In recent years, historians of U.S. foreign relations have examined American attitudes and policies toward Asian nationalism and the decolonization of Southeast Asia after World War II. Vietnam has understandably received the most attention with several notable studies. American policy toward the independence of Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines has also received significant scholarly attention. On the other hand, American policy toward Cambodia during this period has been virtually ignored. What few studies there are of U.S.-Cambodian relations are limited almost entirely to the late 1960s and 1970s when Cambodia became a major factor in the ongoing war in neighboring Vietnam.

Because of Cambodia's importance to the United States during the developing Cold War, the war in Vietnam, the period of the Khmer
Rouge's "killing fields" (1975-79), and the subsequent tangled developments in which the United States was deeply involved, the roots of American interest in Cambodia deserve attention. This study attempts partially to fill that gap by examining U.S. policy toward Cambodian nationalism from the end of World War II until Cambodia finally achieved full independence in 1953-54.

After World War II Cambodia, like Vietnam, gradually became important to the United States, in part because American anticolonial traditions continued to influence American thinking about colonies. The United States had freed the Philippines and believed that its action provided an example that European imperial states should emulate. France, which had returned to Indochina in 1945, was not interested in meaningful independence for its Asian possessions in the near future. Consequently there was some tension in Franco-American relations.

As the Cold War developed, however, the fear that communism would swallow up Indochina and then spread across all of Southeast Asia, India, the Middle East and perhaps even Australia displaced anticolonialism as the most important determinant in forging American policy toward the region. Cambodia was strategically located between Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, and keeping it out of Communist hands was deemed essential. By 1950 the United States was supplying arms and equipment to Cambodia to resist Communist insurgents. By the mid-1950s, after Cambodia had achieved independence, the United States had a full-fledged Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) in place. Cambodia was the only professedly neutral country in the world to which such a group was assigned. In 1958 the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Command characterized Cambodia as "the hub of the wheel in Southeast Asia."4

But if concern with communism characterized American policy worldwide, the dynamics in each country varied. One policy could not fit all situations. Although the Kingdom of Cambodia was, like Vietnam, a part of French Indochina, its language, culture, and historical traditions set it apart. Cambodians feared that Vietnam had imperialist designs on the kingdom, which the Cambodian government feared more than communism. Since the United States increasingly supported the anti-Communist forces in Vietnam, forging equally close ties to Cambodia posed a major challenge.

In addition, the political institutions and sources of nationalism differed from country to country. Thus in Vietnam the United States faced