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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

7 January 1959

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Cambodia*

1. We have received evidence of two coup plots to oust Prince Sihanouk from power in Cambodia. Taking into account his unstable temperament, the fact that Thailand and South Vietnam are implicated in the plots, and the already unsettled political situation in Cambodia, these coup plots could have explosive results.

2. Apparently, the two plots are unconnected. One is a military coup to be led by General Dap Chhuon 1/ and the other involves the building up of a resistance movement around Sam Sary 2/. Neither of these plots, judging from available information, is sufficiently well-conceived for quick success, and there would still be considerable likelihood that they would abort if attempted.

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* This memorandum has been discussed with OCI and DD/B.
1) [redacted] "Dap Chhuon's Proposals for Overthrowing Prince Sihanouk."

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2) [redacted] "Thai-Vietnamese Plans for Overthrowing Cambodian Government."

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DOCUMENT NO. _____
NO CHANGE IN CLASS.
 DECLASSIFIED
CLASS. CHANGED TO: TS S G
NEXT REVIEW DATE: _____
AUTH: HR 70-2
10 JUN 1980
DATE: [redacted]

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3. The immediate danger arising from these plots is that they might cause Sihanouk to take some kind of precipitous counteraction which could damage the US position in Southeast Asia. Whether or not the coups are called off [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Sihanouk's suspicions may in fact already be aroused by the disappearance of Sam Sary from Phnom Penh, and there is a good possibility that Sihanouk may now know, or hear, of one or both of the coup plots. In any case, if either plot is activated or fully uncovered, the current uneasy relations between Cambodia and Thailand and South Vietnam would almost certainly become even much worse. Sihanouk would be very likely to assume that the US was behind the plotting and denounce the US -- with of course the full cooperation of the Communist Bloc.

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4. If Sihanouk were to react violently to knowledge of a plot against him, there are a variety of actions he might take, such as a complete diplomatic break with South Vietnam, recognition of the North Vietnam regime, expulsion of the US MAAG, and the acceptance of limited military aid from Communist China. Less likely possibilities would include the acceptance of extensive Chinese Communist military aid and

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advice, or a request for a Chinese Communist guarantee or some form of alliance.

5. Even if the present plots wither away, present trends in Cambodia indicate some serious, continuing problems for the future. Sihanouk remains irrational and impetuous, yet he has a firm hold on the Cambodian people and near absolute control of the government. Among Cambodia's very small elite, there is some dissatisfaction with and opposition to Sihanouk's leadership and Cambodia's present footsy with Communist China. There is no indication that any liberal, anti-Communist political force is shaping up, however, and no political or military figure of sufficient stature has emerged who could restrain Sihanouk or bring about more moderate rule.

6. Moreover, Cambodia's particular neutralist posture has permitted Communist influences in the country to increase, most notably in the Ministry of Information. Communist influence and activity have increased in the Cambodian school system and among the country's 300,000 Chinese and 500,000 Vietnamese. Moreover, since Sihanouk's sudden announcement of de jure recognition of Communist China in July 1958 and his trip to Peiping the following month, he has appeared quite enamored of

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Communist China and certain Communist techniques. The establishment of the Chinese Communist embassy in Phnom Penh has already brought the total of Bloc officials, technicians, and advisors in the country to approximately 100, many of whom are known to be working to expand ~~contacts~~ within the Chinese community and otherwise engaging in subversive activities.

7. We believe that Sihanouk's objective continues to be a neutral Cambodia. He apparently believes that he can successfully play off the Bloc and the West, and, in terms of domestic political power, he does have the capability to do this at least for the present. To the best of our knowledge, there is as yet no effective Communist movement or organization within Cambodia. However, if present trends continue, there is danger that Cambodia's embryonic Communist movement may develop into a major force, riding on the coattails of Sihanouk, and aided and abetted by the subversive activities of the Bloc. Having alienated so many of Cambodia's few capable men and having suppressed the moderate and conservative elements, Sihanouk may in time turn increasingly to indigenous pro-Communists. There is also some danger that at the same time he might become so enmeshed with the Bloc by hasty moves -- taken because of real or imagined grievances against South Vietnam, Thailand, and the US -- as to make it difficult for him to disengage.

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SHERMAN KENT
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES