The American Air Force had pulverized a Cambodian town by mistake and Communist terror squads had flipped grenades into a packed Phnom Penh movie theatre. Now the corridor floors were peopled by families riddled with shrapnel, deformed by bomb fragments, and covered with charred, peeling skin. Flies homed in through the wall cracks to settle on pools of urine and feces that lay unswept.

A surgeon poked his finger around the gall bladder of a casualty while he chatted with me about the wounded from the warfronts around the capital, the chronic shortage of beds, and lack of plasma.

Down one of the corridors in a filthy room of gray-bare concrete a family squatted around their six-year-old daughter. Her left collarbone jutted out from a strip of deep red flesh. The jagged ends were already darkened and decaying as the bone hung in space. A young man held her right shoulder and propped up her back as she sat on a rag on the floor. I didn’t want to stir the air around the little girl. She was rigid with tension and pain....

It was on August 19, 1973—three days after arriving in Cambodia to report on the war—that I walked through the gates of the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital in Phnom Penh. Cambodia’s agony had begun long, long ago, but this was my personal introduction. Over the next five years scenes like this would be repeated again and again with seemingly endless varieties of detail or, after Cambodia had sealed itself off, they would be recalled by refugees fleeing Pol Pot’s revolutionary laboratory.

Often the death and deprivation were played out in languid heat, against the backdrop of tall sugar palms, lovely Buddhist temples with their surrounding ancestral tombs, and the domestic whiff of prahoc, the beloved fish sauce. The individual stories were recited so often that one had to make an extra effort to register their pain—especially because it was rare to see a Cambodian cry.

Take a not-so-hypothetical peasant in Cambodia’s eastern province of Svay Rieng, bordering Vietnam. His ambitions had been like those of most rural Cambodians and thus most of the country’s people: to watch his rice fields ripen season after season and his children grow up without undue troubles until they could take his place when it came time for a last trip to the village temple.

Over the past decade this man, his family, and village may well have been bombed by American warplanes, overrun by American troops, and looted by the South Vietnamese in the “limited incursions” of 1970. He may have been forced to submit to Communist Khmer Rouge guerrillas and then punished by his government for doing so in the early 1970’s. The Communist victors in 1975 herded him off to a commune, forced his children into labor brigades, and spied on him and his wife. They killed some of his relatives for not sticking to the rules of the new society. In 1978 his village was attacked by invading Vietnamese troops and then in 1979 was raided by the Cambodian rebels fighting them. This farmer is hypothetical because it is only the rare one who has survived all this.

Some would term Cambodia’s downward spiral—from ancient glories through weariness, bloodshed, and invasion—“historical inevitability.” The less sophisticated might say it was bad luck to be so poorly served by geography and aggressive neighbors, to be the Poland of Asia, or worse. “The population is excessively reduced by the incessant wars,” wrote French naturalist and traveler Henri Mouhot during his 1860 journey through Cambodia. When Mouhot hacked his way through the jungle vines and came upon some of the six hundred monuments of Angkor, he noted the stark contrast between these masterpieces and the plagues, famine, and barbarism he saw around him.

Cambodian rulers have frequently looked back on Angkor as the zenith. Prince Norodom Sihanouk tried to emulate, sometimes comically, its god-kings. President Lon Nol, the American-propped general, used the religious traditions of Angkor as a rallying cry against communism. Premier Pol Pot, the ultrarevolutionary, promised that the new socialist utopia he was going to build would be “even greater than Angkor.” And Cambodia’s latest rulers have stitched into their flag the five towers of Angkor Wat—one of the supreme achievements of world architecture.
This virtual obsession reflects the key fact of Cambodia’s story: that since the Angkorian epoch of the ninth through the twelfth centuries the country has been dragged downwards with no end in sight but more suffering and possibly the end of Cambodia as a national entity.

At its height the city at Angkor had more than a million inhabitants. It took seven centuries before such an urban center was again realized, and that was in large part thanks to the refugees who poured into Phnom Penh during the 1970-75 war. It is highly doubtful that the Communist regime between 1975 and 1979, which displaced irrigation of the land as the highest priority, managed such feats of hydraulics as the Angkorian kings, who dug artificial lakes that held sixty million cubic feet of water and, with an elaborate system of canals and dikes, forced large swaths of northwestern plain areas to yield two crops of rice a year.

