

Administration's Credibility: Doubts

By MAX FRANKEL
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 25— This capital is worrying about "credibility" again, but the worry this time is just as great inside the Government as among its critics.

President Nixon, Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Henry Kissinger of the White House staff and other high officials

News

Analysis

have been heard to express concern about their credibility as they attempt to repair the domestic split and the diplomatic damage that resulted from the moves into Cambodia. The divisions at home, they believe, have not only sent tempers soaring and stock prices plummeting but also injured the Administration's diplomacy abroad.

The Administration's critics in Congress and beyond are also harping on damage to the "credibility" of the President and his policies, but in the more familiar way that the word was used against Lyndon B. Johnson. The critics believe that the action in Cambodia undermined confidence in Mr. Nixon's intention or ability to end the war in Vietnam and that the nation's continuing preoccupation with the war—and not the dissent at home—is enfeebling diplomacy.

Definitions Are Different

Thus the supporters and the detractors of the President are using the term "credibility" to mean very different things, and the differing definitions they give the concept tend to define the dimensions of the debate.

The President and his aides acknowledge, at least in relatively private conversation, that their expositions of policy and at times even their good faith

have been widely compromised by the Cambodian venture. They think their purpose was widely misunderstood and that they can, in time, recover domestic support.

Mr. Nixon has told Congressional leaders and others that he prizes the credibility of his office, not just for his political profit but also for the sake of his diplomatic effectiveness in the world. He must be believable, he has pointed out, because his words — whether promises or warnings — are themselves an aspect of American power. He has argued vigorously in recent weeks that he has kept every pledge of troop withdrawals from Vietnam and means to keep and perhaps even improve upon his pledges for the future.

But such a recovery does not exhaust the Administration's concerns about credibility. The outcry in Congress and in many other quarters over Cambodia has caused officials here to worry whether they have not enhanced the very image that Mr. Nixon hoped to dispel: the image that "when the chips are down," as he put it on April 30, "the world's most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant."

What if the Soviet Union continues to augment its position in the United Arab Republic to alter the Middle East power balance in fundamental ways? officials ask in expressing this anxiety. Could the United States, short of involving itself in the region's military action, credibly warn the Soviet leaders to desist? Would Moscow now believe such warnings? Would the Congress and the American people let the warnings stand or would the opposition be so great as

to render them unbelievable?

Indeed, it is asked, will the military value of the Cambodia operation not be vitiated by the domestic reaction, so that Hanoi, far from concluding that time is on the allied side, will conclude instead that awaiting the final American exhaustion is well worth enduring any setback on the battlefield?

Thus it is that the Nixon Administration, like its predecessor, finds itself driven toward the conclusion that domestic dissent is not only a nuisance or a political liability but an impediment to the pursuit of the national interest. The President has struggled against the temptation to denounce the opposition as unpatriotic, but that is the logic of appeals that are genuinely and passionately advanced here for restraint.

Respect for Mood

The President's critics, of course, argue that for the same reasons that Mr. Nixon, too, must be restrained in his words and deeds. They point out that under the American system of government there is simply no way of opposing the decisions of a President without incidentally diminishing his stature as Commander in Chief in military affairs or embodiment of the nation in international relations.

To preserve his credibility, they would have the President respect the mood and temper of the Congress and the country. In the view of leading Democrats, such as W. Averell Harriman and Clark Clifford, as well as the bipartisan supporters of Senate efforts of restraint upon the President's warmaking power, it was Mr. Nixon's challenge to that mood, and failure to consult and pre-

pare the Congress that compounded his credibility problems.

Ironically, Mr. Nixon may have added to his difficulties by his failure to define his real intentions in Vietnam. Although his critics contend that he is prolonging the war to avert what he has called "humiliation and defeat," many of his supporters here argue that he is merely acting tough in Cam-

Inside and Out

bodia and talking tough to speed up the American withdrawal and to cover up a major retreat, staging what has been called "an elegant bug-out."

If that is so, then the President has chosen to risk a loss of some credibility so as to glide furtively out of a war whose furtive beginnings made credibility a presidential issue here in the first place.