

~~TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY~~

May 26, 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Conversation with Lon Nol

Attached is a report from General Haig of his two-hour conversation with General Lon Nol. During the discussion the Cambodian leader stressed that:

- The Cambodian people are behind him and ready to make sacrifices, but he must demonstrate an effective resistance to the enemy. It is imperative to expand the Cambodian government's presence throughout the countryside.
- Cambodia must have the wherewithal to resist, and it can't wait too long.
- Cambodia critically needs:
  - light arms to equip 50,000 troops;
  - additional air support;
  - assistance in equipping and training Khmers in South Vietnam and Thailand (the Thais have promised to form one brigade and two regiments),
  - help in keeping the Mekong River open.
- His government is definitely in the anti-communist struggle and will gladly enter the US bloc of nations if necessary.

In his brief assessment of this conversation General Haig concludes that:

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DECLASSIFIED

E.O. 12958, as amended, Sect 3.5

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By PH NARA, Date 10-1-09

[P. 10012]

- The Cambodian leadership has burned its bridges completely and is resolved to hold firm.
- The leadership is badly shaken, if not desperate, and we must move promptly with more concrete manifestations of US support.
- Lon Nol is emotional and not very realistic (towards the end of the conversation he broke down). It would prove fatal to his government if he were to continue to expect a massive infusion of US assistance.
- Our most urgent task is to get the Cambodians to launch a realistic action program with essentially short-range goals designed to retain the support of the Cambodian people.

Attachment

HAK:JTH:ms:5/26/70

FROM: General Haig, Saigon 655

TO: The White House, Exclusively Eyes Only Mr. Kissinger

Attached is a near verbatim text of my meeting with Lon Nol. I am forwarding it by this means so that you will be able to draw your own conclusions.

In sum the experience confirmed for me that the Cambodian Government or at least its leadership has burnt its bridges completely and is resolved to hold firm. However, it is equally evident that Lon Nol is badly shaken if not desperate and that we must move promptly with more concrete manifestations of U. S. support.

You will note that my efforts were to keep an emotional and not very realistic leader thinking along practical lines. My discussions with Matak being forwarded separately convinced me that Matak and perhaps the military are having problems in keeping Lon Nol's thinking along realistic and practical solutions. If he were to continue to expect a massive infusion of U. S. assistance, I am convinced this would prove fatal to his government. Our most urgent task now is to get the Cambodians to launch a realistic action program with essentially short range goals designed to retain the support of the Cambodian people.

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PARTICIPANTS: BRIGADIER GENERAL HAIG  
LON NOL, PRIME MINISTER OF CAMBODIA

DATE: May 23, 1970 -- 1000 hours

PLACE: PHNOM PENH - OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER

General Haig: The President has asked me to confer with you and to express his admiration for your efforts against our common enemy and to convey to you and the Cambodian people his continuing support for your courageous efforts. He has provided me with a personal letter to you concerning my mission. (Letter opened and translated.)

Lon Nol: Before starting, I would like to express my gratitude and the gratitude of my country for the assistance that the President has given us. You must understand that our country is under heavy attack

and that the situation is very complicated. Although there have been several unfortunate incidents, we are trying to form a network of defense against the enemy.

General Haig: First, I will outline my government's plans as they pertain to our operations in the VC sanctuaries. We contemplate that all American troops will be withdrawn from your territory by June 30.

Lon Nol: One small question. Will the South Vietnamese withdraw also?

General Haig: All American troops will leave by June 30. We visualize that the South Vietnamese in consultation with your government will continue to operate as required in the sanctuary areas in an effort to prevent the enemy from re-establishing these sanctuaries and hopefully to serve as a deterrent to the enemy's efforts to undertake more severe attacks against Cambodia itself. We would hope that the nature of ARVN operations would not be so extensive as to serve as a pretext for more blatant enemy activity in Cambodia.

Lon Nol: I would like to ask this. Let's concede that you are going to withdraw from these border zones and that our friends the South Vietnamese will continue to help us in these areas. We have Khmers in South Vietnam and Thailand. Can the United States equip and train these people and send them back to Cambodia? This equipment could be funneled through the American military aid systems in Thailand and Vietnam. We have already mentioned this to the Thais and with your intercession with the government of Viet-Nam we think it is possible.

