RICE, RIVALRY, AND POLITICS: MANAGING CAMBODIAN RELIEF by Linda Mason and Roger Brown (University of Notre Dame Press; 256 pp.; $19.95/$9.95)

David Hawk

In the late 1960s and through the '70s the Cambodian people suffered from a succession of disasters: the secret U.S. bombing campaign, the disruptive invasion by the South Vietnamese and Americans, the vicious civil war between Lon Nol’s republican forces and the Khmer Rouge, the terrible revolution of Pol Pot in which mass murder reached genocidal proportions, the invasion by the Vietnamese and Heng Samrin’s dissident Khmer Rouge, and the famine that resulted from the severe disruption in the already declining rice planting and harvesting cycle.

Linda Mason and Roger Brown, graduates of the Yale School of Management who worked for CARE on the Thai-Cambodia border, have written a useful though limited book that analyzes a major part of the Cambodian famine relief operation, one of the largest, most expensive, and complicated of its kind. Rice, Rivalry, and Politics describes the frustration and pathos of the international effort to feed the tenth or more of the Cambodian nation that surged across the Thai border in search of refuge and food—a flow of desperate humanity that included both the Khmer Rouge, driven out of Cambodia by the army of Vietnam, and hundreds of thousands of survivors of Khmer Rouge rule who took the opportunity to flee from Communist tyranny.

There are several strong points to the book. First, it describes well the organizational and political conflicts behind the operation of the rice and rice-seed “landbridge” program that, after a late and artificially limited start, pumped tons of rice and seed across the Thai border into Cambodia. Originally, the “landbridge” idea—conveys of rice-bearing trucks going from Thailand into Cambodia—was rejected by the Vietnamese and by Heng Samrin. So, with their acquiescence, scores of thousands of Cambodian farmers came by oxcart and foot through the ranks of several opposing armies to get vital supplies at a time when food and seed were not reaching Cambodia’s populous western provinces from Phnom Penh and the oft-clogged port of Kompong Som.

Second, there is no political bias here. The role of the U.N. and of voluntary relief agencies in feeding the Khmer Rouge back to life and health is laid out in detail. There is a sober depiction of the chaos, corruption, and venality of the Khmer Seri border camps and their rapacious, petty, and flamboyant warlords, before these areas were brought, with the assistance of the Thai military, under the control of the KPNLF, an anti-Communist resistance group led by former Cambodian Prime Minister Son Sann. Because of the lack of any monitoring, there was rampant diversion of relief supplies in the border operation. The substantial and constructive role of the U.S. embassy in Bangkok in the relief and refugee crisis is fairly portrayed. This is a useful corrective to the misleading accounts of various journalists who depicted United States policy as little more than an extension of the war in Vietnam. Rice, Rivalry, and Politics also has its shortcomings, however. It covers only one of the three major areas of humanitarian concern in the post-1979 Cambodia crisis—the border relief operation. Phnom Penh and the famine and medical aid program supplied from Thailand and Singapore and channeled through the Vietnamese-installed Peoples Republic of Kampuchea remains in the distant shadows. Yet the vast majority of Cambodians remained east of the Vietnamese defense line in Western Cambodia, and this amounted, in dollar as well as popular terms, to the larger portion of the famine relief program. The book omits almost entirely a serious treatment of the principles, problems, and dynamics of the half-dozen “Holding Centers for Kampucheanas” deeper within Thai territory.

The authors, of course, only set out to describe that portion of the relief operation in which they were involved, yet their failure to place their work in the overall context of the Cambodian situation after 1979 adversely affects their analysis and some of their conclusions. They note the corrupting influence of the black markets booming in the midst of the relief effort, but this extraordinary flow of foodstuffs and goods was a recrudescence of a primitive capitalatism that created free markets all over the “socialist” PRK and was enormously important in restoring personal, economic, and social life to the Cambodian people.

More serious is the authors’ inadequate analysis of refugee-related issues. A crucial variable in the lives of the Cambodians who fled to the Thai border was whether or not they went, as over two thousand did, to the “holding centers” inside Thailand to become internationally recognized refugees or whether they remained in the unsafe border settlements. The tension between these two possibilities was and is one of the central dynamics of the crisis. Furthermore, while the Cambodian refugees are in desperate need of advocates, it is surprisingly incorrect to say, as the authors do, that “refugees have no political agents.” They do: primarily, of course, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as voluntary agencies such as the International Rescue Committee and, in Thailand in particular, the Joint Voluntary Agency-Kampuchean Emergency Group, both of which strenuously lobbied the Thai, the U.S. Congress, and the UNHCR on behalf of the refugees. Similarly, the authors’ criticism of the International Committee of the Red Cross’s footdragging on the “landbridge” is not balanced by recognition of its vital role in refugee protection across the border, particularly protection of the Vietnamese “land people” for whom the UNHCR had been unwilling and unable to fulfill its responsibilities.