But by the thirteenth century the decline had set in. The canals had begun to dry up, peasants who had been forced to sacrifice all to feed the monumental egos of the temple-building kings rebelled, and constant wars drained the creative forces. Therevada Buddhism, with its emphasis on peace and personal salvation, had replaced the combative, energetic gods of the Hindu pantheon.

Perhaps the temple of Bayon built at Angkor at the end of the twelfth century tells us something. Two hundred and sixteen stone faces, carved into a forest of towers, look down upon the visitor to this haunting edifice. Even the most scientific of archaeologists have claimed that the strange smiles on the faces looking out in four directions over Cambodia veil a melancholy, a Buddhist stoicism in the face of suffering. In the next five centuries after Bayon, Cambodia shrank from an empire that had included much of latter day Indochina, Thailand, and Malaysia to roughly its present seventy thousand square miles—a country the size of Missouri. The royal court’s grip on power grew brittle. The Thais, a suicidal proposition of some seven million or less Cambodians versus nearly a hundred million Vietnamese and Thais. These observers were innocent of the long history that had brought the Cambodians to their present status.

The French saved Cambodia from total dismemberment by its neighbors, but at the cost of Cambodia’s independence. The period of colonization also reinforced hatred for the Vietnamese, who were brought in by the French to help administer the country. Before 1950 Phnom Penh was a capital of Vietnamese and Chinese minorities. Cambodia was the peasants in the countryside.

It is one of my disappointments not to have visited Cambodia during its short season of peace between 1954 and 1970, between independence from France and the outbreak of yet another war, when the downward slide was temporarily halted. Phnom Penh became one of the loveliest cities in Asia, if not the world—a place of broad boulevards and French colonial buildings flanked by palms and bougainvillea. Sihanouk—the dabbler in films, jazz, and women, the tireless talker, the unpredictable one-man show—held court. The Royal Ballet flourished, its prima ballerina at times one of Sihanouk’s lovely daughters by one of his half-dozen wives. Moonlit and torchlit spectacles were staged among the temples of Angkor and visiting dignitaries were elevated to the backs of elephants for rides through the monuments.

Many of the things said and written about Cambodia in those days approached romantic cliché: Cambodia was the land of the eternal smile, contented peasants who opened their doors to strangers, a gentle country where the tick of the clock had still not replaced the pace of nature. But one journalistic cliché about Cambodia (“an island of peace in the Indochina bloodbath”) rang briefly true. Sihanouk, playing a subtle but dangerous game of political acrobatics with the world’s major powers, had managed to keep his country out of wars in neighboring Vietnam and Laos. Viewed from the perspective of what was to come, Sihanouk’s efforts have more than a touch of pathos. They were doomed to failure. Every power—the United States, Vietnam, the Soviet Union, China—had its own reasons for not leaving Cambodia in peace, and history reasserted itself.

W ar broke out in 1970. The savagery and the stoicism behind the Cambodian smile emerged again. Virtually every other Cambodian became a refugee from his native plot. Shattered temples and the skeletons of what were once homes cut the horizons in the countryside. The war—battle-for-battle—was more violent than that in Vietnam. Few prisoners were taken and those captured alive by both sides were often mutilated and sometimes had their livers cut out and eaten in a barbaric battlefield ritual. The war dead have been variously estimated at 600,000 to 800,000—about one in every ten Cambodians, or the equivalent of 20 million Americans.

The Vietnamese, Chinese, and Americans all fueled observers would ask why the Communist Cambodians had severed links with their onetime revolutionary comrades in Hanoi and were fighting Vietnam and even the Thais, a suicidal proposition of some seven million or less Cambodians versus nearly a hundred million Vietnamese and Thais. These observers were innocent of the long history that had brought the Cambodians to their present status.
the conflict, but its final phase pitted Cambodian against Cambodian. Lon Nol, a mystic half-crippled by strokes, sat in Phnom Penh surrounded by inefficient and invariably corrupt advisors and gradually lost touch with reality. The Khmer Rouge forged a Spartan force and tightened their grip around Phnom Penh. The capital managed to retain some of its charm, and while the sounds of battle could be heard on the outskirts newsmen would “return from the war” to good French dinners and wine in tropical garden restaurants. But in its final days starvation and disease had begun to creep in and the rockets landed on the city from the jungles more and more frequently. An emergency American airlift kept Phnom Penh alive until April 13, 1975.

