

Naval War College Review

Volume 32
Number 6 *September-October*

Article 22

1979

Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia

W. A. Platte
U.S. Navy

William Shawcross

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Platte, W. A. and Shawcross, William (1979) "Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 32 : No. 6 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol32/iss6/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

spectives on this vital area. For naval readers, the sections on the Soviet Navy in terms of its leadership, doctrine and operational force components are especially worthwhile, if somewhat brief, for their relevance to the overall fabric of Soviet military affairs.

There are a few errors throughout the work. For example, the famed Red Army leader Marshal Blyukher is portrayed as the chief Soviet Advisor to Nationalist China from 1924 to 1929 (p. 190). In fact, he had been expelled in mid-1927 after an abortive Soviet-CCP coup attempt and, by late 1929, had already commanded the famed Special Red Banner Far Eastern Army during the first modern Sino-Soviet border clash that autumn. Elsewhere, the Soviet IL-12 aircraft is described as "identical" to the famed U.S. DC-3 transport (p. 158), when the actual equivalent was the Lisunov LI-2 which the U.S.S.R. had both obtained from the U.S. and built under a Lend-Lease licensing agreement during the Second World War. Such slips are merely superficial and hardly detract from the authors' otherwise uniformly superior presentation of much more substantive issues.

Amply supported by nearly 150 charts and tables along with considerable photographic coverage, the work is as attractive as it is informative in its portrayal of the Soviet Military Establishment and the doctrine that comprises its driving force. The Scotts' analysis should serve as a solid source for forming judgments on such current issues as SALT II, MBFR and the East-West military balance and should endure as an authoritative topical reference.

JOSEPH E. THACH, JR.
Office of the Assistant Secretary
of Defense for Public Affairs

Shawcross, William. *Sideshow, Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979. 396pp.

Sideshow is a gripping portrayal of men's frailties. It is a story of man's

inhumanity to man, of deceit, psychological shock, bombing, torture, starvation, murder. William Shawcross would like to establish that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were the villains directly responsible for all these excesses. Yet, somehow, the ultimate impression gained is that Cambodians themselves were most cruel to their countrymen, with Vietnamese, North or South, showing no sympathy for their neighbors and running a close second in cruelty.

If American leadership were error prone, it was less so than that of the grossly inept rulers of South Vietnam and Cambodia. Perhaps another team in Washington could have dealt with Vietnam and Cambodia more to Shawcross' satisfaction than did Nixon and Kissinger. Regardless of who made U.S. decisions, the problems certainly would have been vastly different had stronger men than Sihanouk and Lon Nol ruled in Phnom Penh. No, the author's argument simply won't wash. It is obvious that the real villains in the story were the leaders who made fewest errors as they implacably prosecuted their war, the Hanoi Politburo. *Sideshow* does not include this rationale.

Shawcross seems unable to understand that war is by nature irrational. War is best regarded as a gutter fight, where any participant uses the weapons he has and where even the noble, when perplexed, can lash out. He misreads history if he thinks that America had never lashed out prior to Vietnam.

Henry Kissinger reportedly has deferred publication of his memoirs in order to refute the record of Cambodia deduced by Shawcross. This is fortunate, because although *Sideshow* is touted as history by its publishers, it is lacking on two counts.

There is no sense of perspective. Shawcross has painstakingly compiled and excitingly related a wealth of facts, but does not put them in perspective. He is the barker for his sideshow, but he doesn't relate it to past sideshows.

124 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

Vietnam must be classed as a peninsular war, and a war of land power vs. seapower. The author had no further to look than to his own British history of the Napoleonic wars, particularly in Iberia, to see that the seapower is forced to put infantry on the ground and to deny sanctuary to its enemies. This is a standard course of action, yet it is decried in *Sideshow* because Cambodia's "neutrality" was violated.

Nor does the barker inform his customers what else was going on concurrently in the circus. Shawcross seriously shortchanges the important argument that Nixon and Kissinger were able to close out U.S. participation in the Indochina war by maneuvering at the tripolar, call it "three-ring," superpower level. It is well and good to say that Cambodia suffered and that Washington should have placed a higher premium on Cambodian interests than on Chinese, Soviet or U.S. interests. But if this also meant protracted U.S. involvement rather than withdrawal, what would have been the advantage? Cambodia was not a U.S. pawn in superpower politics, it was a Chinese pawn. Peking used it as long as possible to counter Moscow's use of Hanoi to further the encirclement of China. As we now know, by 1970 the Indochinese war had become an intramural Communist battle, not a "war of national liberation." Nixon and Kissinger saw and seized the opportunity offered by China's search for aid (ping-pong diplomacy) in her burgeoning struggle with Moscow. Who would contain Hanoi? Not the United States, but China. It is fascinating and ironic that this book, so critical of U.S. superpower politics, was published at a moment when China was waging war on Vietnam directly rather than by proxy.

When a good history of the Indochinese war is written, 30, 50, or 80 years from now, it is likely to tell us that American participation in Vietnam, 1954-1975, and in Cambodia,

1969-1975, was only an episode, a sideshow, in a protracted and passionate struggle of Asian realignment.

W. A. PLATTE
Captain, U.S. Navy

Smith, E.D. *Battle for Burma*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979. 190pp.

Burma has been so little in the American public or diplomatic eye in recent years that it is easily forgotten that in World War II Burma was the center of conflicting strategies of Britain, China, Japan and the United States. Brigadier Smith, who served with the Gurkhas in Southeast Asia during the war, started out to write about the battles of the Burma campaign but found that the actual engagements were "dictated by national aims and strategic aims of the combatants" to such an extent that his history had to be fitted into a larger frame.

Brigadier Smith discovered a tangled trail of political aims. Churchill had an obsession with the prestige of a speedy recapture of Singapore, and Burma was only a means to that end; but, he wanted to know from the Imperial General Staff, why had Americans liberated the first town in "British Burma"? The United States saw Burma only as a means of getting supplies to Nationalist China; once the successful two-pronged drive across the Pacific had ensured that no campaign on the China mainland would be necessary, the United States gave Burma a very low priority and even withdrew many air units in 1944. For his part, Chiang Kai-shek was suspicious of the British (a suspicion that was returned when Chiang tried to meddle in British-Indian affairs) and only agreeable to taking even a minimal part in what he saw as an imperialist campaign when the United States offered him additional arms or money. The Japanese, once their thrust toward India had been stopped, went on the defensive in a