai version of the current border fight with Cambodia before discussing it. Since the end of November, you see, the Thai-Cambodian border has been shut down. Thai Airways and Air Cambodge have cancelled all their flights. The trains no longer cross, nor do automobiles. The only exception is a twice-weekly flight by Air Viet Nam. Cambodia, being smaller and inland, is obviously suffering more. Mail and telegrams to Phnom-Penh, for instance, can now come in only through Saigon.

Now before seeing the Prince, I was told that the border dispute was the outgrowth of many factors: Conflicting claims over who had title to the ruins of a small, obscure Buddhist temple on Cambodia's northern border; Thai fear that Cambodia's recognition of Red China last summer now means Red China may be outfitting their Thai Army (U.S. Embassy officials in Cambodia say this is completely unfounded); the failure to conclude negotiations on a joint agreement to control rinderpest; the failure to agree on how to shuttle railway cars back and forth across the border; and, more importantly, public and press demonstrations in Thailand against Cambodia and Sihanouk personally. At one point, a Bangkok paper printed a story quoting Nai Visutr Atthayukiti, "Foreign Adviser" to the Thai Revolutionary Party in the absence of a Cabinet under Marshal Sarit's current martial law regime, to the effect that if only Sihanouk were a good Buddhist things would be fine. It was right after that that the Prince closed the border.



Now when I had my royal audience with the Prince in his Palace, he discussed something which I think counts far more. The Prince, as I've already said, is leading his country almost single-handedly and doesn't appreciate opposition. Sihanouk has long been miffed with Son Ngoc Thanh, a onetime Cambodian Prime Minister and nationalist leader during the Japanese occupation who now lives in exile in Thailand. And, of late, Sihanouk has had a falling out with one of his closest advisers, Sam Sary, a personal friend he had to recall from being Ambassador to the Court of St. James after Sam Sary hit the London front pages in a messy business with the family governess. In our talk, Sihanouk said he wanted to alert me for future trouble from his opposition, but that I should be sure to understand that when the issue was joined publicly, it would have nothing to do with Communism. He said that Thailand had been sore ever since she had to return one of Cambodia's provinces to her after World War II. And he implied that Thailand was encouraging Son Ngoc Thanh. What about Sam Sary? I asked the Prince if he had any objection to my looking him up. He smilingly said none whatever, and perhaps I could find out whether his two opponents were in cahoots. I did look up Sam Sary, but it turned out the address I had been given was an old one. Now I read in the Bangkok papers that Sihanouk made a public address just after I left Cambodia in which he charged both men with being "in constant contact with Thai revolutionaries." Reportedly, the Prince is also annoyed with Sam Sary's attempts to form an opposition party.

ROYAL CHAPEL: Floors are plates of solid silver; idols of solid gold. festooned with

Well, yesterday I had a talk here with "Foreign Adviser" Visutr and, of course, the subject of the border dispute came up. His Excellency asked me what I thought of the Prince. When I told him I had been impressed, Visutr quickly said he could think of no more effective opponent to communism in Cambodia. Then Visutr quietly asked me what the Prince thought of the criticism of him in the Bangkok newspapers. I said he didn't like it one bit. This morning, I picked up the front page of The Bangkok World and read that late yesterday afternoon Visutr had announced to the local press that a Washington Post reporter had told him the Prince said he closed the border because of the criticism of him in the Bangkok papers. I am afraid one naive American journalist was had. Hereafter, I had better preface my interviews of others with a "Please don't quote me."

Cordially,

Warren W. Unna
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