

Observer: That Sort of Thing

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By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, April 29— "All right, all right, gentlemen! Enough of this futile weighing of alternatives. I need hard answers. If we go in with nothing more than military equipment, what explanation can I give the American people?"

"That is easy, Mr. President; you say that if Cambodia is allowed to fall, the rest of Asia will fall like so many dominoes. A few rifles, you might tell them, some old tanks, a B-52 or two—these trifles can stop the red march of Communism at no cost in American lives. Antiseptic interdiction. That sort of thing."

"All very well, general, but next you're going to be back here asking for permission to put just a few American troops in—."

"Nothing to be alarmed about, Mr. President. Just a few thousand special military advisers. Show Cambodian boys how to use and care for their American equipment. A little in-the-field instruction in tactics. That sort of thing."

"I see. And what will I tell the American people when a great many of our special military advisers are killed some night in an enemy raid?"

"The only thing any self-respecting President of the

United States can tell them, Mr. President. Tell them these attacks on American boys will not be accepted without retaliation. Tell them that henceforth United States military personnel in Cambodia will be free to return fire, as well as show Cambodian boys how to use and care for their American equipment. That sort of thing."

"It sounds like bad trouble, general. I'll have just a few thousand American advisers in there against armies of the enemy, and before you can say Lyndon Johnson the whole Lon Nol Government will be threatened with military conquest."

Just Move In the Troops

"Nothing to worry about in that case, Mr. President. Some Khmer gunboats would probably attack one of our aircraft carriers. In that case you'd naturally want to move in four- or five-hundred thousand troops to show those gunboats they can't push Uncle Sam around. I'd guess the enemy would have a pretty hard time whipping Lon Nol as long as we've got four or five-hundred thousand troops in there. We could defoliate their territory, burn out their hamlets. That sort of thing."

"All very well for you to say, general, but I have to justify

this sort of thing to the American people. What could I possibly tell them?"

"First off, sir, you might remind them what happened at Munich. You'd probably want to tell them we intend to honor our commitments. Preserve democracy in Southeast Asia. That sort of thing."

"It's absurd to talk about democracy and Lon Nol in the same breath, general. Lon Nol has nothing to do with democracy. To the American people, Lon Nol is just Lon Nol spelled backwards."

"I know that, sir. That's why I think it would be a good idea to hold some elections as soon as possible and get Lon Nol elected democratically after making sure that anybody else who wants to run is in jail. Get him a parliament, too. That sort of thing."

"What's the point of having a parliament if we don't want anybody interfering with the way Lon Nol runs the war?"

"With all due respect, sir, there's nothing like a parliament to bring to the surface politicians who don't like the way a war is being run. Makes them easy to arrest. Long-term imprisonment for treason. That sort of thing."

"I see, general, but what is the point of having the opposition in jail?"

"That way, Mr. President, if the doves ever have reason to nag you about inefficiency and corruption in the Lon Nol regime, you'd be able to say, 'True enough, gentlemen, but who else is there?' That sort of thing."

There's Always an Answer

"But, general, somebody would surely point out that we were fighting a war to save democracy in a country where, by tolerating imprisonment of the opposition, we have allowed no alternative but tyranny. There's no answer to that."

"Respectfully speaking, sir, there is. You could say that people who pointed out things like that were 'Nervous Nellies.' Change the subject. Talk about coonskin. That sort of thing."

"All right, general, let's hypothesize half a million troops pinned down in Cambodia and my own political future at the disposal of Lon Nol. That's the pickle you propose to put me in. I want to know how you propose to get me out."

"Well, Mr. President, actually, getting out would probably be the next President's problem. I'd think he'd want to get out almost anyway he could. Maybe by Cambodian-izing the war. That sort of thing."