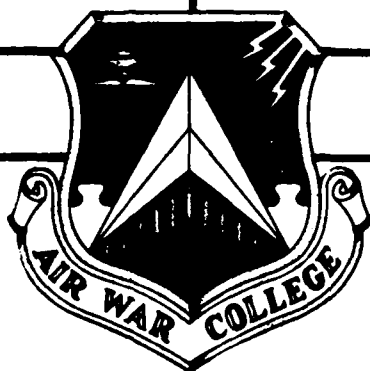


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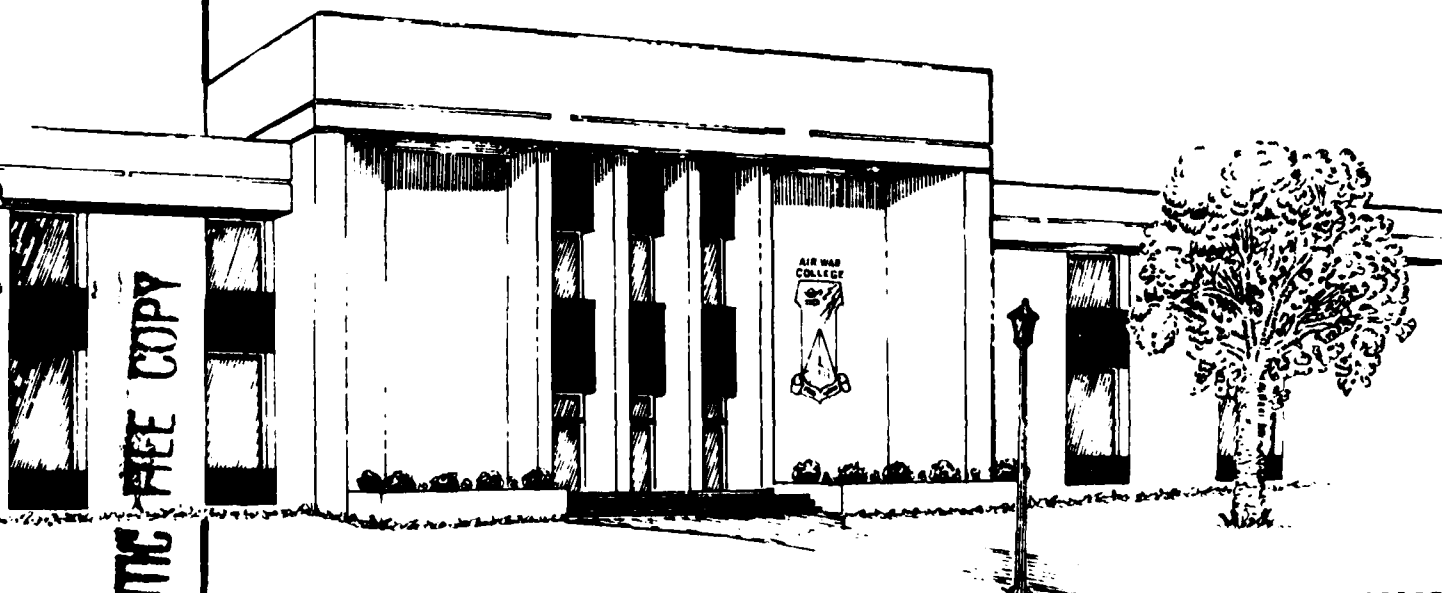
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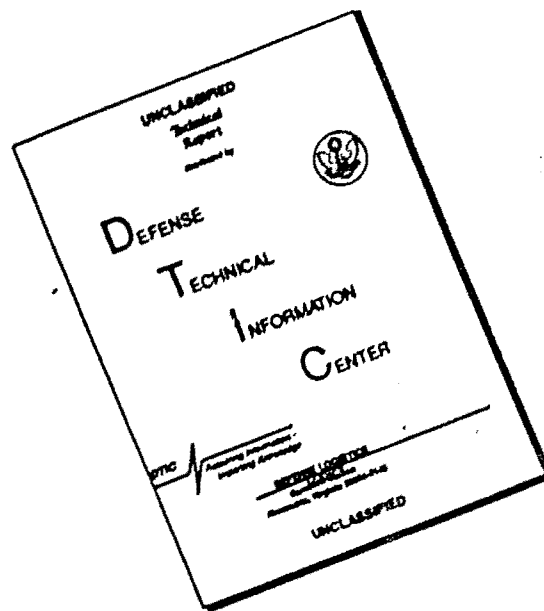
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CAMBODIA IN TURMOIL

