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Nixon 'Draws the Line' In an Astonishing Change

WASHINGTON — The full story of President Nixon's decision to invade the enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia has not yet been told here. Perhaps only the President knows the whole story, for it may turn as much on psychological as on tactical considerations.

Something appears to have happened to jolt the President, from a mood of confidence about the war to one of anxiety, between the night of Monday, April 20, when he revealed plans to withdraw 150,000 more troops from Vietnam in a year, and the night of Monday, April 27, when he decided to move into Cambodia.

At the start of that week, Nixon expressed confidence that a just peace was in sight, that the South Vietnamese could learn to defend themselves and that all American combat troops would be brought home. At the end of it, Nixon had concluded that the attacks into Cambodia were "indispensable" to the American withdrawals and that winning a just peace was at stake.

The President did say in the first speech that he would take strong action if enemy action in Indochina were increased to the jeopardy of American troops and he explained his decision last Thursday night with general references to such increased action over the last two weeks. But the administration has given only the vaguest indications of what the enemy had done in the six days between speeches that accounted for such a remarkable change in its estimate of the situation. There was a great deal of conjecture here both inside and outside the government, about the pressures that crowded in on Nixon in that week. It ran as follows:

—One of the main developments of that week was the President's own speech, apparently surprising his military commanders with a firm commitment to pull 150,000 more troops out of the war in a year.

The commanders had argued for a pause in withdrawals to await developments in Cambodia and Laos.

Nixon and his advisers decided that a delay in the announcement — such as they attempted last August — would risk a further loss of support for their policy at home. So instead of a definite pull-out in the next three months, they chose a one-year timetable for a large withdrawal to leave themselves some flexibility in the short-run.

A
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Warnings of 'Crisis'

But when faced with that commitment and its implication for American combat power in Indochina a year from now, the Joint Chiefs of Staff appear to have urgently demanded yet another review of their long-standing request to strike into Cambodia. Some of them are known to have pushed this argument with the most urgent warnings of "crisis," a word that Nixon himself picked up in his speech.

—At that point, however, only a week ago, the sentiment of senior policy officials still appeared to be running against massive intervention in Cambodia. They acknowledged the existence of a military temptation to strike at the sanctuaries before a pro-Communist regime had a chance to gain power in Cambodia. But they also feared that the short-term profits of invasion would be offset by the long-term risks of having to defend a still larger area against a provoked regime in Hanoi.

The military men counseling an urgent campaign to rescue Cambodia were put down in some official quarters as the same counselors who had dragged the nation into costly but vain escalations in the past.

—At some point in these discussions, Nixon appears to have consulted at length

with Gen. Creighton Abrams, the field commander in Saigon, who has won respect here as a politically astute tactician who understands the tensions on the home front and has adapted tactics to hold down casualties and turn over combat duty to the South Vietnamese.

Support from Gen. Abrams

There are indications that Abrams, having lost his appeal for a pause in withdrawals, joined the calls for a quick thrust into Cambodia before American combat strength was drawn down any further and while the weather permitted it. He appears to have enlisted Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in his quest and they were the only advisers cited by name by Nixon in his address to the nation.

—Simultaneously, Nixon heard new reports from the confusing operations of different political and ethnic military teams inside Cambodia. He was told that the North Vietnamese were extending their base encampments along the South Vietnamese frontier and that Communist-led forces of various kinds were continuing to harass the capital city of Phnom Penh.

North Vietnam, meanwhile, with the active support of Communist China and lesser support from Moscow, was building a new liberation movement for all Indochina, pledged among other things to the restoration of Prince Norodom Sihanouk to power in Phnom Penh.

And there were further indications to confirm the signs that Moscow's earlier interest in arranging negotiations about Indochina was being opposed in Hanoi and Peking.

—And from the other side of the world came confirmation that Soviet pilots had joined in the active air defense of central Egypt, threatening a change in the balance of forces between Israel and her Arab neighbors.

Soviet Mideast Move

Moreover, this venturesome move by Moscow appeared to be another indication that a hard-line faction, led by Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev, was rising to a position of dominance in the Kremlin, probably in alliance with leading Soviet military commanders.

The effect of these developments on Nixon's hard rhetoric is openly acknowledged and their effect on the Cambodia decision itself is thought to have been considerable.

In explaining his action, the President dealt much more extensively with the "credibility of the United States" throughout the world, and his fear of being mistaken for a "pitiful, helpless giant" and a "second-rate power" than with the immediate Communist challenges in Southeast Asia.

In passages markedly different from the "low profile" policy that Nixon outlined earlier this year, he said small nations all over the world were "under attack from within and from without" and they would lose all confidence in American power if he failed to act now.

The President has long been beset by fears that his will would be found wanting by antagonists in this Nuclear Age. Some of his advisers have expressed anxiety — as did their predecessors in the Johnson Administration — that division and dissension at home would be misread as weakness.

Nixon had gone longer into his term of office than either Presidents Kennedy or Johnson without some militant demonstration of his resolve to act strongly abroad. When confronted with the news of Communist action in the face of his withdrawal commitment, this deep need to draw the line at what he called the "intolerable" appears to have played itself out, in unknown measure.