That day U.S. helicopters whirred out of the sky to snatch the remaining Americans from the beleaguered city. Those of us driving to the evacuation site near the American embassy did not discount the possibility of an outburst of violence and anger against the Americans because many Cambodians felt betrayed by Washington.

But what greeted us at the evacuation zone was not an angry mob but a crowd of smiling, curious children pressing forward, waving, and shouting, “OK, OK, Bye, Bye.” Some of my Cambodian friends had come to see me off, and we joined together for snapshots and the last handshakes. Then the Americans scrambled into the helicopters, past U.S. Marines armed for heavy combat cordoning off the waving crowd, and were swept upward, spiraling to the sky and heading for an aircraft carrier sitting safely out in the Gulf of Siam.

Four days later in Bangkok I heard the news on a radio broadcast from Phnom Penh: “At six this morning we entered the central part of the city from the east and north...the brave soldiers of the revolutionary forces pushed in to link up with troops on the hill of Phnom Penh.” The Communist forces had won, but the white flags in Phnom Penh on April 17 were waving from relief that peace had finally come. That illusion lasted about six hours.

In late May I traveled from Bangkok to the Thai-Cambodian border, both to try to verify or discount some of the strange stories emerging from Cambodia and to see if any of my friends who had declined evacuation managed to join the stream of refugees fleeing their homeland. My friends had not come out. None probably ever will. And the evidence mounted that the refugees’ description of their land as a “living nightmare” was not far from the truth. Hours after Phnom Penh’s capture its more than two million people were ordered out of the city at gunpoint to a countryside that was not prepared to receive them. Families, carrying their children and their possessions, trudged in endless lines out of the capital. The hospitals were emptied of the sick and wounded, who dragged themselves along the roads as far as they could. The dying had begun. Evacuation of all Cambodia’s cities and towns was one way to “eradicate the foul odors of the past” and begin what has been called the most radical experiment in revolution of modern times.

How many died will probably never be known. Some have said hundreds of thousands, others several million.

The refugees spoke of systematic executions of entire classes in the old society—government officials, military men and their families, intellectuals and students. Simple peasants also died for disobeying the rulers who later also turned on their own ranks and conducted a series of bloody purges. The aim of all this was to create “a new glorious society” of neither rich nor poor. The means were total regimentation in rural communes, ceaseless work, no private property, money, or normal commerce, and no freedom of religion. Cambodia had become, the regime proudly said, “one vast work site.”

Coupled with its ultraradical domestic policy, the closely knit leadership group in Phnom Penh turned a xenophobic eye on the outside world—and confronted Vietnam head-on. Marx and Lenin took a back seat to history. Phnom Penh’s leaders recalled centuries of hatred and accused Vietnam of wanting to “swallow” Cambodia.

“By half past noon today, the revolutionary forces of Kampuchea had completely liberated the capital city of Phnom Penh,” a broadcast from Phon Penh informed us in Bangkok.

A new set of rulers in Phnom Penh and no doubt a new sigh of relief that another period of death and fear was over. But the victory of the Vietnamese and the small Cambodian resistance movement they fostered had already sown seeds for another conflict. The Pol Pot forces, supported by China, vowed to carry on a protracted struggle, and the fighting in the countryside continued. Perhaps worse for the future, the Vietnamese had in effect conquered their neighbor: the completion, if one likes, of centuries of Vietnamese pressure and belligerence.

And even if Vietnam has the best of intentions to hand the Cambodians back their country minus Pol Pot, there are few to hand it to.

The young girl had been in the dirty hospital cubicle for two weeks since the stray American bomb tore off her shoulder and upper arm. A nurse dabbed the open wounds with a surgical sponge and the girl whined slowly. The young man’s grip around her tightened. I didn’t know whether to risk being recognized by her family as an American, and I thought about slipping out quietly and forgetting about interviews. I was new to Cambodia. And it may have been misplaced anxiety, because for the girl and her peasant family and for generations of Cambodia’s people of the soil it had been irrelevant whether the man who trampled them under foot was a king who forced them to haul the massive stones of Angkor; a distant, corrupt governor who levied exorbitant taxes; a Communist cadre who killed because a party boss he never saw had ordered it; or an American B-52 bombardier who had pushed a button a few seconds too soon while flying twenty thousand feet above the Cambodian countryside.

The girl, with a lovely round face like so many Cambodian children, said nothing. But as I came closer to squat beside her family to ask some questions we looked at each other squarely in the eyes. Then she smiled.