

Ford and Cambodia

Gap Between Aides' Public and Private Statements Poses Credibility Problem

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WASHINGTON, March 10—

President Ford, who has tried to build a reputation for candor and forthrightness, appears to be facing his first major credibility problem since he assumed office seven months ago. The problem has arisen because members of his Administration have been giving in private a more pessimistic assessment of the situation in Cambodia than Mr. Ford's public assessment.

News
Analysis

Members of Congress whom Mr. Ford had counted on for support tend to believe the private assessment and have been resisting his request to support the Lon Nol Government with additional military aid. They include Senator Hubert Humphrey, Democrat of Minnesota, who has publicly questioned the President's motives, and Senator Hugh Scott, the Senate Republican leader, who said he did not see how President Lon Nol could stay in power.

The Ford White House, in the face of this, has dug in its heels on the issue and is standing by the President's public statements. Ron Nessen, the press secretary, has produced intelligence reports from Cambodia to show that the Lon Nol Government can be sustained.

Mr. Nessen, in a press briefing today, sought to make little of the differences of opinion on Cambodia, saying, "The Administration has been unemotional and not strident in this area."

Messages Ambiguous

This is essentially a political problem for the President. The cablegrams from Cambodia are said to paint a picture of impending disaster for the Government forces, but to be ambiguous enough to support more than one point of view.

Mr. Ford agrees with Secretary of State Kissinger that it is important for the credibility of American foreign policy to continue the aid and he is putting the intelligence reports in the best possible light.

But there remains a gap between the private and the public assessments. In private testimony before a group of House members yesterday, for example, William E. Colby, Director of Central Intelligence, was reported to have painted a pessimistic picture of the Cambodian Government's chances even with United States aid.

Some officials have said privately that the Lon Nol Government is likely to fall, but that it is important that it fall with American aid rather than without it.

The gap between public and private hurting Mr. Ford. His optimism has raised the question whether his advisers paint as pessimistic a picture for him as they do for members of Congress.

Mr. Nessen, acting on instructions of the President, has been trying to show that there is no difference in the private and public assessments. In conversations with reporters, he does not seem to be aware of the more pessimistic of the private assessments and seeks to reduce the differences to a matter of semantics.

In making his decision, Mr. Ford is depicted as consulting with a wide range of officials. On the day that he made his news conference statement, he consulted Lieut. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, Mr. Kissinger's deputy on the National Security Council; Donald H. Rumsfeld, White House chief of staff; John O. Marsh, counselor to the President; Mr. Nessen and others by telephone. Mr. Kissinger was on his way to the Middle East but his views were reported to have been relayed by General Scowcroft.

None of these advisers were known to have opposed the essence of the statement. White House officials left the impression that there was general agreement.

Whatever the advice from officials, Mr. Ford has been reported unwavering on maintaining military support in Indochina, just as he had for many years as Republican leader in the House of Representatives. He is reported determined to adhere to his policy despite some defections in Congress and public opinion polls showing that a majority of Americans do not support aid to Cambodia.

"The President feels his course is right," Mr. Nessen said today.