General Haig: I understand your proposal and can assure you that my government is examining ways in which we can aid you in your struggle both in the short term and from a longer range perspective. We are evaluating the availability of additional Khmer in South Viet-Nam and can examine their availability in Thailand in consultation with the Thai Government.

Lon Nol: Let me give you some precise information on this subject. At the present time, we have reached agreement with the government of Thailand that they will form one brigade of Khmers from Khmers living in Thailand, train and equip them hopefully with U. S. aid materiel and then send them to fight on Cambodian soil. The Thais have already permitted us to start the propaganda of recruiting this brigade. In addition, the Thais have promised to form 2 regiments of Khmers in the same manner.

We have asked the Thai Government to help us in this manner to facilitate for you the arming of Cambodian (Khmer) troops. When they arrive on our soil, trained and well armed, that will give us a psychological boost. Our people's morale will be raised by the presence of their brothers and we will be better equipped to fight the enemy.

Another corollary solution would be to have you, the Americans, train us. I mention this in particular in the northeast where we could perhaps train and fight together. However, our big problem at the moment is that we do not know what we are going to receive in the way of assistance from your government. General Cao Ky talked to me the other day and it was his position that the South Vietnamese entered Cambodia before the Americans so that the Americans could follow after and give us the material we need. But we are ignorant as to what we will receive and when. Operating in this vacuum makes it impossible for us as to organize ourselves.

General Haig: We, of course, have done much up 'til now and plan to do more. The President has decided to send a military expert who will operate out of our embassy here in Phnom Penh. He will work with your staff in evaluating your needs and will be able to expedite deliveries, counsel your staff on the utilization and distribution of the arms which we will provide. It is important that you recognize that the equipment we will provide will continue to be basic in nature, including rifles, ammunition, machine guns, mortars, and perhaps some rockets. These are the kinds of equipment which will have the most significant short term impact. As you know, President Nixon has promised the American people that we will not furnish advisory personnel.

Lon Nol: Our Army has grown immensely recently. It is very young and we are just now trying to organize it into a viable combat force. We would like to have mobile brigades with 9 battalions in each brigade and about 500 men in each battalion, with a few tanks, a few heavy guns and some aviation.

Up to now, we have been holding our own. True, in the north we have had some rough experiences but in the south things are going well. I must, however, have some arms to give to the students who have volunteered for the Army.

General Haig: Can you give me your appraisal of how the military situation is currently developing?

Lon Nol: For the immediate situation, in the northeast beside Rattna Kiri we have 2-3,000 men who are holding well. I would like to ask your forces to join them and fight side by side with us. We would profit from your air support. This would provide us with a network that would form a block in this area that would be sure to hold. To the south, there is a momentary hole in our defensive network in the two provinces south of Rattna Kiri. We will fill this hole as soon as we can regroup our forces to send them back.

We are also hoping for our Khmer brigades to come from Thailand and South Vietnam. With them and a coalition of Thai and Lao troops we feel we can form a block in the North. This will fortify enormously our spirits and with the aid of our mobile brigades, and perhaps a little American air support, we will be able to resist the enemy,

General Haig: We will consider on an urgent basis the possibility of providing U.S. air support in your northeastern provinces east of the Mekong to help stabilize the situation there. But I must be perfectly frank, in order not to do you any injustice, especially as you plan your immediate defenses. The effect of undelivered promises by me could be disastrous to your planning. We will be unable to employ American troops in Cambodia after June 30. President Nixon has made this commitment to our people. Were he to fail to deliver on this promise, he could jeopardize other equally important measures of support for your struggle.

Lon Nol: I understand your predicament, but we, too, have immediate problems. Give us air support if you can. Give us some aviation. I cite this example. We can set up a network to assist in the liaison of air strikes east of the river but there are NVA/VC on the other side, too, and we need the means to attack them there also. More aviation of our own will give us greater flexibility to strike at several places.

General Haig: I would like to provide you with my current tentative appraisal of the enemy's capabilities. We are destroying his long-established bases of supply along your border with South Viet-Nam.

In the immediate future we must prevent him from re-establishing his logistical support. The enemy has now been precipitously pushed away from his supplies and must now attempt to swim on the sea of your people. He will try to convert your people against these efforts. If you succeed, the NVA/VC will become inoperative for a lack of logistics and his pressure against you will subside and hopefully the land can be retaken.

