

Turnabout in Capital

Official Euphoria Displaced by Fears As Dissent on War Burgeons in U.S.

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WASHINGTON, May 7—The confidence of just a week ago—euphoria, some called it—is suddenly gone from this capital, and in its place there is fear and the anxious activity inspired by fear. There is fear of violence this weekend as tens of thousands of antiwar demonstrators prepare to parade just as close to the White House as nervous officialdom will allow. There is fear that the psychological value of that determined show of strength on the Cambodian battlefield is being dispelled by the turmoil on the home front. There is fear of further dissension inside the Government—What if Vice President Agnew fails to take the hints to “taper down” the assaults on young people? And there is fear of the political consequences for the Nixon Administration, the Republican party and the nation as a whole.

To turn the tide yet again is obviously the purpose of President Nixon's hurriedly called news conference tomorrow night and of the frantic consultations now with students and college presidents and Governors and Cabinet members.

With reporters poised to break through the prepared answers for a real glimpse of the man at this moment of tension, even while some youngsters may be preparing to break through the elaborate barriers that are to be erected around the White House, the President faces his most difficult public test to date.

Startling Turnabout

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the startling sense of turnabout here. Until yesterday morning, it was still this Administration's clear intention to ride out the protest with appeals to patriotism, the President's duty as commander in chief and the long-range benefit of his decision to move troops into Cambodia.

They knew there would be dissent, officials said, but they had felt that the majority would go along, especially when it became clear that Mr. Nixon had chosen a quite moderate form of escalation, designed to hasten the troop withdrawals and to protect American interests in the Middle East and elsewhere through a new exertion of prowess and will.

But suddenly the depth of passion in what is still presumed to be a dissenting minority became apparent. The tragic killing of four students at Kent State University in Ohio had an effect. So did the impact of the untimely Presidential reference to some student radicals as “bums.” So did the awareness that even conservatives in Congress were alarmed by the failure to consult them on what they took to be a policy shift on the war.

The news from the front only added to the dismay, for officials began to believe that Mr. Nixon's impassioned rhetoric had built up expectations of a historic military operation instead of a grueling slog in the Cambodian muck.

Some of the highest officials of this Government were asking themselves how they could

have embarked on an apparently useful military exercise without due regard for the consequences at home. In fact they were wondering whether an operation that has become the cause of such dissension and is now firmly limited in time to six more weeks and in scope to about 20 miles inside Cambodia, could possibly still demoralize the enemy in the manner intended.

Throughout the last year, it has been the primary objective of the President and his top advisers to chase the war off the front pages of the world, to demonstrate to the enemy that they could engineer public support for a still muscular performance on the battlefield and to dispel the enemy's feeling that Hanoi's fate and fortune was the central concern of all mankind.

This was the strongest card left in the American deck, foreign policy planners used to say. And even those who winced at some of the rhetoric of the President and Vice President nonetheless marveled at their skill and diplomatically useful success in carrying the public along over the last six months.

Even insiders have had trouble squaring these considerations with the President's decision to move into Cambodia and to authorize some bombing of North Vietnam last week.

They are reminiscing now about the hard-won gains in the opinion polls, about the “unleashing” of Mr. Agnew against dissenters and the television networks and newspapers who spread the dissent and about the sense of political invincibility that came over the President's closest advisers, especially the more conservative among them, throughout the winter.

Oddly enough, some of the conservatives themselves were warning each other that the public's support, though surprisingly broad, was probably wafer thin, and they worried about a bad turn in the economy or the war. What they did not expect, but have now come to suspect, is that overconfidence itself could contribute to their taking a policy turn too sharply and too fast.