

# Why Did You Abandon Us?

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“Why did you abandon us?” Those were the haunting words of a survivor of the Cambodian killing fields in 1980. I was the Field Director in Cambodia for the American relief program that included Church World Service, CARE, Lutheran World Relief, and other organizations. The woman who asked me that question saw her husband executed and her children starve under the communist Khmer Rouge. I had no good answer. I could have said, “Because we got tired of fighting and Congress cut off the funds. Our soldiers’ lives were worth more than your lives.” But I knew that I was partially to blame myself.

I was active in the anti-war movement. I believed, and still believe, that the American bombing and invasion of Cambodia and support for Lon Nol’s overthrow of Prince Sihanouk were both strategically stupid and evil. I am still furious that Nixon and Kissinger inflicted a secret bombing on Cambodia that drove Sihanouk and many other Cambodians into the murderous arms of the Khmer Rouge. President Ford predicted a bloodbath if they took over. George McGovern said it would not happen. Ford was right. McGovern, to his credit, saw he was wrong by 1977— Cambodia was drenched with blood -- and advocated international intervention to overthrow the Khmer Rouge. But his change of heart came too late. The U.S. was tired of war in Southeast Asia. So we did nothing. Two million people died.

I was an eye-witness to the mass graves, one of the first westerners to re-enter Cambodia and hear the stories of the survivors. I became determined to bring the Khmer Rouge killers to justice, and have spent the past twenty-six years doing that. In 1981, I founded the Cambodian Genocide Project to gather the evidence and get a case brought against the Khmer Rouge in the International Court of Justice, the only venue then available. But the Cold War froze our efforts. Only after a 1991 peace agreement and 1993 elections were we able to get the U.S. to support trials of the Khmer Rouge leaders. By 2003, the Cambodian government and U.N. agreed to establish a criminal tribunal, and after numerous drafts by me and others, the judges adopted rules of procedure this summer. Investigation and prosecution of the Khmer Rouge leaders’ crimes have finally begun.

Living in Cambodia and witnessing the deadly result of our abandonment of that country to the Khmer Rouge profoundly changed my view of the wars to prevent the communist takeover of Southeast Asia. The cause was just, even if our strategy was stupid.

We are in much the same position today in Iraq that we were in Cambodia in 1973.

The U.S., British, and other coalition partners invaded Iraq twice. We finally overthrew Saddam Hussein, a genocidal dictator who killed hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Shia Arabs. Skeptics say that the U.S. invasion opened a Pandora’s box of ethnic and religious divisions in Iraq. They say the invasion of Iraq was a strategic mistake. We should have focused on Afghanistan. Maybe they are right, just as the critics of the American invasion of Cambodia were right. But they have the burden of proof that Saddam would have abandoned genocide and aggression.

Blaming Iraq’s civil war on the American invasion is similar to blaming the U.S. for the Cambodian genocide. It is upside-down logic to blame U.S. forces that are trying to stop the Iraqi civil war, just as it is perverse to blame America for communist atrocities.

The U.S. goal in Iraq is to leave Iraq able to defend itself against terrorist tyranny. There are two ways to leave Iraq: responsibly and gradually, acknowledging our mistakes, but learning from them and turning the fight over to the Iraqis. That is the strategy that General Petraeus, President Bush, and the Iraq Study Group led by James Baker III and Lee Hamilton recommend, and that our forces are now following.

The other way to leave Iraq – Quit Now – is just as wrong for Iraq as it was for Cambodia and Vietnam in 1973. Pulling out our troops and cutting off the funds to train and rebuild the Iraqi Army so they can effectively fight Al Qaeda terrorists will have the same disastrous result that it did in 1973 when Congress cut off the funds to the South Vietnamese and Cambodian armies. By 1975, South Vietnam was over-run by the North Vietnamese Army in blatant violation of the Paris peace treaty, and Cambodia fell to the murderous Khmer Rouge.

There are two facts the Quit Now crowd ignore. First, time only runs in one direction -- forward. Past mistakes cannot be undone. Current policy must be planned from today, not from what we wish we had done four years ago. Senator McCain and Secretary of State Powell were right that we should have sent more troops. We should have followed the careful planning by the State Department for post-war reconstruction, tossed aside by Secretary Rumsfeld. We should have quickly turned Iraqi government over to Iraqis, rather than appointing a Viceroy. We should not have fired thousands of people who joined the Baathist party only so they could hold jobs. We should not have dissolved the Iraqi Army, leaving 200,000 armed men unemployed, creating an instant insurgency.

General Petraeus and the Iraqi government have recognized those mistakes and have adopted a strategy that is driving terrorists out and placing Iraqis in charge of their own destiny.

The second fact the Quit Now crowd ignores is that bad situations can get worse, even if you run away from them. American withdrawal from Cambodia opened the gate to the Khmer Rouge killing fields. Iraq's enemies have not yet been defeated. Iraqis still reluctantly depend on us to provide the time they need to create a new federal state. The goal of Al Qaeda, the Mahdi Army, and other terrorists is to polarize Iraq: drive Sunnis out of Shia areas and vice versa, using genocidal massacres and suicide bombings of mosques and markets. They foment chaos, destroying security, producing millions of refugees. They kill the moderate leaders needed to rebuild Iraq. Iraq today is in the polarization stage that precedes genocide. If American troops quit now, Iraq like Cambodia will be drenched in blood.

If Congress gives in to the rising drumbeat of defeat, and we quit now or too soon, as we did in Vietnam and Cambodia, we will show the world it cannot count on America. Those who depend on us will lose hope. And someday Iraqis will ask us, "Why did you abandon us?"

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