Lon Nol: I agree wholeheartedly with your analysis. But it is imperative that we now expand our presence throughout the countryside. The people, especially in the northeast, are assessing who is the strongest. They are vacillating between our cause and the visible strength of the VC. The Central Government must be able to exert its power in some way. In the northeast, your air support would help greatly. It would show the people that we too have strength. On our Thai border, we will rally with the Thais and Laos to show the people our will to win.

General Haig: Before I leave Phnom Penh, I would like to sit down with your staff and a map and review the latest troop dispositions, both friendly and enemy.

Lon Nol: We have that for you. There are two places where our troops have held. In Rattanakiri in the Northeast where the situation is critical and in the south. In the south our troops must carry the will power of the nation for the people.

I have asked for light arms totalling 50,000 weapons. The mobile brigades are being formed. Some are in training around Phnom Penh but are without arms. We have an idea of what we want but there is still much work to be done. In some cases we have brigades with only 3 battalions.

Our VN allies operate along the southern border and they will soon be leaving. It will not be efficient nor good if we have to replace their well armed units with our poorly equipped ones. Furthermore, our history with the Vietnamese has been very competitive and we cannot let their units dominate ours even by comparison.

Until yesterday, we have been trying to look into the future. We have the will to fight. Our students and men want to fight but we

lack the wherewithal. We are willing to buy these arms if we have to. When the students have finished their tests, we will assemble 14,000 of them to the rear to form a division. When we can clearly see who will provide what aid for us, then we will buy what additional equipment we need. We must exert our superiority over the enemy. We are definitely in this anti-Communist struggle and if we must enter into your block of nations, we will gladly do so.

General Haig: First, I hope to obtain from you today a summary of the commitments made to your government by other countries, for example, South Viet-Nam, Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, etc.

Secondly, as I have said, the President intends to continue with the provision of individual weapons and equipment through the South Vietnamese or perhaps others. We must not jeopardize these critical steps by impractical ones which cannot be helpful in the short term.

In regard to the question of joining our block of nations, as you know, it is the official position of our government to restore the neutrality of Cambodia, which may prove to be a myth. Nevertheless, it is still important that we not provide Hanoi with additional pretexts and justification for continuing their offensive against your country. We continue to hope to re-establish stability and be able to prevent further escalation or prolongation of the war. Therefore, we believe that it remains, at least for the time being, in the best interests of all parties that Cambodia continue to profess its goal of re-establishing its neutrality. Perhaps this will no longer be possible but we would like to hold this question in abeyance until such time as the enemy's intentions are further clarified.

We believe that Hanoi thought it could quickly overthrow your government by exerting pressure on the Capital through cutting off the lines of communications and its operations in the countryside and then to return Sihanouk and re-establish a government sympathetic to its objectives. However, I believe that the enemy's most urgent need in Cambodia is to re-establish its logistical framework and its lines of communication. Thus, to the degree your people can hold firm now, then the more likely a retrenchment in the level of enemy

pressure will occur as his supplies dwindle further. If this occurs, then your continued claim to neutrality may prove to be the most advantageous course.

Lon Nol: That's a good point with which I agree. To answer your first question with regard to the promises of assistance, we have nothing concrete yet. We have talked to South Viet-Nam and they have agreed to cooperate with us and they have given us some small arms. The Thais have promised one brigade of Khmers immediately and two regiments in the future.

In general, however, all the countries say that they have nothing that they can give us. We need help and help now.

General Haig: That clarifies the situation for me. I now know the proportions of your problem. Permit me to reiterate what kinds of immediate steps we are prepared to undertake. I would also again underline what we will be unable to provide at least in this phase. First, we shall continue to furnish small arms through the South Vietnamese and as our forces thin out in Viet-Nam we may be able to provide additional quantities of individual arms and equipment. Secondly, we will encourage the South Vietnamese to make shallow penetrations along the border after June 30 to prevent the enemy from re-establishing his logistical bases there and to deter further attacks on your country. Third, we will consider providing immediate air support in the northern provinces east of the Mekong. Fourth, we will take under urgent consideration your suggestion that we assist with the arming of additional Khmers in South Viet-Nam and perhaps in Thailand.

