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Lessons from killing fields of Cambodia - 30 years

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By Alex Hinton / April 14, 2005

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When the Khmer Rouge victoriously entered Phnom Penh 30 years ago, many people greeted the rebels with a cautious optimism, weary from five years of civil war that had torn apart their lives and killed hundreds of thousands of Cambodians. All of the city dwellers were sent to live and work in the countryside, joining the peasantry in one of the most radical revolutions in history.

During the nearly four years following that day - April 17, 1975 - Cambodia was radically transformed. Economic production and consumption were collectivized, as Pol Pot and his circle mobilized the entire population to launch a "super great leap forward." The labor demanded was backbreaking, monotonous, and unceasing.

Everyday freedoms were abolished. Buddhism and other forms of religious worship were banned. Money, markets, and media disappeared. Travel, public gatherings, and communication were restricted. Contact with the outside world vanished. And the state set out to control what people ate and did each day, whom they married, how they spoke, what they thought, and who would live and die. "To keep you is no gain," the Khmer Rouge warned, "To destroy you is no loss."

In the end, more than 1.7 million of Cambodia's 8 million inhabitants perished from disease, starvation, overwork, or outright execution in a notorious genocide.

Now, 30 years after the Khmer Rouge came to power in a time of war and terror, we - who also live in a time of war and terror - would do well to consider what lessons can be learned from the Cambodian genocide. I offer four suggestions in the spirit of George Santayana's oft-cited words "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

- **The vision thing:** Pol Pot and his fellow ideologues believed that the "science" of Marxism-Leninism had provided them with the tools to eliminate capitalist and imperialist oppression. The "all-knowing" Party would catapult Cambodia toward communist utopia. Like that of other genocidal ideologues, the Khmer Rouge path to this future was strewn with the bodies of those who did not fit this vision.

Today, in an era of new fanaticisms, the Khmer Rouge remind us that vision needs to be tempered with humility and toleration of the sort that inspired people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and, perhaps now in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

- **The enemy within:** For the Khmer Rouge, grandiose and unrealistic visions led to failures, failures suggested subversion, perceived subversion fueled paranoia, and paranoia sparked purges and the "purification" of the masses.

After Pol Pot's clique ordered the eradication of "hidden enemies burrowing from within," terror and death became commonplace. Sometimes suspected enemies were executed in public; often they simply vanished. "Be quiet," people whispered; "bodies disappear."

In our age of terrorist fear, as suspect Arabs and Muslims vanish, are tortured, or held without trial, the Khmer Rouge period cautions us about the dangers of political paranoia. The enemy within, too often, turns out to be ourselves as - driven by fear - we violate the rig

others.

- **Torture:** The Khmer Rouge established an elaborate security apparatus to identify and eradicate the "impure elements" threatening the purity of the revolution.

Some of these class enemies were killed immediately; others were imprisoned and tortured. Arrest presupposed guilt, so interrogators sought to force prisoners to reveal their treason. "Why did you betray the Party?" they would ask. "Who else belongs to your secret network?" The Khmer Rouge utilized a wide range of torture techniques - electric shocks, asphyxiation, immersion in water, forcing the consumption of feces and urine, stringing prisoners up in the air, and prolonged bodily stress - that have echoes today. These brutal methods got results: Most prisoners were eventually willing to confess to almost anything.

Now, as we learn more about Bagram, Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and sites of rendition, the violent practices of the Khmer Rouge warn us that the information extracted through torture is highly unreliable and that those who turn down this dark path start to resemble the evil they are pursuing.

- **Through a glass darkly:** One of the most startling aspects of meeting perpetrators of genocide is how ordinary they often are. In their path to evil we catch reflections of ourselves. Most of us have, at some point, used stereotypes and euphemisms, displaced responsibility, followed instructions better questioned, succumbed to peer pressure, disparaged others, become desensitized to the suffering of others, and turned a blind eye to what our government should not be doing. These sorts of things are going on right now in the war on terror.

Thirty years later, the Khmer Rouge teach us difficult lessons about ourselves and the world in which we live. Such understanding can help us become more self-aware, humble, tolerant, and let's hope, willing to act in the face of evil.

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