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Cambodian Quagmire...

President Nixon's shocking decision to send American troops into Cambodia immediately raises the question: Can they get out?

Withdrawal from South Vietnam as well as Cambodia is cited by the President, as the chief reason for plunging deeper into Indochina. The President's own rhetoric is once again ambiguous. He describes the American military move as a decision "to go to the heart of the trouble . . . cleaning out major North Vietnamese and Vietcong-occupied territories, these sanctuaries which serve as bases for attacks on both Cambodia and American and South Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam."

This is hardly a limited objective. The sanctuary areas now being used by Vietnamese Communist troops in Cambodia are far more widespread than the Fishhook and Parrot's Beak areas currently under allied attack. Talk of a six to eight-week operation, combined with Presidential language that indicates an effort to close out the Communist sanctuaries entirely, strongly suggests that more is intended than simply to shore up the Phnompenh regime and deter further Communist moves against it.

There is little reason to believe that the Vietnam war can be won by military operations in Cambodia, which cannot affect infiltration by sea, through Laos and across the demilitarized zone. There is little reason, furthermore, to believe that the Cambodian sanctuary can be closed. Similiar bases have been cleaned out repeatedly within South Vietnam only to resume activity once allied troops withdrew; such operations are rarely attempted now in South Vietnam.

To pursue the objective of closing down Cambodia as a sanctuary assures a prolonged involvement of American troops and their likely entrapment in a quagmire as dangerous as that in South Vietnam, if Hanoi responds by escalating its own involvement there. The quicker the American action is terminated, the more likely it is that it can be terminated at a time of American, rather than Communist, choosing.

...Political Derring-Do

President Nixon's televised explanation of why American troops are crossing the Cambodian border included a long peroration on history, morality and patriotism.

The jingoistic language was surprising enough. It included an admonition against the United States acting "like a pitiful, helpless giant." It stressed the need for "the richest and strongest nation in the history of the world" to show its "character" when "the chips are down." The phrases sounded as though they stemmed from the Spanish-American War rather than from the Chief Executive of the United States two World Wars and a Cold War later.

But even more astonishing was the intrusion of Presidential politics into a speech of this nature. Mr. Nixon's personalized comments suddenly introduced a new element into his explanation of the Cambodian adventure. In the midst of his remarks on the shooting war, Mr. Nixon brought in the all-too-familiar political wars.

"I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe was right than be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and to see this nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history," he declared.

This statement suggests a linkage of Mr. Nixon's political position with the military decision to invade Cambodia. It is a suggestion that he is sacrificing his political future in pursuit of victory. It is not a brave remark but a partisan one. It is not designed to assure Americans that the only consideration behind the complex Vietnamization plan is the stability of South Vietnam. It cannot clarify American standing among foreign nations already confused by the ramifications of internal American politics. Nor will it reassure the American people that the timetable of withdrawal from Vietnam has nothing to do with the timetable of the next Presidential election.