

Cambodian Decision: Why President Acted

By HEDRICK SMITH JUN 30 1970
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WASHINGTON, June 29— President Nixon's venture into Cambodia is ending with proclamations of unprecedented military gain, but it was launched for the broader purpose of rescuing Cambodia from sudden Communist domination and that purpose is still unrealized.

A reconstruction shows that the survival of an anti-Communist Government in Cambodia came to be seen by Mr. Nixon as essential for the defense of Vietnam and the American stake in Indochina. As pieced together by correspondents of The New York Times in Washington, Saigon and Phnompenh, Mr. Nixon's handling of his most serious crisis also involved the following main factors:

¶The President, believing that Communist nations had long been trifling with him in Indochina, Korea and the Middle East, saw Cambodia as the first feasible opportunity to demonstrate that he could meet force with force.

¶Mr. Nixon was haunted

by intelligence reports that enemy commanders were moving against Cambodia, confident that American hands were tied by war-weariness at home.

¶Before attacking, the Nixon Administration tried to signal circuitously to Hanoi that it would accept an accommodation — which the Cambodian Government was seeking—provided that Cambodia's principal port remained closed to Communist supply shipments. The overtures collapsed over the port issue.

¶Once he felt himself militarily challenged by the enemy in Cambodia, Mr. Nixon pushed the pace of decision-making here—so much that one senior adviser cautioned him that the generals in Saigon might be giving the President only the advice they thought he wanted to hear.

¶Repeated and forceful opposition to the use of Ameri-

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can troops in Cambodia from Secretary of State William P. Rogers, stressing the risks of domestic discontent, caused Mr. Nixon to delay the operation 24 hours.

Once decided, Mr. Nixon also ordered four heavy bombing raids against North Vietnam, despite the year-and-a-half-old cessation of United States raids on the North—with the purpose, officials now acknowledge, of warning Hanoi against counterattacking across the demilitarized zone into South Vietnam. The four attacks appeared to be a violation of the private understandings with Hanoi prohibiting bombing of the North.

Like Predecessors, Uneasy

Formally, the Cambodian operations began with a Presidential announcement on April 30. But for Mr. Nixon, the beginning was well before that.

Like President Kennedy in the Cuban crisis and President Johnson in Vietnam, he felt Communist forces crowding and testing him. He had contained the frustration of not retaliating when the North Vietnamese shelled Saigon early in his term, when North Korea shot down an American intelligence plane, when the Paris peace talks bogged down. Now the Soviet Union was moving combat pilots into the United Arab Republic and Communist forces were threatening another nation in Indochina.

Of all these situations, Mr. Nixon felt, Cambodia offered the first opening for effective military reaction that would carry his larger political message. As the President confided to a senior adviser: This is a risk, but this is the kind of thing I have been waiting for.

Mr. Nixon's objectives in Cambodia centered on staving off Communist domination. Survival of Premier Lon Nol's Government, for a time, at least, appeared essential. It's survival was needed to assure the defense of South Vietnam and the process of American withdrawal, to spare Saigon the blow of seeing a neighbor collapse while the United States did nothing and to deny Hanoi a gain that would tempt it, in the words of one senior adviser, to "go for all the marbles" in Indochina and forever spurn negotiation.

Lift for the Premier

An American attack from the rear, Mr. Nixon thought, would divert and disrupt the enemy forces threatening General Lon Nol and also give the Cambodian Premier a badly needed political lift. But it required no open commitment.

Despite his preference for orderly procedure, President Nixon, like his predecessors, reacted in crisis with rump-group meetings, late phone calls, an out-of-channel message to the field and other activities that bypassed planners at the State and Defense Departments.

The White House became so worried about security leaks that even members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were late to learn of some critical discussions. State Department lawyers were not told to prepare the legal case for invasion until four days after it began.

The gestation process for Mr. Nixon's decision was much longer than Administration accounts suggested. It began almost immediately after General Lon Nol and others deposed Prince Norodom Sihanouk on March 18.