by

Mervin T. Avants, Jr.
Lieutenant Colonel, USAF, MSC

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN
FULFILLMENT OF THE RESEARCH
REQUIREMENT

Research Advisor: Mr. Neal Huntley

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

March 1986



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AIR WAR COLLEGE RESEARCH REPORT ABSTRACT

TITLE: Cambodia in Turmoil

AUTHOR: Mervin T. Avants, Jr., Lieutenant Colonel, USAF,
MSC

Cambodia, or the People's Republic of Kampuchea, has existed as a nation since the fifth century, and in general has offered a peaceful, agrarian life to its inhabitants. But, for the past decade this once tranquil land has suffered turmoil and tyranny unique in its barbarism. During this period its population has fallen from seven to six million, its economy has been devastated, its people systematically terrorized, and its sovereignty stolen. This paper reviews Cambodia's history, and then focuses on the events of the past decade, highlighting the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese takeovers, Cambodia's situation today, and concluding with a forecast of the Khmer peoples' future.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Mervin T. Avants, Jr., (M.H.A., Medical College of Virginia; Ed.M., Boston University) was introduced to Cambodia through two years in Southeast Asia (1966-1968). At the time, Cambodia was a peaceful "buffer" nation with a successful, if not impressive, agrarian economy. Lieutenant Colonel Avants served with the 9th Aeromedical Evacuation Group during that period and traveled throughout the Far East and Southeast Asia. He has been awarded a number of decorations, including the Air Medal. He is a graduate of Armed Forces Staff College as well as the Air War College, class of 1986.

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I INTRODUCTION

Cambodia is a relatively small nation in Southeast Asia of 69 thousand square miles, about the size of Missouri. The population is currently estimated to be about 6,000,000, though estimates prior to 1976 put the population as high as 7.3 million.¹ Cambodia is bordered by Thailand on the north and west, Laos to the northeast, and Vietnam to the east.

Since 1970 the nation has been constantly embroiled in insurrection, famine, invasion, and war. Because Cambodia was already a backward country by modern standards, these events have served to devastate this once peaceful society. This article begins with Cambodia's history, but focuses primary attention on events of the past fifteen years, with emphasis on the regimes of Pol Pot and Heng Samrin, and a review of superpower involvement and perspective.

The nation is referred to as Cambodia throughout, in concert with U.S. government policy. The current Vietnamese-backed government of Heng Samrin officially calls the nation the People's Republic of Kampuchea. However, that government is not recognized by the United States. The non-communist organizations fighting for liberation also call their country Cambodia.

II HISTORY

Though Cambodia lies wounded and helpless at the crossroads of history in 1986, the nation was once a great power in its region. The Khmer people, ancestors of today's Cambodians, trace their history back to about 100 A.D. and the establishment of a nation called Funan in the area that is now Cambodia.² During the 10th century an extremely influential and powerful state known as the Khmer Empire rose to prominence in the region. Its capital was at Angkor, northwest of the Tonle Sap (Great Lake). Enormous, ostentatious palaces were constructed over the centuries in that area which remain as tourist attractions today. The glory days of the Khmer Empire included territories which incorporated all of today's Cambodia as well as parts of modern-day Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma, and Malaysia. The empire may have overextended its reach, for it began to decline in the 14th century, ultimately succumbing to repeated Thai attacks in the 15th century.³ Over the next few hundred years Cambodia was alternately dominated by one or another of its more powerful neighbors, never regaining a semblance of its past glory.

In the mid-19th century the great Western powers, led by the English, began to show greater interest in the region. British influence in Burma stimulated heightened French interest in the entire area, leading to a French capture of Saigon in 1859, followed by expanded French control to include Cambodia in 1864. This state of affairs remained in effect until World War II, when Japan overran Cambodia in 1941.

