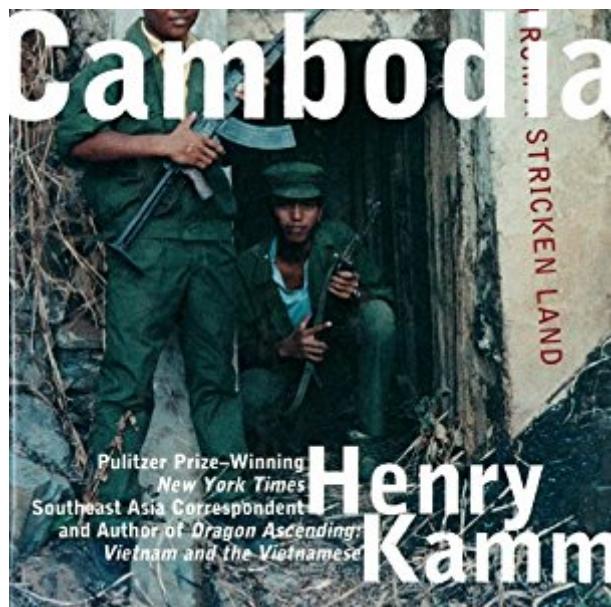


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# Cambodia: Report From A Stricken Land



## **Synopsis**

Based on his observations over three decades, Henry Kamm, Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times Southeast Asia correspondent, unravels the complexities of Cambodia. Kamm's invaluable document - a factual and personal account of its troubled history - gives the Western listener the first clear understanding of this magic land's past and present.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Henry Kamm's book provides a good overall view of events in Cambodia of the last thirty years. If you are looking for an in depth account of the Khmer Rouge genocide, look elsewhere. Kamm's book covers the events that led up to the Khmer Rouge takeover, covers their brief rule and their attempts to regain power and finally the downfall of Pol Pot. Along the way Kamm describes the tragedy of a poor country trying overcome the horrors inflicted upon it by its own people. A very well written and readable book by an author who knows his subject well.

Great history of recent events in Cambodia. Except for a few lapses, I found it very readable book. Considering the book's length, you can't really lose with this one (I read it easily on a weekend). The book benefits from Kamm's background. He is from a former Eastern bloc country. Kamm is not afraid to identify 'villains' and the flaws of supposed 'heroes'. Furthermore, as a reporter for the New York Times, Kamm's skills at exposition are outstanding. Still, the book has two general failings: (1) pedantic grammar and (2) sycophantic tendencies. If memory serves, English is not Kamm's first language - and sometimes it shows. Some of his sentences are an endless series of clauses, taking

on a stream of consciousness quality. Fortunately, the entire book is not like this. It seems Kamm simply tries too hard. Second, Kamm generally offers high praise for those who have consented to be interviewed - at least initially. For example, Kamm heaps praise on Prince Sihanouk. To be fair, he later criticizes (harshly) the Prince. Still, the reader is sometimes left to wonder how 'balanced' Kamm's point-of-view really is. Although Kamm is blameless for not having equal access to the Khmers Rouges as he does their successors, the reader is left with the uneasy feeling that the book suffers from factual gaps.

How lucky you are in a country where we hold our sense of victimhood as dearly as we do Mom and apple pie, "Cambodia: Report from a Stricken Land" should be required reading. Though author Henry Kamm is a New York Times correspondent, this is not the standard history written from an U.S. foreign policy perspective. Kamm has reported from Cambodia for four decades; his is the tale of the Khmer people. Like much of Southeast Asia, Cambodia has long been impoverished, undeveloped and far more corrupt than Chicago in its heyday. Though Kamm's coverage stretches back a few hundred years, it largely centers on the last 40: the height of Cambodia's suffering. He chronicles the rule of a despot prince, the brutal idiocy of communism and the brief yet notorious reign of the Khmer Rouge, which matched the Nazis horror for horror. Equally fascinating is a view of the Cold War from a Third World pawn's perspective. For the last 50 years, Cambodia has been the foreign policy slave of France, the U.S., Vietnam, China, Thailand and the U.S.S.R. Yet you'll find no talk of democracy's glorious triumph - a la Reagan - in this book. Without preaching, Kamm starkly illustrates how American policy has precious little to do with human rights and freedom. It had everything to do with self-interest. Many Cambodians died because of it. If there's a quibble with the book, it's that Kamm occasionally jumps from date to date, making it a tad hard to follow. But this is a minor complaint. The wonderful thing about Kamm is that he doesn't use the dry, thesis-paper speak used by so many history writers. This is a book that is both personal and compassionate.

Total honesty is most frequently received as a slap in the face. Unfortunately, the recipient can never seem to understand how richly-deserved or well-intentioned the painful gesture might be. The "powers that be/were" in Cambodia, the United Nations, and the United States State Department, will only react with anger at the sting of Henry Kamm's assessment of the current state of affairs in Cambodia. But even that reaction would be an improvement over the past. "The insouciant Khmer smile that continued to beam when there was nothing to smile about" infected UNTAC, US

diplomacy, and the international community immediately upon arrival in Cambodia. As Kamm aptly puts it, "UN officials stationed in the poorest countries of the world share an understandable inclination to work themselves into a constant state of determined optimism about their mission". The modern American "politician diplomat" is no different than his/her UN counterpart in that regard. Readers of "Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia" by Stephen Morris will perhaps reach their own conclusions as to why only Vietnam will remain secretly pleased at Cambodia's fate. Henry Kamm has made a major contribution with this remarkably blunt, decidedly angry work. Anyone interested in Cambodia should take Henry Kamm's words to heart.

Having just returned from a three week trip to Cambodia, I would not claim any expertise but did find myself wondering what book the Phnom Penh reviewer had read. Kamm vividly communicates the pain and the pathos of the Cambodian people as they have been used and misused both as pawns in larger geopolitical struggles by Thailand, Viet Nam, China, the former Soviet Union, and, sadly, the United States as well as their internal political leaders- including the current batch of squabbling, feuding leaders obsessed with power and the perquisites of power while the pressing needs of the masses of the Cambodian people go abegging. While one can sympathize with Kamm's plea that some disinterested international body must be found to run the country until a new generation of leaders emerges, that is not a viable alternative to the current paralysis. Further it appeared to me that Cambodia is already nurturing an unhealthy over-dependence upon NGO's and what NGO's can do. For better or worse, it is the Cambodian people themselves who will determine and shape their own destiny ! Henry Kamm's book helped me find eyes to see, and it is the resiliency, the sparkling eyes, and the yearning hopes of the Cambodian children I met as well as their haunting fears and legacy of pain that I shall never forget

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