Twilight Zone of War

For years, Cambodia was a twilight zone of the Vietnam war. Prince Sihanouk, balancing between the belligerents, had let the North Vietnamese create a dozen base areas to shelter 40,000 to 60,000 troops for use against South Vietnam.

American generals had periodically pressed the Johnson Administration for permission to attack these sanctuaries, but President Johnson had refused. The Nixon Administration grudgingly tolerated the situation. Its plans for a gradual troop withdrawal from Vietnam assumed that the enemy bases in Cambodia would remain intact.

Within the last year, however, even Prince Sihanouk began to worry about the expanding enemy activity on his soil. He allowed American B-52's to bomb the base areas. For a time, he curtailed the enemy supply shipments to the bases through the port, then Sihanoukville, now Kompong Som.

Prince Sihanouk's ouster, described as a surprise in Washington, posed an opportunity. All foreign-policy agencies quickly drafted proposals for dealing with the new situation. In this process, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird invited the generals in Saigon to submit contingency plans.

Abrams's Options

By April 1, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the United States commander in Vietnam had offered the Pentagon several options:

First, to let South Vietnamese troops harass the enemy across the border.

Second, to help the south larger attacks over a period of months to disrupt the enemy bases.

Or third, to let American forces join the South Vietnamese in a swift full-scale assault on the bases.

Using the American forces General Abrams did not formally recommend any course.

Washington was still looking for diplomatic ways to contain the Cambodian situation. Perhaps Hanoi, with its forces

now less secure in Cambodia, would show interest in negotiation — if not on Vietnam alone then in the context of an international conference on all Indochina, which France proposed on April 1.

General Lon Nol tried to work out live-and-let-live arrangements with the North Vietnamese, first in direct talks and then through Chinese and other Communist intermediaries. He asked North Vietnam to reduce its military presence in Cambodia and its reliance on shipments through Sihanoukville. Hanoi refused.

Washington made no direct approach to Hanoi, but passed word to Asian intermediaries that it would respect any deal General Lon Nol made. It got no diplomatic reply.

One Diplomat Unsure

One diplomat said the American approach was so feeble and casual that he was not sure the intermediaries understood that the messages were meant for Hanoi. American officials, moreover, were sure that Hanoi suspected the United States of having ousted Prince Sihanouk and could not, therefore, credit Washington with good faith.

South Vietnamese forces, meanwhile, were staging sporadic raids across the Cambodian border, against the advice of American officials in Saigon. The United States increased bombing raids against enemy concentrations in Cambodia, but General Abrams's contingency plans, now sent by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the White House, were in limbo. Secretary Laird, talking with President Nixon in the second week of April, opposed an American assault because he feared heavy casualties — as high as 400 to 800 dead in the first week alone — and a public outcry.

In mid-April the combat situation changed. Starting April 13, enemy forces were detected moving westward into Cambodia from the border areas, cutting roads, blowing up bridges, harassing military posts and towns. The White House interpreted the reports "leniently" — as reliable on the location of enemy actions, but not on their size, seriousness or intent.

In Saigon, however, General Abrams was particularly struck by the thinning out of enemy forces in the Fishhook, a Cambodian salient that juts into South Vietnam 75 miles northwest of Saigon, which was considered the most important enemy refuge area.

General Abrams and Ellsworth Bunker, the American Ambassador, met privately for several nights and about April 15, sent parallel recommendations to the Departments of State and Defense. They urged an American attack into the Fishhook and joint attacks with the South Vietnamese against other bases.

Arguments Summarized

High military sources summed up General Abrams's arguments as follows:

One of the two American divisions standing guard against attacks from the enemy bases in Cambodia was going home soon under President Nixon's withdrawal program, shifting a major burden to Saigon's forces. With the rainy season approaching and the Lon Nol Government unlikely to survive until fall, the time was right. An attack would help the South Vietnamese and assure further American withdrawals. With a third of the enemy forces moved west, the risks of American casualties were reduced.

The general's argument envisioning benefits for the Vietnamization program, impressed Secretary Laird. The promise of lower casualties convinced him, and he endorsed the proposal.

