

U.S. SAID TO SHIFT VIEW ON AIR COVER IN CAMBODIAN WAR

It Is Reported Ready to Aid South Vietnamese Beyond Deadline Set by Nixon

OFFICIALS ARE VAGUE
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But They Indicate Growing Likelihood That Raids Will Be Made if Necessary

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WASHINGTON, May 22 —

The United States was reported today to be prepared to continue air cover, if needed, for South Vietnamese forces that are considered almost certain to remain in Cambodia after the American withdrawal deadline July 1.

The latest evolution of the Administration's policy emerged in a variety of ways during the day. Spokesmen remained intentionally vague in their public comments, but in private, officials indicated an increasing likelihood that the support would go on.

Under intensive questioning by newsmen, the White House press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, refused to say whether the United States would provide air cover for the South Vietnamese units. But he appeared to allow for this possibility when he finally said that he would reserve comment "on the discussion of United States air activity in relation to June 30" in Cambodia.

Some Rule Out Denial

Other high officials said that if, as assumed, the South Vietnamese retain in Cambodia the combat forces that have been battling the Vietnamese Communists there since April 29, and if they require air cover, they cannot be denied it.

With an eye on Senate criticism of actions in Cambodia, the officials noted that the proposed fund-bill amendment forbidding the use of American ground forces in Cambodia — a measure now under debate — does not prohibit the use of United States planes to cover the South Vietnamese after the withdrawal.

But, the officials went on, actual decisions will be made in the light of specific combat situations when United States commanders have determined that the safety of South Vietnamese troops, or the security of American forces across the border in South Vietnam, requires tactical air strikes.

Bombing and Strafing

The support would take the form of bombing and strafing missions by jet fighter-bombers and helicopter gunships.

In any event, it appeared that the reported course of United States policy — the apparent readiness of the Administration to supply air cover to the South Vietnamese if need be and to accept their continued presence in Cambodia — represented a major departure from the policy enunciated by President Nixon in his news conference May 8 explaining the Cambodian action.

On that occasion, he said that

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while the South Vietnamese were not obliged to abide by the American deadline, I would expect that the South Vietnamese would come out approximately at the same time that we do because when we come out our logistical support and air support will also come out with them." IGNAY

Last Saturday White House officials told newsmen in a briefing at Key Biscayne, Fla., that the Administration had every reason to believe that the South Vietnamese would depart about the same time as the United States forces did.

At that point, however, according to authoritative quarters, President Nixon was already under mounting pressure

from the Department of Defense and the Saigon Government to agree to an indefinite stay for South Vietnamese units.

Laird Supports Stand

There were growing indications this week that the Administration had decided to accept the argument that the South Vietnamese must remain in Cambodia or, at least, be free to return when required. That interpretation was confirmed today by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird. However, it was known that many key officials opposed the policy.

Appearing on the "Today" telecast of the National Broadcasting Company, Mr. Laird said: "I think it would be a mistake to make a firm timetable and establish it here for the Vietnamese forces."

"I personally feel as Secretary of Defense," he added, "if the occasion should arise when the South Vietnamese forces could go into the sanctuary areas at a time when the sanctuaries are rebuilt; when there are North Vietnamese occupying the particular territory, I would recommend that they be used if they so desire. It would be a decision that would be worked out in cooperation with the Cambodian Government and the South Vietnamese."

Mr. Laird emphasized, however, that there would be "no American advisers in Cambodia after June 30." Other Administration officials expressed confidence that the South Vietnamese troops had the capability to operate without them