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Nixon's Three Theories Behind Cambodia Action

WASHINGTON — In explaining President Nixon's sudden decision to invade Cambodia, his foreign policy aides point to three Nixon theories about how to deal with the Communists in general and the Soviet Union in particular. These are worth examining. The first is that you cannot show weakness in one part of the world without encouraging Moscow to believe that you will be weak and vulnerable in other even more dangerous parts of the world.

The second is that unpredictability is often a virtue in dealing with the Soviets, for if they cannot be reasonably sure of how the United States will react, they may be more careful about how they move against you or your allies.

And the third is that sudden bold moves that take the enemy by surprise are likely to be more effective than small moves which give the Communists time to adapt.

Bold and Dangerous

These are bold and dangerous theories, but there is obviously something to them. For example, on the first point, President Kennedy was convinced that Moscow took the big risk of trying to put missiles in Cuba because Kennedy launched the Bay of Pigs invasion against Castro but weakened in the end and didn't see the invasion through.

Nixon referred to this theory in his "Six Crises," published in 1962. "Khrushchev would have been a superb poker player," he wrote. "First, he is out to win. Second, like any good poker player, he plans ahead so that he can win the big pots. He likes to bluff, but he knows that if you bluff on small pots and fail consistently to produce the cards, you must expect your opponent to call your bluff on the big pots.

"That, in effect, is what happened in Laos and Cuba. The United States talked big and did not back up its talk with action . . . There is nothing more dangerous in dealing with a man like Khrushchev than to talk bigger than we are prepared to act . . . What happened in Laos and Cuba tended to make him far more cocky and far more belligerent than he would otherwise have been . . ."

Theory of World Policy

It is a fair speculation, supported by some of Nixon's principal advisers, that he had this wider theory of world policy in mind when he struck Cambodia. In almost every speech since he started withdrawing troops from Vietnam, he has inserted a warning that he would act if the enemy took advantage of him, and since Hanoi would not negotiate on his terms and kept building up the sanctuaries, followed by Moscow's sending its pilots into operational flights over Egypt, he moved suddenly and secretly.

This was in keeping with his second and third theories. He did not follow what seemed to be the predictable line of steady withdrawal, but made the unpredictable lunge at Cambodia and revived the bombing of North Vietnam, surprising not only Hanoi

but Moscow, and many of his own associates and the Congress.

He explained later in his press conference that the difference between his strategy and President Johnson's was that Johnson moved against the enemy "step by step," whereas the Nixon invasion of Cambodia was "a decisive move."

The only trouble with these neat theories is that they don't always fit the facts.

Congress Surprised

The Congress was surprised by his unpredictability, but the enemy wasn't, so we won't know till later if it was "decisive." It may be that the men in the Kremlin regard the President's invasion as unpredictable and even irrational, considering how it divided the American people and didn't find the enemy, but by the President's way of thinking he may still have made the Soviet leaders think they must be careful in dealing with an incalculable man who has so much power and is willing to use it despite the opposition of Congress and members of his own Cabinet.

Two points need to be made about these Nixon theories. First, the U.S. did not react to Moscow's savage invasion of Czechoslovakia, yet Moscow did not then assume it could bluff Washington on Berlin or press its advantage to change the balance of power against the U.S. in Western Europe. Nor did the U.S. assume that the Soviet Union was "weak" just because Khrushchev tried to put his missiles in Cuba and turned back when challenged by President Kennedy.

Reliance On Secrecy

Second, whether Nixon's theories are correct or not, action on them against a sovereign nation without the knowledge of any but two or three of his closest advisers and without consultation with the Congress, places enormous reliance on secrecy, the big strike, and on the judgment of the President alone.

If he is free to hit Cambodia in secret, why not Hanoi? Why not the Soviet ships bringing the arms from the real sanctuary? That would be even more bold and unpredictable. All Presidents tend, of course, to take a highly personal view of their historic role, and many of them make the tragic error of thinking they are what they merely represent, but few have been quite so personal about it as Nixon.

As he said, "I knew the stakes that were involved. I knew the division that would be caused in this country. I also knew the problems internationally. I knew the military risks . . . I made this decision. I take responsibility for it. I believe it was the right decision. I believe it will work out. If it doesn't, then I'm to blame . . ."

But what about everybody else concerned? In a world of atomic weapons, even if we concede a certain Machiavellian logic to the three Nixon theories, this is a startling assertion of personal authority: Never mind the Congress, never mind the division of the country. "I knew the stakes . . . I knew the divisions . . . I knew the risks . . . I believe it will work out. If it doesn't . . ." Let us pray!

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