This failure to deal adequately with the refugee issue skews Mason and Brown’s treatment of the position and role of Thailand. Thai policy in the Cambodian crisis was conditioned not only by the perceived threat to Thai sovereignty and security posed by Vietnamese military and political control of Cambodia, but also by the fact that the 1979 Vietnamese thrust into Cambodia presented Thailand with its fifth massive wave of Indo-Chinese refugees. There had been similar waves after the victory of Ho Chi Minh in Northern Vietnam in 1954, of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, of the North Vietnamese in South Vietnam, and of the Pathet Lao in Laos in 1975.

In a somewhat muddled conclusion, the authors posit that relief organizations should exercise more political influence and drive a harder bargain with the host countries in which they work. In some cases this may be true. In my opinion, the UNHCR should have been more prompt and insistent in dealing with refugee protection issues. But
what Mason and Brown are complaining about is the U.N. food program for the Khmer Rouge, which they feel should have stopped after the Khmer Rouge were no longer literally starving. And indeed, feeding those disciplined mass murderers was deeply and properly disturbing to most of those who had to do it. Yet it is doubtful that UNICEF and other U.N. agencies could have furnished food and excluded them.

The hard reality is that when famine strikes with guns eat first. The Khmer Rouge, left unfed, would have attacked the civilian refugee populations along the border that were receiving food. Relief organizations should, of course, strive to adhere to their humanitarian mandates. But as famine relief workers inside Cambodia could no doubt testify, helping people in need may require compromise and cooperation with prevailing military-political powers.

Its limitations notwithstanding, Rice, Raid, and Politics is well worth reading both as a case study in relief management and as an account of an important aspect of the ongoing Cambodian tragedy.

ENVOY TO THE MIDDLE WORLD
by George McGhee
(Harper & Row; xii + 460 pp.; $25.00)

James W. Spain

While Dean Acheson was “Present at the Creation,” concentrating on reconstruction in Europe and the Far East, George McGhee was devoting himself to the “Middle World”—that vast area reaching from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Bay of Bengal and from the Caspian Sea to the Cape of Good Hope. This first volume of McGhee’s memoirs deals with his government service during the early postwar years, when eleven independent countries of the Near East, South Asia, and Africa were just on their way to becoming the sixty-six they are today, when Britain had begun to withdraw from responsibility east of Suez and the United States to assume it, and when the Soviet Union had initiated its ploy for advantage in the Third World. We see McGhee first as special assistant for economic affairs and coordinator for the Greek-Turkish Aid Program (1946-49), then as assistant secretary of state for the Near East, South Asia, and Africa (1949-51), and as ambassador to Turkey (1951-53). Later, under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, he was to become counselor of the Department of State and chairman of the Policy Planning Council, under secretary for political affairs, and ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany.

The author’s accounts of the events in which he participated are vivid, personal, and crammed with local color. But McGhee has added to each chapter two additional elements that make his memoirs even more valuable and readable: a summary of basic facts and events before and after the period he is describing, in effect providing a current handbook on the Middle World, and the liberal use of both American and British official sources of the period. (Though a Rhodes Scholar and self-confessed Anglophile himself, McGhee sometimes appears in the British records as an impetuous Texas cowboy trying to hassel the staid and dignified British lion’s departure from its overseas lair.)

McGhee’s thirty-two chapter headings are themselves exciting—for example, “Early Days of the Arab Refugee Program,” “Introduction to Apartheid,” “Negotiations With the King of Oil,” “End of an Era in Tunisia and Libya,” “Greek-Turkish Entry Into NATO,” “Britain and Egypt at the Brink,” and “Talks With Mossadeq.” For students of postwar history concerned with the workings of our present world, McGhee’s chapters on meeting with Nehru in Washington and in New Delhi provide a graphic description of the brooding, evasive Indian leader and of the vast conceptual gulf that separated the governments in these two capitals. A similar pair of chapters on the shah of Iran’s first official visit to Washington in November, 1949, and on McGhee’s visit to Teheran in March, 1951, depicts an attractive but overly ambitious young ruler with no political base and a compulsion for things military. Drawing on eighty hours of conversation with Iranian Premier Mossadeq in October, 1951, McGhee sympathetically details the virtues and deficiencies of that remarkable Iranian populist. The author’s description of the discussions and negotiations surrounding nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and of the narrow outlook and peculiar stubbornness of its chairman, Sir William Fraser, will be basic material for any further writing on the subject. In fact, much of what was to come in U.S. relations with both Iran and India are foreshadowed in McGhee’s contemporary accounts.

The brief chapter on “Developing an African Policy” constitutes a micro-encyclo-