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## The Cambodian Bombing Deadline

The establishment of an Aug. 15 deadline for American bombing in Cambodia has pushed the diplomatic process there into a higher gear. Previously, while it felt assured that the bombing would go on indefinitely, the American-supported regime in Phnom Penh refused to entertain the idea of negotiations with its Cambodian challengers. Now it has agreed for the first time to talk with "the other side." For his part, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, deposed in 1970, has just completed a two-month tour in Eastern Europe and Africa designed to show that his claim to rule again in Cambodia has a measure of international support. His statement, upon returning to his current base in Peking, that it's "too late" to negotiate with Henry Kissinger, shortly Peking-bound, seems an obvious opening ploy to extract more generous terms.

The principal unknown in the Cambodian equation is whether or to what extent the Prince can speak for the Khmer Rouge Communist insurgents, who control perhaps 90 per cent of the country's territory and who have kept Phnom Penh under continual tight siege despite more than 120 straight days of American aerial bombardment. With the end of the bombing apparently near, however, a situation is being created in which such political questions will be answered by events. Sihanouk is Peking's candidate and the Khmer Rouge are backed by Hanoi, although both he and they have strong credentials as Cambodian nationalists. Lon Nol, our man in Phnom Penh, seems to lack a significant popular base of his own. But only a negotiation will tell.

The judgment provided the other day by Defense Secretary James Schlesinger—that he has "misgivings" about the capacity of the Lon Nol government to survive without American bombing—may be accurate analysis. But it has mischievous and disturbing implications in terms of policy. Whether the Phnom Penh group supported by the American government can or cannot survive on its own is, from the policy viewpoint, irrelevant, since the United States has no obligation to defend Cambodia and no commitment to prop up Lon Nol or any other Cambodian entity—or at least none that has been revealed or could have any legal standing. As for any obligation growing out of our duty to Saigon, "Vietnami-

zation" has adequately prepared South Vietnam to cope for itself regardless of what happens next door in Cambodia. This last is the mission which Mr. Nixon accepted and discharged, by his own claims, in the years leading up to the Vietnam cease-fire last January.

Secretary Schlesinger went on to say, in response to a question, it was "quite possible" the President might ask Congress for authority to continue bombing after Aug. 15 if the other side escalated the conflict. Such a hint can only strengthen Lon Nol's already strong reluctance to engage in serious negotiations. In this sense, to hold out the prospect that Congress might authorize renewed bombing is to mislead Lon Nol, who deserves at least to be dealt with in a straightforward way. In another sense, the hint that Mr. Nixon may come back to Congress cuts across the plain intent of the compromise by which Mr. Nixon agreed to halt the bombing by Aug. 15 if Congress would authorize him to bomb until then. In fact, that latter authorization was a face-saver for the President, as he must know better than anybody else. Congress was willing to give the President six more weeks of bombing in exchange for a firm terminal date, even though no one has seriously contended that the extra tonnage will have any measurable effect on the political outcome in Phnom Penh. The possibility that Congress would be confronted with a request for sanctioning further warfare was not part of the deal. The point was that this would be the end of it.

A request for renewed bombing authority would be a cynical gesture inviting and deserving to be interpreted as an effort to transfer to Congress, rather than to share, the responsibility for what may unfold in Cambodia after Aug. 15. In any case, we trust that both houses of Congress would have the courage and clarity of vision to turn any such request down. If the bombing was wrong in July—which the Congress rightly insisted it was—then it would be at least as wrong in August. Mr. Schlesinger's threat ought to be seen for what it is—an unrealistic attempt to reinforce the bargaining power of the Lon Nol regime. That is how the other side is sure to see it, for they can count congressional votes. For their own sake, that is how our Cambodian allies ought to view it, as well.