But at the White House, the military possibilities were still offset by the fear of pushing the war deeper into Cambodia and the fear of spoiling the chances for negotiation.

The prospects for diplomacy had unexpectedly improved when the Soviet Union said that it, too, was interested in an Indochina conference. "Only a new Geneva conference could bring a new solution and relax tension," Yakov A. Malik, the Soviet representative at the United Nations, said on April 16. The Americans got private indications that this as a deliberate initiative and assumed that the Russians had cleared it with Hanoi.

Pressures Still Rise

Still, the pressures in Cambodia were building up. Premier Lon Nol pleaded with greater urgency each day. Mr. Nixon did not want another state in Southeast Asia, dependent on the United States, but neither did he want to stand idly by. High officials felt the whole rationale for defending South Vietnam would collapse if they acquiesced in a Communist take-over of Laos and Cambodia. Also, the President feared Prince Sihanouk, with Hanoi's aid, might be returned to power.

So Mr. Nixon set out to help Premier Lon Nol clandestinely. He let Saigon's forces increase the scope and frequency of their attacks into Cambodia. The purpose, one high official said later, was "to put pressure on the enemy forces so they wouldn't turn toward Pnompenh."

American advisers were told to help plan the enlarged raids, but not get into combat inside Cambodia.

By April 17, the President had also approved a secret

shipment of 6,000 captured AK-47 rifles of Soviet design to the Cambodian Army. The United States first tried to use Indonesia as a cover for this aid, but for reasons of diplomacy, shifted to South Vietnam.

Plans were also made to assemble a force of 2,000 Khmer Krom troops to stiffen the Cambodian army. These mercenaries fighting in South Vietnam for the American Special Forces were later flown secretly to Pnompenh.

President Distracted

President Nixon evidently hoped that these measures would win time. He was, in any case, distracted by the battle over his Supreme Court nominees, the Apollo 13 astronauts and the need to announce another troop withdrawal.

General Abrams was pleading for a 60-day delay in withdrawals. Secretary Laird wanted a cutback of 50,000 by Aug. 15. With the issue unresolved, Mr. Nixon went to greet the returning astronauts in Honolulu.

He finally hit on a compromise, surprising even some senior advisers: to delay withdrawals for 60 days but to hide that fact in an announcement of a full year's pullouts—150,000 men by May, 1971. Mr. Nixon flew back to San Clemente, Calif., to make the announcement April 20—a long and, as it turned out, fateful day in his perception of the situation in Indochina.

The speech emphasized his terms for a political settlement in more flexible terms than ever before.

He Reiterates Warnings

He did point with concern to "the enemy's escalation in Laos and Cambodia" and repeated warnings that if "increased enemy action jeopardizes our remaining forces in Vietnam, I shall not hesitate to take strong and effective measures to deal with that situation."

There was no real hint of the internal discussions about Cambodia.

Officials insist that Mr. Nixon's optimism did not disguise any secret calculations. Press dispatches had already reported the fall of Saang, a district capital 18 miles from Pnompenh, but official confirmation did not reach the traveling White House until late on April 20.