Following the war, the French returned to power in Cambodia (and Vietnam). Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who had been made king by the French in 1941, embarked on a campaign for Cambodian independence. As a result of French failures in Vietnam, the Geneva Peace Conference of 1954 partitioned Vietnam into north and south, recognized Cambodia's neutrality, and called for free elections to select a Cambodian government. Prince Sihanouk abdicated the throne, ran for election, and became chief of state in 1955. He was immensely popular with his people, possessing traditional authority as well as benefiting from the nation's successful struggle for independence. This enabled his party to win every seat in the Assembly,⁴ cementing his influence in the nation for the next 15 years. Though his party was the only one of significance

in the country, and his position was unshakeable, Sihanouk did allow his Premier, General Lon Nol, some power.

Sihanouk became a skilled and successful "neutralist" in the international cold war as well as in the hot war underway in Asia.⁵ He played his neighbors off against one another; the U.S. off against the U.S.S.R.; accepted U.S. aid to fight the Cambodian communist movement, which he called the Khmers Rouges; at the same time permitting North Vietnam and Viet Cong forces to use Cambodian territory as staging areas in their war against the South Vietnamese and the U.S. He established close relations with the People's Republic of China to counter the North Vietnamese threat to Cambodia, capitalizing on Mao Zedong's desire to avoid a Ho Chi Minh dominated Cambodia. In general, Sihanouk's accomplishments in maintaining the tightrope balance of his knotty neutralist stance were impressive. Certainly, no other Cambodian could have achieved equal success during these difficult years.

From 1955 to 1965, Cambodia retained a relatively calm exterior, especially in comparison to its South Vietnamese neighbor. The seeds of increased unrest in Cambodia were being nurtured, however. In 1965 Saloth Sar, who later took the name Pol Pot, journeyed to both

Hanoi and Beijing to seek increased funding for his Kampuchean Communist Party. He was turned down in both China and North Vietnam. General Lon Nol, Sihanouk's army commander, also sought military assistance from Beijing that year and was turned down.⁶

Meanwhile, the U.S. and South Vietnam were beginning to complain that Cambodia served as a sanctuary for North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces, and that they were being supplied through Cambodian-based depots. As the fighting in South Vietnam intensified in 1967, complaints escalated and were accompanied by hints that the U.S. might claim a right to pursue the Viet Cong into Cambodian territory.⁷ At about the same time, the first Communist revolt against Sihanouk's government began in Battambang province and spread to surrounding areas before being quelled some months later.⁸ Communist-led revolts in Laotian and Thai border provinces continued to increase in the late 1960's.⁹ In January, 1968, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge group initiated armed struggle against the Sihanouk regime, and were affecting several provinces by February.¹⁰

The shrewd and vigilant Sihanouk was well aware of the fragile nature of Cambodia's hard-won neutrality in Southeast Asia, and travelled the country imploring the

Khmer Rouge not to destroy the delicate independence he had won for the nation. He even implied that failure to cooperate with his wishes might lead him to hand over the reins of power to General Lon Nol, who could be expected to apply direct and relentless suppression against the dissidents.¹¹

In March, 1969, the United States began to bomb suspected North Vietnamese and Viet Cong sanctuaries in Cambodia. Though Sihanouk had agreed to the bombing (after winning U.S. concessions on Cambodian territorial rights to disputed South Vietnamese-held lands,) he continued to feel that the best solution to North Vietnamese-Viet Cong incursions into Cambodia was political pressure. Many of his followers, including General Lon Nol and deputy prime minister Sirik Matak, disagreed and wanted to forge a U.S.-Cambodian alliance to drive the Vietnamese out of the country militarily. The anti-communist Cambodians increased their visibility and influence so significantly that, a year later, with Sihanouk out of the country and major anti-Hanoi demonstrations underway in Phnom Penh, General Lon Nol and Sirik Matak were able to stage a bloodless coup and assemble a new government under their leadership.¹²

With Sihanouk's fall, Cambodia's flimsy neutralist structure collapsed on the helpless country. South Vietnamese units attacked the North Vietnamese inside Cambodia almost immediately. The North responded with a counteroffensive of its own. Within a month 20,000 U.S. and South Vietnamese troops were in Cambodia in what President Nixon termed an "incursion."¹³ Though domestic U.S. protest forced the withdrawal of U.S. troops in June, the South Vietnamese troops remained, the North Vietnamese troops withdrew deeper into Cambodia, and the war continued with American bombing support. By the end of 1970, all of Cambodia was at war.