Lon Nol: Thank you. Remember two things. First, if we are not made stronger, the intrusions of the well armed South Vietnamese troops will be an affront to my people which can be exploited by the enemy. This is a complex problem that we Cambodians have. We cannot let the Vietnamese exhibit their superiority over us. Now that the VC has lost their bases, they will probably try to give arms to the populace seizing any pretext to spread discontent and build support for the illegal Government of Sihanouk. The press will probably further inflame this situation. I have always said however that there are very very few Cambodian Communists and the Khmer Rouge

movement is very very small. The VC/NVA receive their support primarily from the Vietnamese segment of our population. We must now impose our will on the people and our morale will be greatly lowered if we do not receive the wherewithal to do this.

To assure the victory, we must:

1. Consolidate the northeast and northwest.
2. Consolidate the south.
3. Receive from you urgently 50,000 light arms.
4. Build our mobile brigades, and,
5. Obtain some additional aviation.

The population will not give food to the VC unless we lose face. It is a question of maintaining face and re-establishing our presence in the provinces. Another area where you can help us is along the Mekong by providing some Marines to keep the river open. This is an all important economic and communication link.

General Haig: Yes, that is important and I believe the South Vietnamese can continue to do this.

Lon Nol: Let me give you the character of the atmosphere around here. Historically speaking, as Chief of State I am well obeyed. However, there is much confusion. I suppose that this is caused by the fact that we have not dominated the military situation. Added to this is the fact that we have met a very solid, battle-hardened Vietnamese Army. So, our situation is not like before. I cannot see how we're going to get out of this. We wait for help and we wait, but we can't wait too long.

General Haig: I would like to examine one point you have raised more closely. You must understand that we recognize the problem posed by Cambodia's traditional distrust of the Vietnamese. I spoke to General Abrams on Wednesday about this. Through our advisors we have monitored very closely the South Vietnamese Army's performance in Cambodia. General Abrams reported that the South

Vietnamese Army is performing magnificently and there was little if any abuse of the Cambodian population. I therefore suspect that the VC/NVA are spreading these stories of atrocities. These must be refuted. On my return to Saigon, I will talk to President Thieu and ask him to be sure that public statements by his spokesman as well as the ARVN's future performance do not add to these long standing tensions.

Lon Nol: General Ky has already made such a declaration. He took the bull by the horns right after Svay Rieng was retaken. We have established liaison with South Viet-Nam and we are doing our best to find the solution to this problem. He's agreed that the situation is a little over-heated on both sides. This is just an accessory problem, however, and all can be smoothed over. What is important in these times is to sort the essential from the accessory problems. The essential fact is that we now have weak troops facing a strong, experienced VC/NVA Army. The people are behind me but I must do something in this "essential" area. I must form an effective network of resistance. If I do not, I will lose all that we have accomplished. Cambodians are reasonable. My colleagues and I have been trying to resolve our difficulties. I hope that you are ready to aid us. We feel the ground trembling under us. I have just spoken to the Central Committee and told them that it is not going to be easy to win our liberty. We must be prepared for sacrifices.

However, the government can't wait too long. The ground on which we stand is not firm. We stand ready to make sacrifices to save our country.

General Haig: I am extremely grateful for your evaluation of the situation and am sure that the results of our meeting today will be of great interest to President Nixon. As I stated earlier, he has asked me to convey to you his friendship and to reiterate his support. I want to make it clear what we will do. I understand your outlook and I accept it. Our problem is to overcome them. I do not want to promise you what we cannot deliver, that would be shortsighted. I will discuss your problems with the President and we will study them with the utmost urgency.

President Nixon however also has many problems of his own and he does not want to jeopardize our future freedom of action by making illconceived moves at this time. He realizes that patience, sacrifice and courage are necessary to do the job and that basically Cambodians must save Cambodia.

The enemy can repeat can be beaten. We have already proven they are not invincible. The Army of South Viet-Nam is standing up well against them as you have seen in the south. Cambodians can as well. Our hearts and our sympathies are with you and we will do all we can. (At this point General Lon Nol broke down and sobbed. He then got up and went to the other end of the room until he regained his composure.)

Lon Nol: Help us to buy the military hardware we must have. And please convey to President Nixon our warmest regards and heartfelt thanks for his kind efforts on our behalf.

Lon Nol then gave General Haig his government's written plan for rebuilding its armed forces.

The meeting terminated at 12:15 P. M.