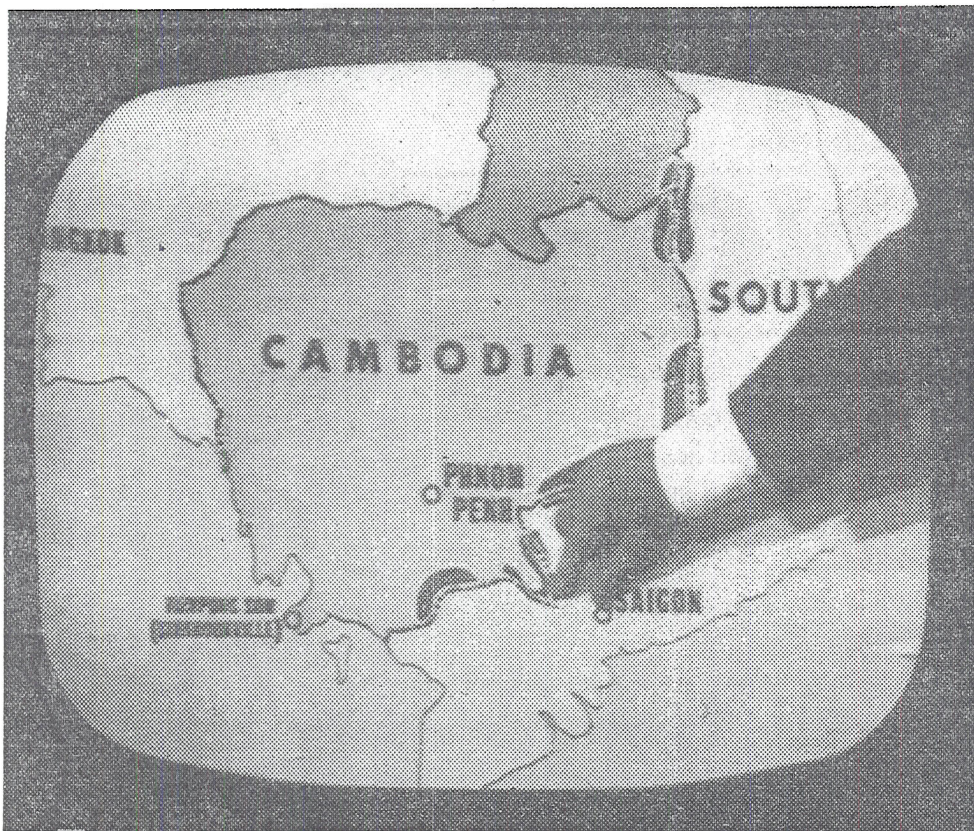
On that day, too—although it was probably unknown to Mr. Nixon as he spoke—Hanoi's spokesman in Peking indicated that Prince Sihanouk was joining a new united military front for the "liberation" of all Indochina; the Russians backed off their interest in a Geneva conference, and the Lon Nol regime submitted a request for more than \$500-million in military aid.

Mr. Nixon was restless that night—"wound up," his wife said—and after his speech, abruptly flew back to Washington. One aide said afterward that the President might have sensed "something was up."

Confirmed by Intelligence

By morning, intelligence reports had built up a picture of steady deterioration in Cambodia, but the problem hit Mr. Nixon with sudden force.

From that day on, Mr. Nixon got daily briefings from Richard Helms, Director of



C.B.S. News

On April 30, announcing U.S. troops would be sent into Cambodia, President Nixon compared distance from Fishhook area to Saigon to that from Baltimore to Washington.

Central Intelligence. Details were sketchy, but the Communists were attacking Saang, Ta-keo and Angtassom, south of Phnompenh and Snoul and Memot, to the north.

The State Department surmised that the enemy was using hit-and-run maneuvers to create an impression of civil war. The Pentagon view, more persuasive to the White House, was that the North Vietnamese had decided to overthrow Lon Nol by isolating his capital, or taking it.

Mr. Nixon summoned the National Security Council to meet on April 22, the group's first consideration of the contingency plans. The talk centered largely on a proposed South Vietnamese offensive into the Parrot's Beak, an enemy position jutting into Vietnam 35 miles from Saigon. There was some discussion of an American attack into the Fishhook.

Crisis Schedule Enforced

The next morning, the President seemed bent on some kind of action. He called for operational plans for the Parrot's Beak, forcing a crisis schedule upon the Washington Special Action Group — a body headed by Henry A. Kissinger, his special assistant for security affairs.

The group, which is called WASAG, was created in April, 1969, when North Korea shot down an American intelligence plane. It played a central role in the Cambodian venture from late March onward by assembling and refining all contingency plans, assessing their consequence, and managing the execution of Presidential orders.

At the peak of crisis, the group's members were Mr. Kissinger; David Packard, Deputy Secretary of Defense; U. Alexis Johnson, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs; Mr. Helms; Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs; Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, his successor, and Marshall Greene, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs.

