

Issue and Debate

Venerable Problem of U.S. Military Aid

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 4— Since World War II Indochina has been an almost perennial sore in American politics and an almost perpetual arena of international confrontation.

No matter what phase American foreign policy has passed through—anticolonialist, antiCommunist, prodétente—United States opposition to a Communist takeover of Indochina by force has endured. And no matter who has been doing the fighting—the French, the Vietminh, the Vietnamese and the Cambodians—it has almost always seemed as if the final decision on war or capitulation or peace rested in Washington.

Now, as Congress moves to consider new Administration requests for aid to Saigon and Phnom Penh Governments, and as rumors persist that Congress might vote the beginning of an end of the program, the issue of United States responsibility in Indochina is being inescapably posed once more.

The Background

More than 50,000 Americans lost their lives and more than 300,000 were wounded in eight years of combat in Vietnam, and the United States has provided South Vietnam with \$150-billion in military and economic aid since 1950. Now the Ford Administration is asking Congress for \$300-million to supplement the \$700-million appropriated for military aid in the current fiscal year. For the fiscal year beginning July 1 the Administration is requesting \$1.3-billion.

As for Cambodia, since the coup against Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the take-over by Marshal Lon Nol and the "incursion" of South Vietnamese and American forces, all in 1970, the United States has provided \$1.75-billion in military and economic aid. The Ford Administration is

asking for \$222-million beyond the \$275-million in military aid approved for the fiscal year ending June 30. For the next fiscal year the Administration seeks \$425-million.

In recent years Congress has cut back on the aid programs; this year there is a lot of talk on Capitol Hill about cessation not just reduction.

President Ford has responded suggesting that Congress approve a plan for phasing out aid to South Vietnam over three years. He did not mention Cambodia, but he has made clear that he feels

deeply about aid to Cambodia in the coming fiscal year.

The questions being raised are: Should Congress end the military aid program now, at the end of the next year or in three years? What are the practical and moral consequences?

Administration View

Senior Administration officials draw a distinction between South Vietnam and Cambodia as far as the American stakes are concerned.

They maintain that the United States has a vital interest in supporting the Saigon Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu because of the long history of American involvement and what they view as Saigon's relatively good chances of survival. They consider the Phnom Penh Government to be of less importance because the "Association" with it—as Secretary of State Kissinger has termed the relationship—is of short duration and the chances of survival appear slim.

Mr. Kissinger told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in secret session last week that if, as seems likely, the Lon Nol Government falls, it is of great importance that the American air pipeline still be open; his argument was that if the fall came after aid had ceased, other nations would blame the United States, adversely affecting international relations.

The senior officials also believe that continued aid to Cambodia may lead to a military stalemate that could yield negotiations.

With respect to Saigon, Mr. Kissinger said in a recent news conference "that if Vietnam falls as a result of an American decision to cut off its aid, this will have, over a period of time, the most serious consequences for the conduct of our foreign policy."

In brief the Administration argument is as follows:

We have removed our troops and the South Vietnamese are doing the fighting reasonably well by themselves. The costs of support are only a fraction of what they were.

With the fighting being almost entirely done by more than 200,000 North Vietnamese, the Administration says, Soviet and Chinese aid to Hanoi, which last year may have exceeded Washington's aid to Saigon for the first time, shows no sign of stopping.

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to Indochina

Most South Vietnamese do not want to be governed from Hanoi, as attested by refugees, who almost always flee southward. While the Saigon Government is hardly a model democracy, the argument goes, it is a government and is doing quite well under the circumstances.

The officials recall that the American effort once had broad national support, whatever the feelings about its wisdom may be now, and that at the time of the signing of the Paris accords in 1973 there was no indication that Saigon would not continue to get the means to defend itself.

According to the administration, the only way to bring about real peace is to establish battlefield equilibrium, which requires aid for at least three more years. Without that aid, the administration argues, Saigon will fall, the Communists will take vengeance on those who depended on the United States and American credibility will be forever tarnished.

Opposition View

Legislators and outside groups opposed to further military aid do not tend to distinguish between Saigon and Phnom Penh, but their arguments are by no means uniform.

Some believe that the conflicts will go on regardless, that the United States has already spent enough in blood and treasure and that now is as good a time as any to stop. Others maintain that ending the aid will lead to the downfall of the two Govern-

ments, which will bring about negotiations yielding coalition governments, as in Laos, and peace. Still others forgive victory for the Communists, believe they deserve to win and want the process speeded.

Such active opponents of military aid as the Senate majority leader, Mike Mansfield, and former Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford insist that the United States has no strategic interests in South Vietnam or Cambodia. Indeed, they maintain that continuing involvement in Indochina damages the American role in the world.

"The suggest of more aid for Lon Nol and Thieu at this time, follows the usual pattern," Mr. Clifford said in an interview. "Just a little more, we've been told for almost 30 years, and we will accomplish our purposes. But a little more now will just mean a little more next year. The war in Indochina is a civil war, and it will be endless and hopeless unless the United States makes the decision now to stop the aid and begin the process of building a peace."

The opponents deny that the United States has any continuing commitment to Saigon. Whatever promises may have been made at the time of the signing of the Paris accords, they maintain, Congress did not share in the undertaking.

They view the Thieu Government as essentially corrupt and repressive and as having little popular support. Refugees flee southward, it is conceded, but for practical reasons — to escape the bat-

tlefield — rather than out of conviction.

While the opponents of aid recognize that Peking and Moscow continue to assist Hanoi, they do not believe that this alters the fact that the Thieu and Lon Nol Governments are maintained solely by American aid and that peace cannot come to either South Vietnam or Cambodia unless the United States makes the first move.

The argument that the United States has a moral obligation to continue the aid elicits the reply that the moral obligation is to the Vietnamese and Cambodian peoples, not to Mr. Thieu and Marshal Lon Nol.

"The argument that the fall of these men will lead to a bloodbath," Mr. Clifford asserted, "is only speculation and must be weighed against the certainty that the war itself has been and is a bloodbath."

The Outlook

Until this week a Congress majority appeared to many to be opposed to the supplemental aid. Whether this will change as a result of the Congressional fact-finding trip to Indochina and pressure by the Administration is not clear. In any event it is unlikely that anything near the total will be granted.

The President and Congress seem headed toward some form of compromise on the plan to phase out aid to South Vietnam in three years. How much the aid will be and for how long, are still open questions.