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"Cambodia's Curse" by Joel Brinkley*

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## No Show

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## No Show

### Abstract

For someone of my generation, any mention of Cambodia conjures up a jumble of images and emotions—albeit, nearly all from the distant past. Always appearing, but in no particular order, would be: the revelation of Nixon’s secret war; the killings at Kent State; strikes that closed down a number of American college campuses; Pol Pot; the seemingly endless debate whether to use the term Cambodia or the more radical “Kampuchea”; Prince Sihanouk; and last but certainly not least: the Khmer Rouge as the personification of a Third World liberation movement.

### Keywords

Human rights, Cambodia, Post-war reconstruction, Peace, Stability, Corruption, Repression

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## No Show

by Mark Gibney

For someone of my generation, any mention of Cambodia conjures up a jumble of images and emotions—albeit, nearly all from the distant past. Always appearing, but in no particular order, would be: the revelation of [Nixon’s secret war](#); the killings at [Kent State](#); strikes that closed down a number of American college campuses; [Pol Pot](#); the seemingly endless debate whether to use the term Cambodia or the more radical “Kampuchea”; [Prince Sihanouk](#); and last but certainly not least: the [Khmer Rouge](#) as the personification of a Third World liberation movement.

By the time that the Khmer Rouge came to be known for what they really were—the worst butchers in all of human history—it already was too late. Few really cared anymore because the US involvement in Vietnam was now over and it was time to move on to other things, preferably non-political things. And although a wonderful movie like “[The Killing Fields](#)” (1984) could later elicit some deep sympathy and emotion—if not for an entire nation, at least for the horrible ordeal of [Dith Pran](#)—by this time Cambodia (there was no longer any pretense that it was Kampuchea) was quite removed from the Western conscience—and perhaps it needs to be pointed out that there is no intended irony in that last remark.

Thus, there was virtually no reaction, and certainly no celebration, when Vietnam invaded in 1979 in what should have been recognized as one of the great cases of humanitarian intervention. The Khmer Rouge ran and hid, although the US government insisted for some period of years in recognizing this genocidal group as the “lawful” government of that poor country.

Since then, Cambodia has lost every bit of its special status. Now, it is just another country saddled with a corrupt and brutal (but not too brutal) government. The poverty is overwhelming, but poverty happens to overwhelm a lot of people in a lot of places.

All of us have been taught the mantra that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. But in this particular case, like many others, those who have not forgotten the past are the ones who have been forced to keep repeating it. Those of us who repeatedly do forget the past have not had to repeat it at all.

This has been heralded as the [Age of Apology](#). But not even the new president would ever think of visiting this part of America’s past. What would be in it for us? Rather, Cambodia has moved from being a “[Sideshow](#),” to use William Shawcross’ term, to something like no show at all.

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*Mark Gibney is the Belk Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina-Asheville. His most recent book publications include [International Human Rights Law: Returning to Universal Principles](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) and the edited volume [The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). He also has two forthcoming books. The first (with Sabine Carey and Steve Poe) is [The Politics of Human Rights](#) (Cambridge)*

*and the second is an edited volume (with Sigrun Skogly) Human Rights and Extraterritorial Obligations (University of Pennsylvania Press).*