The group met twice on April 23, again on April 24. In Saigon, the South Vietnamese generals were hesitant about a major strike without the Americans. General Abrams and Ambassador Bunker met with President Nguyen Van Thieu, after which Saigon finally geared for action while General Abrams pressed Washington to use American advisers in the Parrot's Beak operation.

Nixon Is Iitate

M. Nixon was now pushing the process of making decisions, irritated that the enemy appeared complacent. American intelligence confirmed anew that the enemy command was telling its troops to push west without fear of an American attack from the rear. The White House denounced the enemy moves as a "foreign invasion."

On Friday morning, April 24, the President called for operational plans for the Fishhook operation to be delivered from Saigon within 24 hours. He called a secret meeting of the National Security Council for Sunday, pointing toward a final decision Sunday night. This would give the generals the 72 hours they said they needed to attack on April 29, which would be dawn, April 30, Saigon time.

The President flew to Camp David, Md., Friday afternoon. Mr. Kissinger brought the plans on Saturday and the two men studied them. In Washington that evening, they conferred with Secretary Laird and Attorney General John N. Mitchell aboard the Government yacht Sequoia on the Potomac. They then attended a private showing of "Patton," the film biography of the defiant general, which Mr. Nixon was eager to see for a second time. (FIRST TIME, APR 4)

Two Members Absent

Secretary of State Rogers returned from New York on Sunday morning and, with Secretary Laird, heard a Pentagon briefing on the Fishhook plans. Thus all participants in the afternoon meeting of the Security Council were prepared for the main topic of debate.

The two Secretaries joined the President, the Attorney General, General Wheeler, Mr. Helms and Mr. Kissinger at the Executive Office Building next to the White House. Two statutory members of the Council, Vice President Agnew and George A. Lincoln, director of the Office of Emergency Preparedness, were not present.

Mr. Nixon said that he had decided "to do something." The Parrot's Beak operation had his tentative approval, with American air support but not American ground advisers. The Fishhook was the problem at hand.

The Pentagon representatives argued that a full assault, with American troops, was essential. Military analysis showed the enemy seeking either to topple the Lon Nol regime or to clear a supply corridor to the sea in eastern Cambodia. Either prospect jeopardized the defense of South Vietnam and American withdrawal. The Parrot's Beak alone would serve only as a warning. Using the South Vietnamese in the Fishhook would require a major reshuffle of armies and might prove too difficult for them. With the heavy rains due in a month, and Lon Nol unlikely to survive until fall, it was now or never.

Secretary Rogers carried the principal burden of opposition. The use of American troops in Cambodia meant widening the war. The risk was grave of becoming entrapped, as the Johnson Administration had been. The President won wide

popular support for gradual withdrawal and should not risk losing it. The allies' military objectives could be achieved by South Vietnamese forces alone.

They Meet for 3 Hours

The debate lasted three hours, ranging over other enemy base areas. Mr. Nixon came away thinking he had a choice of doing nothing or involving American troops. An attack in the Parrot's Beak alone seemed unlikely to bring much military advantage. To use only South Vietnamese ground forces would be a pretense, for American air and logistical support was deemed essential. It was a line of thinking Mr. Kissinger appears to have shared. Besides, the President was determined to prove that he could meet force with force.

Mr. Nixon withdrew to his hideaway office and ordered a tray of dinner. On a pad of yellow legal paper he summarized the pros and cons. As disclosed by Stewart Alsop in Newsweek and later confirmed officially, the President's doodling showed how intimately the survival of the Lon Nol regime had become linked in his mind with American success in Vietnam.

In reviewing whether there should be some action in Cambodia, Mr. Nixon listed only arguments in favor: "Time running out" was followed by "military aid" to Lon Nol could be "only symbolic." Then came a scribble saying inaction might tempt Hanoi to install a puppet regime in Pnompenh and a final entry saying that inaction by both sides would leave an "ambiguous situation" with time favoring the Communists.

Liabilities Listed

The President then listed the pros and cons for American action in the Fishhook and for a South Vietnamese attack alone in the Parrot's Beak. He recognized that the Fishhook move would bring a "deep division" of the American people. He feared that it might provoke a collapse of the Paris talks, an attack on Pnompenh or a major North Vietnamese attack across the DMZ.

