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Sea Invasion Vetoed

By FLORA LEWIS

U.S. military chiefs urged a massive American landing on the coast of Cambodia at the fateful White House meeting last Monday night, according to well informed sources. A Pentagon spokesman refused comment today on this information. *(27 APR)*

The purpose of the large-scale operation, rejected by President Nixon, would have been to cut off the vital sea supply route to Communist troops in eastern Cambodia by taking control of the port of Sihanoukville.

The sources estimated at least two American divisions, about 30,000 men, would have been required for an amphibious invasion.

A considerable number of them would have been expected to remain on the coast once it was captured.

According to the sources, Gen. Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Adm. Thomas Moorer, Navy chief who is to succeed Wheeler, assured President Nixon that the landing could be carried out alongside current overland U.S. operations in Cambodia, announced Thursday night.

Atty. Gen. John Mitchell, who played an important part in the top level meeting, was said to have been an enthusiastic supporter of both the sea-borne and ground attack plan.

Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird was said to have argued against the larger amphibious attack, though he supported the chiefs on their plans to attack across South Vietnam's border with Cambodia.

Laird's position was that the sea-borne operation was not practical because, even if it succeeded, it would have been almost impossible to pull the troops out afterwards.

Also, the terrain of jungle and swamp, crossed by rivers, raised serious doubts that the proposed pincer assault by sea and by land could succeed.

Laird argued that the purpose of operations against Cambodia was to destroy bases and "to teach them (the Communists) a lesson," and that landings would involve the U.S. far beyond that goal.

Secretary of State William P. Rogers was said to have been firmly against the whole idea of sending Americans to fight in Cambodia. But he was overruled by the President who chose what appeared to be the middle option.

Henry Kissinger, Nixon's chief foreign affairs advisor, took an equivocal position, according to the sources.

Kissinger had advised that Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk was solidly entrenched in power not long before the prince was overthrown, and the cloudiness of his crystal ball had apparently dimmed his eagerness for further predictions.

Nixon was warned of immediate strategic risks in the decision to invade, according to the sources, especially of the risk that South Vietnamese troops involved would fare so badly as to destroy the credibility of his whole "Vietnamization" program for turning the war over to them.

Presumably, that was an element in

his decision to use American forces for the crucial assault on well defended Viet Cong headquarters in the "fish-hook" salient of Cambodia.

While the select group of military and Cabinet officers were meeting in the White House last Monday, Nixon's chief domestic advisor, John Ehrlichman, was said to be conducting soundings of congressional reaction on Capitol Hill.

Ehrlichman's report was said to have been the last element of the situation provided to the President before he made his decision.

The atmosphere at the White House meeting was said to have been calm, with the President described as "very, very reserved." Aides working on documents for the policy-makers were described as "fatigued and exhausted."

For two to three weeks before the Monday night meeting, Pentagon planners had been feverishly preparing a series of different possible operations in Cambodia.

Although the President spoke of "massive military assistance to Cambodia itself" as one of the three options he considered before ordering the attacks, the sources said that idea was discarded fairly early in the planning stage.

The Cambodian army's performance in its initial fights with the Viet Cong convinced American military officials that it simply couldn't cope with the Communist forces, no matter how well it might be equipped.

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