The results were catastrophic. Over the next five years the country was wracked by war. The U.S.-backed Cambodian forces were in continual conflict with the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, and the Khmer Rouge. The single most significant long-term event may have been Prince Sihanouk's support for the Khmer Rouge, freely given following the Lon Nol coup. With Sihanouk's prestige and reputation behind them, the Pol Pot forces gained recruits and were able to absorb the brunt of the fighting from the North Vietnamese.¹⁴ After South Vietnamese forces were withdrawn in 1971, Lon Nol's army

suffered a decisive military defeat.¹⁵ Two years later, U.S. military support to the Lon Nol government was crippled as a result of U.S. Congressional funding restrictions. In January, 1975, the final Khmer Rouge offensive began. President Ford requested \$222 million dollars in military assistance for Cambodia that month, stating to no avail in his message to the Congress that the U.S. "...objective in Cambodia is to restore peace and to allow the Khmer people an opportunity to decide freely who will govern them."¹⁶ In early April, Lon Nol fled, and on April 17th, 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh and Pol Pot's reign of terror began.

III KHMER ROUGE RULE

For the next three and one-half years the Khmer Rouge government wrought a living hell on its people. For reasons which remain uncertain, but which are speculated on later in this article, the new government's first act was to evacuate the city of Phnom Penh, herding several million residents into the countryside without warning, preparation, or consideration for age or health.¹⁷

The Pol Pot regime apparently believed that the nation's hope for salvation lay in a radical return to traditional agrarian ways. In its paranoiac and manic

commitment to this concept the Khmer Rouge rage was apparently directed at all who were not perceived as poor, simple farmers. Hundreds of thousands lost their lives through purges, work camps, forced relocations, and random violence.

For example, the province of Prey Veng, located near the Vietnam border, was feared by the Khmer Rouge as a source of smuggled Vietnamese arms. The 900,000 members of the province were uprooted and driven westward. In the process, untold thousands were murdered, tens of thousands more died along the route of the forced march. Today there are 836 identified mass graves in the Prey Veng area, some with as many as 3,000 bodies. Estimates of a Prey Veng committee are that half the pre-Khmer Rouge population of 900,000 died.¹⁸

Stories of irrigation canals that would not function because of the profusion of corpses clogging them, thousands of crushed skulls of babies littering the countryside, slave labor, execution, and torture are so widely reported in and out of the country that their veracity is now accepted, even in the face of limited documentation. The current regime has established a kind of memorial to the Khmer atrocities called the "Tuol Sleng

Museum of Genocidal Crime," where visitors can see torture chambers and thousands of skulls on display.¹⁹

Estimates run as high as two to three million people killed between 1970 and 1980 as a result of war and the Khmer Rouge takeover.²⁰ Special attention was accorded the educated and the middle class, and their destruction was a top priority of the Khmer Rouge.²¹ Of more than 500 physicians practicing prior to the arrival of Pol Pot, only 40 have been found.²² Famine and disease followed in the wake of purges of the best and brightest of the Cambodian people. The population of the country declined steadily throughout the Pol Pot genocide.

