

Military See Cambodia as Key to War

By George C. Wilson
and Michael Getler

Washington Post Staff Writers

Pentagon officials believe Cambodia, not South Vietnam, will be the key battleground for the Indochina War in the coming year.

If the anti-Communist forces there cannot contain the North Vietnamese, military leaders fear the tactical situation in Indochina will go back to the darker days of 1968 and 1969.

This assessment is based on the assumption that "Vietnamization" — President Nixon's program for turning the war over to the South Vietnamese—passed its most crucial test in 1970 and is working.

Military leaders believe the South Vietnamese Army, supported by American firepower and remaining troops, should be able to handle any Communist thrusts in South Vietnam—at least through mid-1971.

As a hedge, Gen. Creighton Abrams, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, wants to delay further troop withdrawals for a while once they reach the 344,000 level set for Christmas. That compares with 349,700 troops in Vietnam on Dec. 3.

Abrams, according to Pentagon sources, believes the Tet holiday in January could be troublesome, as it was in 1968—the year of the big Communist Tet offensive in

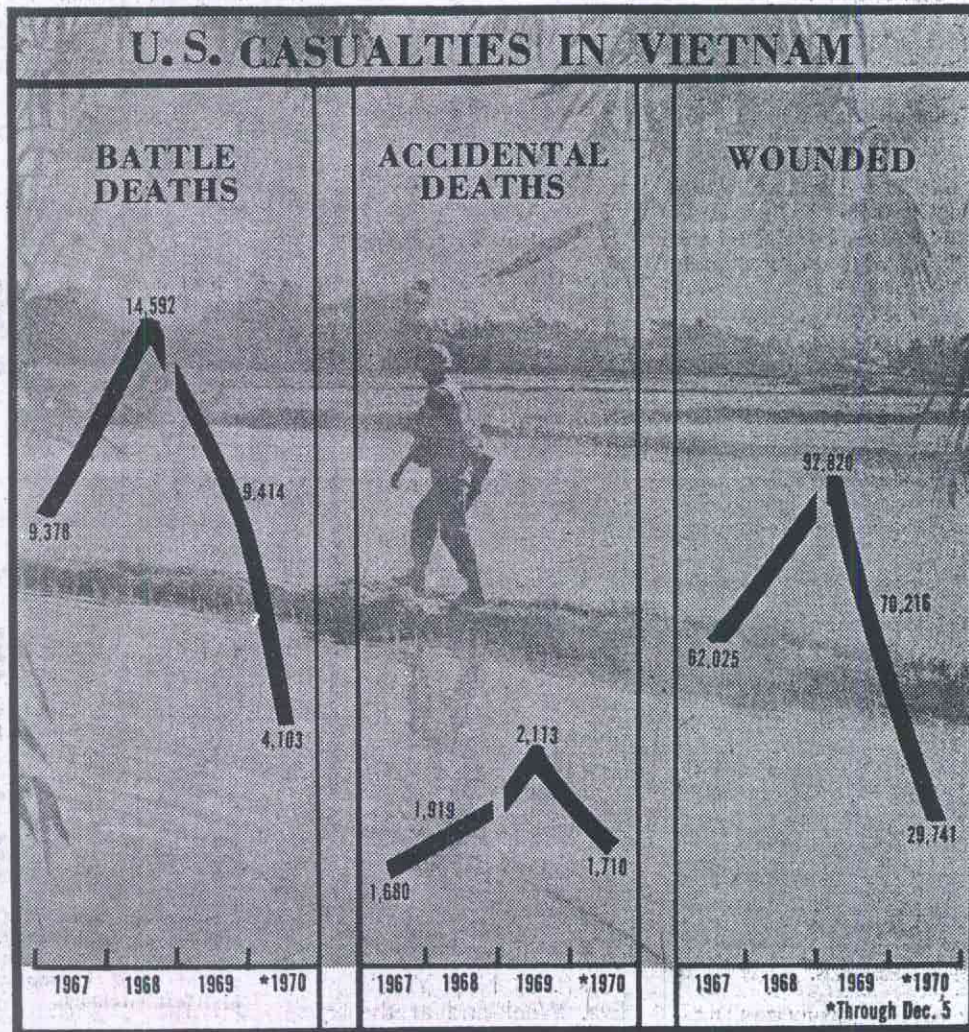


Chart By Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

U.S. Casualties have dropped. Break in trend line shows start of Nixon regime.

South Vietnam. So he wants to wait until at least February before resuming troop withdrawals paced to get American strength down to 284,000 men by May 1, 1971.

Similarly, Air Force leaders have suspended with-

drawals of their tactical units until after May, 1971—giving South Vietnam more time to prepare to take over more of the air war.

Five Air Force F-4 squadrons, three F-105 fighter-bomber squadrons and 12

squadrons of the older F-100 fighter-bombers already have left Vietnam. Remaining are 25 squadrons, totaling about 450 aircraft, on five bases in South Vietnam and four in Thailand.

See WAR, A6, Col. 1

Pentagon Terms Cambodia Key Battleground in Asia

WAR, From A1

The United States also still has in Thailand 42 B-52s, down from the peak of 102. The B-52s are concentrating on supply centers in Laos and the Ho Chi Minh trail through that country.

Assuming President Nixon approves the withdrawal schedule recommended by his military leaders, the military view on South Vietnam is generally optimistic.

