

The Wrong Issue

President Ford's increasingly threatening remarks about the future of Cambodia are only serving to make a bad situation worse. If he persists in describing one Congressional vote authorizing \$222 million in ammunition as the acid test of United States reliability to an ally (sic), then the genuine allies the President is presumably concerned about may regrettably come to believe it.

However, the issue of "United States reliability," as Mr. Ford addressed it at his news conference last week, is not germane to the present plight of the Cambodian people. Looking back over the record of the United States in Cambodia since 1970, only a polemicist who cared little for facts or fairness could claim that the deterioration of President Lon Nol's Government was due to the failure of the Congress to give adequate support. In that time the United States sent nearly \$1.8 billion in economic and military assistance; in the past year alone this country has provided \$452 million in aid. Yet the regime is in desperate straits, besieged in its capital, with a long record of inefficiency, corruption and dwindling ability to govern.

The United States and President Lon Nol have undoubtedly attempted to negotiate a settlement, though how genuinely cannot yet be said since so much of the diplomatic record is still held secret by the various governments. After all that has happened, only by a supreme act of faith could the Congress accept President Ford's argument that just this extra bit of military matériel would make a settlement possible. The United States Embassy in Phnom Penh apparently does not believe this; leading members of the Ford Administration reportedly do not believe it.

The United States has no defense commitment to the Government of President Lon Nol; both the Ford and Nixon Administrations and the Congress, in repeated legislative measures, have specifically disclaimed such a commitment. Any attempt at this late date to set up Congressional responsibility for the situation in Cambodia is unsupportable.

Yet by continuing to issue more or less veiled threats of ultimate responsibility, toward the apparent end of making more skittish Congressmen wary of subsequent reprisals, President Ford is only confusing and possibly demoralizing allied governments around the world which have more solid reasons for relying on the United States.