Logically, the Khmer Rouge had no success managing the national economy. The entire nation exported less than one million dollars in 1977.²³ Incredibly, in the midst of this economic and human holocaust, a writer for a respected Western periodical reported that the Khmer Rouge constitution "...taps profound moral roots in Khmer political tradition...This lends the revolution almost sacred force...Like the puritan revolution in England..."²⁴ The same article went on to point out that Cambodians leaving the country did so easily as the regime seemed to acknowledge the existence of "...the few

whose values could not be accommodated in a people's state."²⁵

Pol Pot and his cronies had no more success with foreign relations than they did with internal affairs. They developed immediate friction with all their neighbors, the most serious being with the Vietnamese, with continuous border warfare underway from early 1978 onward.²⁶

Though the Pol Pot regime often boasted that it had brought to an end two thousand years of Cambodian history, it chose to follow precisely the same anti-Vietnamese policy as its predecessors. What motivated Pol Pot was probably a combination of savage nationalism and intense competition with the Vietnamese Communists for leadership of the Kampuchean Communist Party. It is certainly possible that Phnom Penh was evacuated as ferociously as it was because of fears on the part of the Khmer Rouge leadership of a Vietnamese takeover.^{27, 28}

In any case, the Khmer Rouge political inability to deal with its Vietnamese neighbors proved fatal. On December 25th, 1978, the Vietnamese launched a massive invasion. Within two weeks, Pol Pot and his followers had fled to the mountains of western Cambodia.

IV VIETNAMESE TAKEOVER

There is disagreement amongst Western analysts as to why the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and what their goals are in that country. Many do agree, however, that the first thing driving the Vietnamese is their own security, and that they want to see a close working relationship amongst the nations of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.²⁹ They certainly could have invaded Cambodia before 1978. As one writer observed prior to the invasion, Vietnam's well-equipped army of over 600,00, backed by an armed militia of 1.5 million, had little to fear from Cambodia's army of 90,000.³⁰ It appears that the Vietnamese delayed invading pending assurance of Soviet support, probably gained in June 1978 when they joined COMECON, the Soviet controlled Council for Mutual Economic Assistance.

By the end of January, 1979, the Vietnamese armed forces occupied all population centers of Cambodia.³¹ The Vietnamese installed a puppet government led by Heng Samrin, a Khmer Rouge defector, and Democratic Kampuchea became the People's Republic of Kampuchea, the PRK. The Vietnamese front government immediately distanced itself from its predecessor and announced a liberal program

stating that all Cambodians had a right to their "...old native land..." and to build a life of happiness. They promised freedom of movement, religion, private ownership, and a general reversal of past policies.³² In addition, the Heng Samrin government signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with its Vietnamese supporter legitimizing the presence of Vietnamese troops and agreeing to renegotiate common borders.

And what of the people? As the Khmer Rouge fled, they took rice and destroyed food storage areas to aggravate the Vietnamese governance problems. Many villagers were forced to eat their seed rice. Famine followed, refugees were generated. New local leaders were appointed by the government and, though the Vietnamese puppet regime condemned Pol Pot and his chief henchman, Ieng Sary, to death, almost no other Khmer Rouge officials were charged with any crime. In fact, many were appointed to positions of authority--surely a bitter pill for ordinary non-Communist Cambodians.³²

Over the six years since the Vietnamese invasion and occupation, Cambodia has remained an enigma, its leadership seldom seen or interviewed. Evidence is beginning to mount, however, that the long-range

Vietnamese goal is to colonize Cambodia. A recent visitor there noted that some 700,000 Vietnamese, including farmers, technicians, and merchants, have been settled in the country, apparently, occupying much of the best land and fishing grounds.³³ There is adequate room for the emigres with a Cambodian population that is now 60% female and almost half under the age of 16--a legacy of the Pol Pot years. In addition, at least part of the population feels that the Vietnamese, in spite of the hardships they inflict, are preferable to the agony of a Khmer Rouge return.³⁴ Cambodia has essentially ceased to exist politically under the rule of its Vietnamese puppet government.³⁵

Though Vietnamese leaders had expected a quick and easy victory when they invaded Cambodia, they had no such good fortune.³⁶ In spite of the fact that their invasion had expelled the deadly Pol Pot from power, they encountered a revival of anti-Vietnamese sentiment. In addition, the Khmer Rouge escaped virtually intact to their mountain strongholds. While Hanoi was installing its puppet government in Phnom Penh, the experienced Khmer Rouge were already launching a guerrilla war against the occupying forces. Simultaneously, non-communist groups

who had been operating against the Khmer Rouge from Thai border strongholds began to ally against both the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese. To further complicate Hanoi's problems, the Thai's (uncomfortable at the sight of their traditional Vietnamese enemy massing troops along their border) began allowing the Chinese to use their territory as safe haven in the resupply of the Khmer Rouge. And to complete the Vietnamese predicament, universal international condemnation greeted their military success.

