

Washington: Who Advises the President?

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, May 7 — One of the most surprising things about the violent opposition in the Congress and the universities to the invasion of Cambodia is that President Nixon was genuinely surprised by it.

He was forewarned time and again by his own people about what would happen if he invaded Cambodia, but he was astonished when the warnings came true, and this is not the first time. He misjudged the opposition to his Supreme Court nominations of Judges Haynsworth and Carswell as much as he misjudged the opposition to his adventure in Cambodia, and this raises questions not only about his personal judgment but about where he is getting the advice he chooses to follow.

The Rejected Friends

Paradoxically, his decisive advice is not coming from his oldest friends in the Cabinet. He has been closer personally to William Rogers, his Secretary of State, and to Robert Finch, his Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, over the last fifteen or twenty years than to anybody else in his Cabinet or on his White House staff, but there is no evidence that they are his principal ad-

visers on foreign or domestic affairs. In fact, they are probably more unhappy about the present plight of the Administration than anybody else in Washington tonight.

The Nixon Cabinet is clearly not playing the powerful role Mr. Nixon said he wanted it to perform at the beginning of his Administration. He was quite specific about what he expected from them during and after the Presidential campaign of 1968.

During the campaign he said: "The President cannot isolate himself from the great intellectual ferment of his time. On the contrary, he must consciously and deliberately place himself at their center. . . . This is one reason why I don't want a Government of yes-men. . . ."

When he introduced his Cabinet on television at the beginning of the Administration he said, "Every man in this Cabinet will be urged to speak out in the Cabinet and within the Administration on all the great issues so that the decisions we make will be the best decisions we could possibly reach."

But the Cabinet has not worked that way under President Nixon, any more than it did under Presidents Johnson and Kennedy. Increasingly, and earlier than in most Administrations, Mr. Nixon has isolated himself with a few members of

his White House staff and followed the advice of Attorney General Mitchell and Vice President Agnew.

Thus, by the accident of a newspaper "leak," we now find Secretary of Interior Walter J. Hickel complaining in a private letter to the President that the Administration appears to lack an appropriate concern for the attitude of young Americans, and appealing to the President to keep in touch with his own Cabinet.

The Nixon Paradox

"Permit me to suggest," Secretary Hickel wrote, "that you consider meeting, on an individual and conversational basis, with members of your Cabinet. Perhaps through such conversations, we can gain greater insight into the problems confronting us all. . . ."

This helps explain what has been going on here behind the scenes. The President, for all his talk of "teamwork," has not been using to the full his Cabinet, whose members are in touch with the realities of the problems in their areas of responsibility, but has increasingly been closeted with his White House staff, who are more isolated from the people at home and abroad than almost anybody else in the Administration.

The result is that the Presi-

dent now finds himself precisely where he said he would not be: isolated from the great intellectual ferment of his time, and even from his own dissenting Cabinet members, and acting on assumptions which turn out to be false.

Accordingly, he is now in a dangerous situation, both at home and abroad. By his lunge into Cambodia, he has not destroyed the enemy or wiped out the sanctuaries, but aroused such a protest at home that he has committed himself to withdraw within seven weeks from Cambodia, thereby inviting the enemy to establish new sanctuaries in an area which includes the Cambodian capital.

In the process, he has not only divided his own Cabinet and party, but almost achieved the impossible goal of reviving the confused and incoherent antiwar movement and uniting the Democratic party.

This is clearly not what he intended, and it is amazing that it has happened to Richard Nixon. For he is a cautious man, who says he believes in careful staff work, getting the facts before he moves, organizing the Cabinet and listening to their views before he acts; but he didn't do it, and is now in a jam because he broke all his own rules about getting the facts and never being surprised.