

## Nate Thayer



Nate Thayer in 1997, speaking at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Bangkok after his interview with Pol Pot. Credit...Lance Woodruff/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

### International Consortium of Investigative journalists (ICIJ)

**Nate Thayer, Thailand/United States**, was the former Southeast Asia correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

In October 1997, Thayer was allowed into the remote northern Cambodia field headquarters of the Khmer Rouge for an exclusive interview with Pol Pot – the first such interview in 18 years and the only one before Pol Pot's death. The former Khmer Rouge leader, accused of responsibility for more than one million Cambodian deaths between 1975 and 1978, was then under house arrest and on trial for treason by the Khmer Rouge leadership that ousted him.

Thayer was the Cambodia correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, and The Associated Press and has contributed to more than 40 publications.

Thayer's reporting earned him The World Press Award, the 1997 "Scoop of the Year" British press award, and the 1998 Francis Fox Wood Award for Courage in Journalism.

While a visiting scholar at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, Thayer received a grant to write a book on Cambodian politics, which will be published in 2001.

He was the first recipient of the ICIJ Award for Outstanding International Investigative Reporting for his Pol Pot exclusives.

Thayer died in early January 2023.

+++++

## Nate Thayer, Journalist Who Interviewed Pol Pot, Dead at 62

January 04, 2023 Agence France-Presse

WASHINGTON —

Nate Thayer, the larger-than-life American freelance journalist who scored a massive scoop with his 1997 interview with Pol Pot, the genocidal leader of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, has died at 62, his family said Wednesday.

Thayer was discovered dead by his brother Rob Thayer at his Falmouth, Massachusetts, home Tuesday.

"He had a lot of ailments. He was seriously ill for many months," the brother told Agence France-Presse.

Nate Thayer spent years reporting on Cambodia politics and society, including the Khmer Rouge, the brutal communist regime that left more than 1 million people dead between 1975 and 1979.

Beginning in 1989, he worked for The Associated Press and then publications such as *The Phnom Penh Post* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, building contacts in the dangerous jungle border regions of Thailand and Cambodia.

With his shaven head, chewing tobacco and handiness with guns, he gained a reputation as a gonzo journalist, setting out on crazy adventures such as traveling

with a well-armed reporting team from *Soldier of Fortune* magazine into eastern Cambodia in search of a likely extinct forest ox called a kouprey.

In the wild west frontier of Thailand and Cambodia, he braved firefights and was severely injured by a landmine in 1989 while riding with Cambodian guerillas.

### **An interview with 'uncle'**

Thayer's work paid off in 1997 when he sent a cryptic message to *Far Eastern Economic Review* editor Nayan Chanda that he would interview "uncle," or Pol Pot, whom no journalist had met for two decades.

From Thailand, Thayer slipped into Pol Pot's Anlong Veng jungle redoubt, beating out a *New York Times* team that had arrived near the border thinking they would see the shadowy Cambodian.

Days later, he broke the story in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Pol Pot, blamed for murdering over a million people, told him, "Am I a savage person? My conscience is clear."

Chanda attributed Thayer's journalistic success to a distinct "doggedness."

"He was very intense, very focused on the story he was working on, almost like a force of nature," Chanda said.

"He actually knew quite a few of the Khmer Rouge. ... Nobody else spent as much time pursuing those guys, going to dangerous places, being with them in a firefight," he added.

A year later, Thayer scooped others with Pol Pot's death and an interview with the one-legged Khmer Rouge army commander and Pol Pot rival, Ta Mok.

But by then, he was embroiled in a fight with ABC News' "Nightline" program over its use of his video footage and reporting on the Khmer Rouge, which Thayer said violated their agreement.

Thayer rejected a prestigious Peabody Award, which cited him as a correspondent for "Nightline," and the two sides later settled his suit.

### **Focused on Asia**

The son of a former U.S. ambassador to Singapore, Thayer spent most of his career focused on Asia, reporting from combat situations such as the Myanmar border and investigating North Korea.

He also traveled to Iraq to report on the 2003 U.S. invasion.

He won a number of journalism awards, including the ICIJ Award for Outstanding International Investigative Reporting, and was proud of being a freelancer, calling for more respect and better pay for reporters not employed full-time.

Slowed by long-term ailments, some dating to his injuries from the mine explosion, in the past decade Thayer reported online on right-wing extremism from Washington and Massachusetts.

With his health failing, he spent his final months posting poetic odes to his "best pal," his dog, Lamont.



## ***Nate Thayer, Bold Reporter Who Interviewed Pol Pot, Dies at 62***

The “mad genius” journalist scored an exclusive interview with the genocidal Cambodian leader and covered his show trial, another worldwide scoop.

By [Seth Mydans](#)

Published Jan. 6, 2023 Updated Jan. 10, 2023

Nate Thayer, a risk-taking, publicity-drawing journalist whose career was capped by an exclusive jungle interview in Cambodia with Pol Pot, the leader of one of the worst convulsions of mass killing of the last century, has died at his home in East Falmouth, Mass. He was 62.

His body was found on Tuesday, but it was not clear precisely when he had died, his brother, Robert Thayer, said. He said his brother had long struggled with multiple ailments.

Mr. Thayer interviewed Pol Pot in October 1997 after months of clandestine meetings with Khmer Rouge guerrillas, whom Pol Pot led. After crossing the border from Thailand, Mr. Thayer sat with him in a forest clearing, facing a broken man whose followers had turned against him as his movement collapsed into opposing factions.

During Pol Pot’s four years in power, in the late 1970s, two million people — as much as one-fourth of Cambodia’s population — died of execution, torture, starvation or overwork as he attempted by force to create a pure, pre-modern Communist state.

