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The President And Cambodia

WHEN PRESIDENT NIXON decided to deploy American combat troops in Cambodia, it was possibly the most momentous Presidential decision since April, 1917, when Woodrow Wilson asked the Congress to declare war on Germany.

That is a potential, of course, and puts the worst construction on the gamble. We cannot know the payoff. But the prognosis, based on American experience in southeast Asia, is not good.

The President insisted the deployment is limited. But many deployments, called escalations, authorized by President Johnson, 1964-68, also were limited. Each was designed to rectify a military dislocation in Vietnam, but it didn't work. Each failure begot another deployment in rectification, until a small war, barely a skirmish, became America's fourth biggest war, a war defying extrication.

Mr. Nixon used a map to explain his strategy. The map showed dark areas contiguous to the Vietnam border, like lesions in an X-ray film, which the President designated as enemy lodgment on Cambodian soil. It is his determination, he said, to "clear out" the enemy (40,000), in what is hoped to be what the Germans used to call a blitz.

Mr. Nixon denied a purpose to occupy these sanctuaries. Once the enemy is expelled, and their supplies destroyed, "we will withdraw."



W HETHER THIS PLANNED WITHDRAWAL (provided the enemy can be expelled) is possible, depends on military contingencies Mr. Nixon's Pentagon can hardly foresee. Here, again, the prognosis is dubious. For six years the enemy has exhibited a marked ability to fill vacuums of the character described by the President.

Mr. Nixon's reasoning in support of his decision invites analysis as to its plausibility at several points. He said it will shorten the (Vietnam) war, an apocryphal conclusion, and keep casualties at an "absolute minimum." Elsewhere he speaks of "massive military aggression" of North Vietnamese in Laos and Cambodia. But he failed to say how these masses can be overcome without a compensating increase of casualties and commitments.

IT IS CONCEIVABLE if the enemy caved in, and fled its sanctuaries. But this would be a miracle of a kind not yet observed in North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.

"We take this action not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia, but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam." Unhappily this presumes that what we now face is a tactical incident, not "war," a grim reality hard to dispel by mere disclaimer.

Mr. Nixon resorted to loaded, emotional words when he described what would happen had he not taken the decision. The United States would appear "like a pitiful, helpless giant." It would become a "second-rate power." Thus he adopted the forlorn philosophy so long advanced by former Secretary of State Rusk in support of repeated Johnson escalations.

What the Cambodian move will do to the American socio-political climate, and to Mr. Nixon's almost two years of pledges to end the Asian adventure, may not easily be estimated at this early stage.

Certainly his Guam policy of "no more Vietnams" has been largely nullified. His 150,000-man withdrawal is imperiled, though he does not concede it. The Vietnam futility seems shifted to a new site. How much more futility the war-weary American people can take, is problematical. We shall see when the casualties start rolling in.

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