



Nixon Gets Poor Military Advice

30 May 70

WASHINGTON — The splendid combat performance by South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia not only strengthens the Vietnamization program but casts dark clouds over the U.S. military advise going to President Nixon. The way ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) outfits have handled North Vietnamese regulars in Cambodia's Parrot's Beak has evoked raves from the very U.S. generals who insisted they

could not do the job. Gen. Creighton Abrams, U.S. commander in Vietnam, has personally expressed his surprise to the Pentagon. What's more, high officials privately make this blunt admission: the South Vietnamese could have performed the Cambodian operation alone, without U.S. troops.

The implications of this are staggering. It means Mr. Nixon could have enjoyed the military fruits of entering Cambodia without the calamitous political and economic consequences he now endures and without reactivating the dormant peace movement. The President could have avoided his present crisis of confidence had he rejected the counsel of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and instead heeded the advice of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, who wanted an all-ARVN operation in Cambodia.

This Cambodian dispute between Laird and the Joint Chiefs is the culmination of sharp backstage disagreement over Vietnamization between civilian and military at all levels which we observed during our recent reporting trip to Vietnam. Even before Mr. Nixon's April 20 announcement of another 150,000 U.S. troops to be withdrawn, the military felt he was pulling out too rapidly.

Adding respectability to this view was Gen. Abrams himself. No Colonel Blimp, Abrams is the most sophisticated American commander during 16 years in Vietnam. Moreover, Abrams knows all about the training of ARVN, having been originally assigned to Vietnam as Gen. William Westmoreland's deputy for that purpose.

Yet one high-ranking civilian official told us in Vietnam: "Abe just doesn't understand

Vietnamization." He and other civilians feel Abrams and the uniformed military are missing an essential point of Vietnamization — that South Vietnamese troops must take over from the Americans not when they are ready, but ready or not. Otherwise, the South Vietnamese never will be ready.

This is best illustrated in the strategic Mekong River delta. The mighty U.S. 9th Division, only American ground troops in the delta, pulled out last August amid nervous prostration by the U.S. high command. The generals feared the 7th ARVN Division simply could not handle the job in troublesome Kien Hoa and Dinh Tuong provinces.

Superficially, their fears have been realized. Communist military activity in those two provinces has increased, and nobody claims the 7th ARVN performs nearly as well as the Americans. Nevertheless, since the Americans left, pacification — the Saigon government's control of the countryside — has moved steadily forward. In sum, the Vietcong are losing the delta guerrilla war.

It can even be argued that the heavy-handed U.S. 9th in the delta actually retarded pacification. Certainly, had Washington granted Gen. Westmoreland's 1966 request to send three U.S. divisions into the delta, the damage wrought by American troops — as we pointed out at the time — would have played into Vietcong hands.

That indicates the U.S. military still has not fully grasped the political complexities of guerrilla warfare.