

Tuesday, May 5, 1970

An Opportunity And a Threat

PRESIDENT NIXON'S Cambodian decision was made in his constitutional role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Though all important military decisions are of course political also, it is manifest that impelling military purposes determined the Cambodian course.

These military purposes, are so obvious that they were surely recognized by the Senators who have directed at the President a volume of criticism seldom known in this country. The senators did not give Mr. Nixon the grace period that is traditional when an American President acts militarily in his capacity as commander-in chief. Instead they attacked instantly and bitterly.

What they were really saying was that they do not believe Mr. Nixon means his policy of Vietnamization, despite two large troop withdrawals already completed and a pledge of 150,000 more to come home in the next year. In saying that, they were guilty of succumbing to polarized passions to the point where they closed their eyes to crucial military facts. They were also guilty of undermining the President at a crucial moment.

The Cambodian situation presented American and South Vietnamese forces with a threat and an opportunity, both tied inextricably to Vietnamization.

The threat lay in the immediate and still present possibility that Hanoi's force of 40,000 in the Cambodian sanctuaries would crush the weak Cambodian army, seize the capital of Phnom Penh and overthrow the new Cambodian government. The Communists would then turn that entire country into a sanctuary, granary and staging point for attacks the full length of South Vietnam. This, as Mr. Nixon clearly pointed out, would inevitably slow Vietnamization and expose American Forces to greater dangers.

The opportunity lay in the possibility that, by swift and resolute action on our part, the major Cambodian sanctuaries could be overrun, their stockpiles seized or destroyed, and enemy supply lines cut. This would weaken the enemy, hasten Vietnamization and bring more Americans home sooner.

IN ALL THREE of Mr. Nixon's addresses to the nation announcing troop withdrawals he warned that this country would make appropriate response if the enemy attempted to change the fundamental situation. The enemy ignored that warning and attempted to seize all of Cambodia. The President answered with the kind of decisiveness that has been tragically absent from American responses to such challenges recently. The empty mutterings from Moscow and Peking show that they well understand this kind of resoluteness.

At the least, the current operation should act as a spoiler and afford the Cambodians time to save themselves. If it accomplishes that much, Vietnamization will be hastened. We believe that will happen.