Two key non-Communist, anti-Khmer Rouge, anti-Vietnamese groups emerged. A former Cambodian prime minister, Son Sann, working with former Republic of Cambodia General Dien Del, brought together five non-Communist resistance groups to form the Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces, the KPNLAF. Prince Sihanouk again became active from his base in China and forged the Sihanoukist National Army, the ANS, in 1981. Though Son Sann and Sihanouk assiduously sought assistance from the free world, it was clear by 1982 that the needed help was not forthcoming.³⁷ With more volunteers than they could equip, they were compelled to accept a Chinese offer of help they had wanted to avoid because of Chinese insistence they ally with the Khmer Rouge. With no alter-

native, they accepted China's offer, joined with the Khmer Rouge, (though all retained the right to operate independently) and on 22 June 1982 the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, the CGDK, was born.

V CAMBODIA TODAY

War continues in Cambodia. Heng Samrin's PRK forces, in close alliance with the powerful Vietnamese military, are on the offensive against the forces of the CGDK. The numbers weigh heavily in favor of the PRK, with a military of about 30,000, plus Vietnamese occupation forces of 160,000 to 180,000. The CGDK is thought to comprise about 30,000-35,000 Khmer Rouge, 12,000-15,000 KPNLAF, and 5,000 or so ANS troops.³⁸ Following the spring 1985 (dry season) offensive, all CGDK bases were overrun by PRK forces.³⁹ The CGDK response has been to dismiss their military weaknesses by insisting that their intent is to fight a guerrilla war, and bases are unnecessary.

Politically, the CGDK's diplomatic success is impressive. They maintain a seat in the United Nations, and continue to win overwhelming votes in the General Assembly for withdrawal of all Vietnamese forces. Reports from inside Cambodia indicate the people are increasing their support for the coalition CGDK government.⁴⁰ A

concern in the long term can be the Khmer Rouge special relationship with China, which assures their forces are larger, better equipped, and more powerful than the non-Communist Son Sann and Sihanoukist forces. In the unlikely event of a Vietnamese withdrawal, the Khmer Rouge would be the dominant force in the country. This could certainly bode poorly for the non-Communist forces of the CGDK, who even now complain of Khmer Rouge aggression and lack of cooperation.⁴¹

All indications are that the Heng Samrin government is secure. In a mid-October congress of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party in Phnom Penh, the 51-year old Heng Samrin was re-elected party secretary.⁴² The unexpected "retirement" of Pol Pot in August as commander of the opposition guerrilla army may indicate some progress on the part of the Vietnamese client government in forcing concessions on the part of the CGDK.⁴³ The Heng Samrin government position has consistently been that the Pol Pot clique must be eradicated before any negotiations can be initiated between the two sides.

In the meantime, stalemate continues. As the dry season approaches, the Vietnamese and Kampuchean forces gear up for another offensive. The people continue to

suffer. The country remains unable to feed itself with rice production only about half the 1969 total (though triple the 1979 total.)⁴⁴

VI CONCLUSION

With the experienced Khmer Rouge once again operating as a guerrilla force, buttressed by the KPNLAF and the ANS, there is no evidence that the Vietnamese or their client government will be able to eliminate them. On the other hand, the CGDK, substantially outnumbered and outgunned, is not expecting clear victory.

Time appears to be on the side of the Vietnamese. With large numbers of their countrymen taking up residence in Cambodia, and with a Vietnamese-dominated infrastructure evolving to manage the affairs of the nation (in the absence of the capable Cambodians largely liquidated by the Khmer Rouge,) stalemate must ultimately favor the Vietnamese Communists.

The future, then, holds continued suffering and turmoil for the Cambodian nation. The likelihood of freedom prevailing there is, of course, nil. Oppression and Vietnam will dominate in the short term, and likely in the long term as well.

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27. See Chandler above, p. 192.

28. See Smith above, p. 280.

29. See Leepson above, pp. 257-258.

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