

Royce Brier

The War Problem Before Decision

THIS WAS WRITTEN before President Nixon declared himself on Cambodia, a declaration to be discussed here next week.

Many newspapers, publicists, verbal analysts on television and politicians have been jumping the gun on what the United States has done, or is about to do, in Cambodia. Hence it seems appropriate to consider the Cambodian reality as it existed yesterday afternoon, hoping it will aid our understanding of Mr. Nixon's determination of the crisis.

Yesterday we had not "gone into" Cambodia, as many headlines, speculative news stories and broadcasts informed you. What we had done over the past few days was arrange some aid for the Cambodian government, a military junta, which has been under attack by North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas. Wednesday, South Vietnamese combat formations moved into Cambodian territory, the purpose, to block their enemies from the north.

We have promised to the South Vietnamese some tactical air cover, technical advisers in logistics and combat, possibly ground transport and medical assistance.

★ ★ ★

IT WAS NOT CLEAR before Mr. Nixon addressed the nation that we have agreed to send the Cambodians even small arms, let alone sophisticated weaponry, which would entail training Cambodians in its use.

With one exception, the situation was therefore analogous to that of the Americans early in the Kennedy administration, when a few hundred "advisers" were working with the beleaguered South Vietnamese.

We must note, ominously, that the advisers numbered 16,000 when Lyndon Johnson took office. The exception is that American aviators were flying

with South Vietnamese as "observers," and not flying combat missions.

★ ★ ★

THIS WAS THE STORY, but the changeover was gradual, almost unnoticed, and even concealed until air casualties appeared.

We have been making bomb runs over Laos for several months to interdict North Vietnamese supply into South Vietnam, and some of this bombing may have slopped over to Cambodian bases.

In any case, air war outside Vietnam's borders is not a departure, nor arms supply a critical departure. Commitment of American ground combat troops would be a critical departure, and would radically alter world opinion and the Indochina problem.

The problem would then be to expel the enemy from Cambodian soil, and necessarily Laotian soil, thus expanding the Vietnam war over virgin terrain. It would constitute an escalation, whatever anybody says. Pentagon elements are vigorously pushing it as "vital" to protect our forces in South Vietnam. Some are even arguing it would shorten the war, which assumes Americans are idiots who don't know from up.

Here, then, is a peril. It reverses Asian policy, nullifies "no more Vietnams." It doubles Vietnam as a sacrifice. It has no visible destination. But this is the way wars have ever grown, unless the people and their leaders have the moral courage to discern reality, and to say "no more" to military vainglory, centered in this case in the Pentagon.

May 1, 1970