Ripping up Communists' supplies in Cambodia, just over the border from South Vietnam, and closing the Cambodian seaport of Sihanoukville has made it difficult for the North Vietnamese to mount a major attack in lower Vietnam. One intelligence report states that between 1966 and early 1970 the now-closed port was the entryway for 24,000 tons of Communist war supplies. This tonnage was higher than previous estimates.

Captured bills of lading—the basis for the tonnage estimate—have led military officials to conclude that about 80 per cent of all the weaponry and equipment for Communist troops in III and IV Corps of Vietnam came through Sihanoukville.

U.S. intelligence officials now estimate that 200,000 rifles went through Sihanoukville, 160 million rounds of rifle ammunition and 8.5 million rounds of rocket, anti-aircraft and recoilless rifle ammunition.

Military leaders argue that President Nixon's decision to go into Cambodia with American troops has been vindicated by the military results. They concede in hindsight, however, that the South Vietnamese troops could have handled the raids themselves.

Pentagon figures show these trends in other indicators of how the war is going

in South Vietnam:

- American battle deaths down. The toll for 1970 will be about half that of 1969 and one-third of the total in 1968—President Johnson's last year in office.

- South Vietnamese casualties are only slightly lower in 1970 than in 1969—indicating that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) is bearing the brunt of combat.

- Enemy deaths—though estimated to reach about 100,000 in 1970—are significantly less than the previous two years and are headed toward the 88,104 level of 1967. This represents the return to small unit actions.

- ARVN battalions, not American, are making most of the forays on the ground. Pentagon figures show the ARVN, for the first 10 months of 1970, conducting 8,329 such actions and American and third-nation battalions 685—less than one thirteenth of the total. Although those figures are far from precise, the ratio is representative. In 1968, American and third-nation battalions were credited with about one-fifth of the ground operations and in 1967 about one-third.

The figures thus buttress Nixon administration claims that the Vietnam war has wound down in the first two years of Vietnamization.

To keep American war casualties down, President Nixon made it clear last week that he will turn to intensive bombing of North Vietnam. As in the earlier stages of the Vietnam war, the United States will try to substitute its air power for its manpower.

Despite intensive bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos, and occasional raids against war stockpiles in North Vietnam, military leaders report that the enemy is moving south again in large enough numbers to surpass the 110,000 sent south in 1969. But the total will be lower than the 250,000 Communist troops who infiltrated in 1968.

This time, most of these fresh troops may end up in Cambodia rather than South Vietnam.

"If that happens," one military official, said "it

could be a real problem for the President."

Right now, most of the North Vietnamese infiltrators are still in Laos, with their ultimate destination unknown. The 1.1 million man ARVN army, remaining American troops and those from Korea could handle the influx if it moves into South Vietnam, military leaders contend. But Cambodia is a different matter.

Mr. Nixon at last Thursday's press conference said "none whatever" when asked if "you foresee any circumstances whatever under which we would use ground troops in Cambodia."

Therefore, it is up to the Cambodian and South Vietnamese armies, supported by American air power, to protect Cambodia and its pro-American Lon Nol government. Whether this can be done is the real question in the mind of officials watching the Indochina war from Washington.

If the anti-Communist forces cannot contain the North Vietnamese, military leaders fear the tactical situation will go back to the darker days of 1968 and 1969.

By opening ports and securing their supply lines, the North Vietnamese would be in a strong position to launch new attacks along South Vietnam's western border.

That prospect is especially worrisome after May, 1971, when American troop strength will be down to 284,000 men, with the main punch in the north of South Vietnam instead of the Delta in the south.

The withdrawal of 60,000 Americans between this Christmas and May is expected to reduce U.S. strength in all of Vietnam to the equivalent of about two combat divisions. The force will comprise six brigades.

Half of those six brigades are expected to be in northern I Corps, one in II Corps and two brigades in central Vietnam, including Saigon. But if Cambodia resumes its position as a Communist launching platform for attacks against South Vietnam, that deployment plan

and the President's Vietnamization program will be endangered.

"The real crunch," one military analyst said, could come in mid-1971.

Laos is also discomfiting to Pentagon officials as they watch a Communist buildup of more than 65,000 North Vietnamese troops, including 15,000 guarding the border in case ARVN or U.S. forces try a Cambodian style raid.

If President Nixon should decide bombing of Laos is not enough, a South Vietnamese sweep on the ground might be tried. But the rugged terrain and Communist defenses would make this difficult.

Even before threatening South Vietnam with major thrusts, the North Vietnamese, it is conceded, could score a headline-making victory in Cambodia.

Congressional restrictions and announced administration policy put the United States on the sidelines, hoping for the best, as distinguished from throwing in American ground troops.

The core concept of the Nixon Doctrine — substituting American money, in the form of weaponry, for American troops—is thus expected to undergo a test by fire in Cambodia before long.

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Thursday that the Cambodian Army since April has grown from 40,000 to 150,000 and needs American help to arm itself.

Laird said "over 40,000" regular North Vietnamese troops are in Cambodia and "slightly over 10,000 Vietcong. The latter are still believed to be near the South Vietnamese border.

Laird said last week that, if the Cambodian army crumples, he would urge a larger commitment of South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia.

But in advance of that possibility, President Nixon is asking Congress to approve \$255 million for Cambodia for fiscal 1971 for military aid. Congress already has voted \$30 million for foodstuffs for Cambodia.