In the interview he offered a bland defense of the carnage.

“I came to carry out the struggle, not to kill people,” he told Mr. Thayer, who quoted him for [an article](#) published in the Far Eastern Economic Review, an Asian newsmagazine.

“Even now, and you can look at me, am I a savage person?” he asked in the interview, which [was videotaped](#) by David McKaige and Marc Laban, whom Mr. Thayer had hired. “My conscience is clear.”

He added: “I only made decisions concerning the very important people. I didn’t supervise the lower ranks.”

Mr. Thayer had competition for the interview from Elizabeth Becker of The New York Times, but when she arrived at the border, he used his connections to block her entry and maintain his exclusive. She had conducted the last American interview with Pol Pot 18 years earlier, for The Washington Post, and had narrowly survived an attack by unidentified gunmen.

Mr. Thayer’s interview was [his second clandestine trip](#) across the border. Earlier that year, his Khmer Rouge contacts had taken him to witness an outdoor show trial in which Pol Pot, the movement’s founder, was denounced by comrades.

“‘Crush! Crush! Crush Pol Pot and his clique!’ shouted the crowd,” Mr. Thayer reported. “There, slumped in a simple wooden chair, grasping a long bamboo cane and a rattan fan, an anguished old man, frail and struggling to maintain his dignity, was watching his vision crumble in utter defeat.”

Just under [six months later](#), in April 1998, an ailing [Pol Pot died](#) at 73.

The jungle meeting produced a minor drama of its own when Mr. Thayer gave Ted Koppel of the ABC News program “Nightline” the American broadcast rights to his video.

The network immediately distributed both still pictures and the video around the world with credit to ABC, [which Mr. Thayer said violated their agreement](#) and scooped his own article. ABC News said it had followed standard practice, paying him for the material, giving him credit but presenting it as its own.

He declined to share [a Peabody award](#) with the network and brought suit, winning an out-of-court settlement after years of litigation.

He also won a cluster of awards for his investigative reporting.

Mr. Thayer spent many months writing a book about the Khmer Rouge titled “Sympathy for the Devil: A Journalist’s Memoir From Inside Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge,” which offered vivid descriptions of the trial and interview. The book was advertised online, but for unclear reasons it was never published, and Mr. Thayer carried the manuscript with him for years afterward.

People who knew him described him as a courageous reporter who was determined to dig for truth while cultivating a rugged, Heart-of-Darkness image and sometimes exaggerating his exploits.

Writing on his Facebook page on Wednesday, Robert Brown, the founder and publisher of Soldier of Fortune magazine, said: “Goodbye to one of the most colorful, gutsy, by some standards certifiable mad genius journalists I have ever encountered.”

Calling him “a loner who hated being alone,” Michael Hayes, founder and former publisher of the newspaper The Phnom Penh Post, said in an email:

“He was fearless, infuriatingly stubborn, uncompromising in his commitment to a free press, extremely generous to those people he loved, unbelievably disorganized in terms of managing even the simplest paperwork, and constantly wrestling unsuccessfully with a whole host of inner demons.”

Image



A photo by Mr. Thayer of a Khmer Rouge guerrilla with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher strapped to his back in Banteay Meanchey Province, Cambodia, in 1990. Credit...Nate Thayer/Associated Press

Nathaniel Talbott Thayer was born April 21, 1960, in Washington, the son of [Harry E.T. Thayer](#), a career diplomat who served as ambassador to Singapore from 1980 to 1984, and Joan Pirie Leclerc. In addition to his brother, he is survived by his mother and his sisters, Marian Vito and Margaret P. Thayer.

Nate attended and was expelled from several private schools, Robert Thayer said, then attended the University of Massachusetts in Boston but did not graduate.

“I was a problem child,” Mr. Thayer wrote in a Facebook post in August, “And honestly I have always been a problem adult. I don’t do well with rules.” He added:

“Whenever someone tells me what to do, I do the opposite. Even when they are entirely right.”

He headed to Southeast Asia in 1984, working for Soldier of Fortune before joining The Associated Press in Bangkok. There he focused on the continuing civil war in Cambodia in which Pol Pot’s guerrillas were fighting the Vietnamese-backed government that had driven the Khmer Rouge from power.

Mr. Thayer moved to Cambodia in 1991 and joined the Far Eastern Economic Review (it ceased publication in 2009), for which he continued to cover the war and challenge the government with exposés of corruption.

One story he often recounted involved a foray into a conflict zone in Cambodia during which the truck he was riding in struck an anti-tank mine. He was wounded but survived because he was sitting in front on the gearbox, he said, while the soldiers on either side of him were killed.

In 1999, Mr. Thayer and the photographer Nic Dunlop were the first journalists to interview the fugitive Khmer Rouge prison commandant [Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch](#), a scoop that led to Duch’s arrest [and trial](#).

After Cambodia, still adventurous, Mr. Thayer traveled to several conflict zones, including Iraq, where he covered the American invasion in 2003.

Slowing down in recent years, Mr. Thayer turned to reporting online, writing analyses of American white supremacy movements and North Korean affairs. He subsisted in large part on the generosity of others, friends said. In his final decade he fell into alcohol and drug abuse and his health declined.

In recent months he recounted his deterioration in rambling postings on Facebook.

“I’m old and crippled now,” he wrote in August. “Two strokes, two heart attacks, two bouts with Covid, sepsis infections which went viral and left me with heart and other damage.”

He declined doctors’ recommendations for treatment. Nearly 200 donors gave a total of \$34,230 to a GoFundMe campaign late last year to support him.

During this time his companion, and subject of many Facebook posts, was his dog, Lamont, a black half Labrador, half Corgi, whom he called his best friend.