

ANTHONY LEWIS (NY TIMES 6 JUN 76)

Strangely, Cambodia Move May Speed U.S. Pullout

LONDON — Ironists who write our history will take much pleasure in the Cambodian adventure. For in the end it seems likely to confound both the claims of its author, President Nixon, and some of the fears of its critics. By logical standards, the invasion of Cambodia by American and South Vietnamese troops ought to be rated a disaster — for the Cambodians, for the prospect of a political settlement in Southeast Asia, for the peace of America. But at this point there seems a chance that it will inadvertently help to achieve, by one of those dialectics of history, the very object its critics would wish: a more certain American withdrawal from Vietnam.

In terms of military objectives, the main points made by the President in his speech of April 30 announcing the action were two: that the enemy was "concentrating his main forces in the Cambodian sanctuaries where they are building up to launch massive attacks on our forces in Vietnam," and that in the Eastern border area of Cambodia there was "the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam."

The headquarters has not been found: hardly anyone believes any more that it ever existed nor did our invading armies find the slightest evidence of Communist troop concentrations prepared for a "massive" attack on South Vietnam; virtually no enemy troops were in the border areas.

Catalogue of Supplies

The principal basis for the president's assertion now that this has been "the most successful operation" of the whole Vietnam War is, therefore, the catalogue of enemy supplies discovered in Cambodia. So many mounds of captured supplies have been displayed over the years in Vietnam that one is bound to be skeptical. In any event, that gain has to be weighed against the political results of the adventure.

Cambodia as a whole has increasingly become a battleground. The Cambodians find themselves overrun by opposing armies of her ancient enemies, the Vietnamese, with pressure from still another old threatening source, the Thais.

Perhaps that was inevitable from the moment Prince Sihanouk fell to a rightist coup, upsetting the delicate balance of Cambodian "neutrality." But the U.S.-Saigon invasion has sharply raised the level of physical destruction and made a continuing large-

scale struggle for Cambodian territory more likely.

Communists Roam

The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, freed from the restraints that kept them in the border areas, can roam where they wish in Cambodia — and in Laos. Already military action in Southern Laos has increased.

The communists can also begin openly to build a political base in Cambodia, perhaps operating under the cover of the Sihanouk exile regime. There are reports of larger native Cambodian elements along with the Vietnamese in the enemy forces.

In the opinion of the most experienced correspondents in Indochina — American and British and French — the hope of preventing a wholesale Communist takeover in Cambodia once the American forces leave is slim. We shall have in Phnom Penh a government and political structure even weaker than Saigon's, and threatening to collapse on an even wider front.

Hanoi Hawks

Another result has probably been to strengthen the intransigents in Hanoi, those who have argued that America will crack internally if the war is kept going long enough. And as the Russians obviously fear, Cambodia has increased the uncompromising influence of China in Southeast Asia.

Last and most important there is, of course, the political effect of the Cambodian adventure inside the United States. And it is in the bitterness aroused, the geographical and political and generational divisions deepened, that the irony of the Cambodian affair may eventually be seen to lie.

For the domestic explosion at the move into Cambodia has made it almost impossible for President Nixon to back away now from his withdrawal program. He will have to go on at whatever risk. U.S. officials have said just about that in reassuring European governments concerned over the Cambodian invasion.

Crunch Lies Ahead

The real crunch still lies in the future for Nixon. It will come when and if he finally faces the probability that he cannot pull out American troops and at the same time achieve his political objective of a friendly, secure South Vietnam. Perhaps then the Cambodian experience will give him greater strength to withstand the American and South Vietnamese generals and adopt the single objective that would have made the political costs of Cambodia unnecessary; to get out of Vietnam.

(C., 1970, New York Times Service)