

Nixon Learned Lessons in Cambodia

By Jack Anderson

The lessons of Cambodia, now that U.S. troops are back on the Vietnam side of the border, are being reviewed at the highest levels. Out of this agonizing analysis has already come two conclusions:

Lesson No. 1 — President Nixon will send Cambodia all the military aid he can wangle out of Congress. He will also support South Vietnamese forces that continue to fight in Cambodia. But he has emphasized to subordinates: "We have no intention of going back."

Lesson No. 2 — Never again will the President commit American armed forces without taking congressional leaders into his confidence. His failure to consult Capitol Hill has created the worst constitutional crisis since the congressional rebellion against President Woodrow Wilson after World War I.

The Nixon administration will continue, of course, to present the Cambodian operation as a glorious success. But in the deepest of privacy, some top officials are calling it Richard Nixon's Bay of Pigs. They refer not to the military results so much as the political repercussions.

Congressional Crisis

The Cambodian decision not only whipped up passions to a dangerous pitch across the country but caused a confronta-

tion between the President and Congress.

Congressional leaders were not consulted, Nixon has said privately, for fear of a security breach. If advance information had leaked out, it would have jeopardized the entire Cambodian operation.

As it turned out, security leaks reached the enemy in time for them to escape. They did not get enough advance notice, however, to booby-trap the supplies they left behind except for one cache.

President Nixon tried to explain to Republican leaders at a secret White House meeting on June 9 why he had not confided in them.

"Had we consulted with the Senate before going in," he said, "we would have had 2,000 dead at least. Since the beginning of the Republic, an American President has had the duty to protect his troops. I'd rather save the lives of 2,000 soldiers in Cambodia than save the feelings of some people."

The President went on to assure his party leaders that "we don't intend to get into a war anywhere without consulting the Congress."

Unleashing Saigon

He added, however, that the U.S. would not restrain the South Vietnamese from making forays across the border. "We can't tie the South Vietnamese with 40,000 enemy rambling around in Cambodia."

If the President failed to consult Congress about Cambodia, he also paid little attention to his own decision-making machinery. The inside story is beginning to leak out.

Contrary to popular belief, for example, Nixon was not pushed into Cambodia by his generals. Their opinions were solicited and considered. Whatever pressure they exerted, however, had little effect on the eventual outcome.

The dramatic decision to strike across the Cambodian border began to take shape on the morning of Tuesday, April 21. Henry Kissinger, the President's security adviser, and Central Intelligence Director Richard Helms called upon the President. They reported that the North Vietnamese were setting up highway and communications networks with the apparent aim of thwarting the Vietnamization process and prolonging the war.

At the Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were also analyzing the new situation. An "action officer" produced a "flimsy" or first draft of the position the Joint Chiefs should take. This was ground through their ponderous bureaucratic machine, which produced a buff-colored paper giving a revised position.

JCS Green Paper

Eventually, a final green version gave the Joint Chiefs' Cambodian recommendation:

bombs away. This went directly to the White House without passing across Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's desk, thereby ruffling Laird's fur.

At the White House, the President convened the National Security Council, which met three times during that crucial last week in April. The Joint Chiefs were represented by Admiral Thomas Moorer.

However, Nixon paid scant attention to any of these prestigious advisors. His decision to enter Cambodia, was reached in a solitude breached chiefly by trusted aide Henry Kissinger and Attorney General John Mitchell.

The NSC was used largely as a sounding board. The "option papers" were prepared by the Washington Special Action Group — the NSC's executive arm headed by Kissinger.

On Friday, April 24, Nixon retired to the presidential retreat at Camp David, Md., to pore over his options. By Saturday, he was back in Washington, where he cruised the Potomac on the presidential yacht, Sequoia. Aboard were Kissinger, Mitchell, and the President's close friend, Bebe Rebozo.

There were more meetings on Sunday and Monday, plus telephone conversations with Kissinger, Laird, Wheeler and Secretary of State Bill Rogers. The decision came Tuesday, April 28, exactly one week after Kissinger and Helms had brought the first report.

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