Mr. Nixon seemed determined to attack, but the opposing arguments of Secretary Rogers evidently led him to break his own deadline. He called another meeting for Monday morning, April 27, with Mr. Rogers, Mr. Laird, Mr. Kissinger and H. R. Haldeman, his chief of staff, but without the military or intelligence chiefs.

Someone—apparently still Mr. Rogers—suggested that the military might be telling the President only what it thought he wanted to hear. The suggestion haunted Mr. Nixon. Out of that meeting came his personal, out-of-channels message to General Abrams demanding "the unvarnished truth," man-to-man.

That afternoon, Mr. Rogers testified at a closed session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and ran into a storm of opposition to possible American involvement in Cambodia. Without directly disclosing the contemplated use of United States troops, he tried to hint at the imminence of a military decision. Mr. Rogers recounted the Senators' objections in a long telephone report to the President that evening.

Wrote His TV Speech

From Saigon, General Abrams replied that an American assault was necessary. With that message and new memos from other advisers, and after one more call to Mr. Laird, Mr. Nixon withdrew to make his decision. The next morning he conveyed it, first to Mr. Kissinger and then to Mr. Rogers, Mr. Laird and Mr. Mitchell,

whose advice, always important, to the president is not known in this case.

Having decided to attack in the Fishhook, the President said that he was also sending American ground advisers into the Parrot's Beak and ordering consecutive attacks on a number of enemy base areas. As the operation unfolded, he also approved the four raids on North Vietnam.

Ignoring some advice that he treat the event in a low key, the President prepared his own television address, working it through eight longhand drafts on Tuesday and Wednesday night, staying up till 5 A.M. Unlike President Kennedy and Johnson, he never submitted it for editing by his main cabinet advisers. All of Mr. Nixon's senior aides still wince at some of his rhetoric.

Some of Mr. Nixon's senior aides, were troubled by the President's apocalyptic vision of the stakes. Others found some military points overdramatized.

The President's assertion that the enemy was massing in the sanctuaries to attack South Vietnam contradicted Secretary Laird's support of the American assault because of the enemy's movement the other way. It also contradicted the latest intelligence that the enemy forces had sensed what was coming and were dispersing faster than before with some of their arms caches.

The generals felt uneasy that Mr. Nixon, to give importance to his move, led the American public to expect the capture of top enemy commanders by announcing an attack on "the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam." They knew the enemy command unit—the Central Office for South Vietnam, called COSVN—was always on the move and doubted they would catch its 200 men in Fishhook. Their troops were

ordered to "neutralize the COSVN base area"—meaning arms caches, supply dumps and other facilities.

Cable Office Closed

Notice of the President's speech reached Premier Lon Nol only after it was over, because the Pnompenh cable office was closed. Although he had agreed in mid-April to deeper raids by the South Vietnamese and more recently to the Parrot's Beak operation, his consent was not sought for the Fishhook. The White House believed if he said "no," it was in trouble; if he said "yes," he might be.

In the days following Mr. Nixon's speech, what the Congress and the public took to be limitations of time and scope on the invasion were only firm definitions of the Administration's private intentions: six to eight weeks and a limit to penetrations of about 20 miles. Some field commanders even found the time limit a welcome surprise; they had expected two to four weeks.

But other rules of engagement had to be adjusted to the enemy's spreading attacks throughout Cambodia. To help Premier Lon Nol defend himself in the months ahead the Administration agreed to leave South Vietnamese troops behind after June 30 and tried to arrange Thai support as well.

American planes now fly tactical air support for the Cambodians under the guise of raids against enemy supply lines. American ships blockade Cambodia's coastline. And new military and economic aid is being prepared. Thus, the operation, now formally ended is, in fact, far from over.

This article was written in collaboration with Max Frankel and incorporates reports by William Beecher, Henry Giniger, Henry Kamm, Sydney H. Shanberg, Robert B. Semple Jr., Neil Sheehan, Terence Smith, James P. Sterba and Tad Szulc.