

Why Are We in Vietnam?

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LONDON, May 8—President Nixon's action in Cambodia has had at least one constructive effect: it has dramatized the flawed character, not to say illogic, of his declared plan to get the United States out of Vietnam.

As outlined in his address to the nation last Nov. 2, the plan had two objectives. One was gradually to withdraw American troops. The other was to achieve the political goal that the troops were there to secure—maintenance of the Thieu-Ky regime or some other non-Communist government in South Vietnam.

In short, the President seemed to have it in mind to pull American troops out and still "win." What was the significance of his repeated warnings against "defeat" and "humiliation."

Inconsistent Goals

On the face of it, the two objectives were inconsistent. If we could not make the writ of the Thieu-Ky Government run with 500,000 American soldiers, how could we expect to secure that aim as we withdrew?

The Administration's answer, the key to the plan, was "Vietnamization": we would strengthen the forces of South

Vietnam quickly enough to permit a reasonably prompt American withdrawal.

Possibly out of wishful thinking, most Americans assumed that Mr. Nixon was committed to the withdrawal part of the formula. If South Vietnam did not prove politically or militarily capable of taking up the withdrawing Americans' burden, she would have to compromise with the other side; in any case, we would go.

Political Priority

But now, in the Cambodian affair, we see that the President still rates the securing of his political aims in South Vietnam over the objective of withdrawal. He had to send troops into Cambodia, it is explained, to clear out the threat from there and make possible continuing withdrawals. In other words, we have to assure the Thieu-Ky Government's security before we withdraw. We, not the South Vietnamese themselves.

If American military action, in Cambodia or elsewhere, could finally guarantee a happy political future for South Vietnam, how simple life would be. But we know from five years of death and destruction that it is not like that. And so the Cambodian action brings us

back to the old questions: Can American arms win a political victory? And at what cost?

A British politician has just addressed himself to those questions in a speech that President Nixon and other American conservatives ought to read. The speaker was Enoch Powell, a right-wing figure in the Conservative party, an unsentimental man, a man utterly opposed to Communism.

"American military power," Mr. Powell said, "cannot secure any specific political result in Southeast Asia. This is a war in which the United States can win, if it wishes, every battle; but it is a war which the United States is bound to lose.

"I have no doubt that the United States forces can eliminate the Vietcong base which has so long flourished—of course it has—in Cambodia. But when the operation is over, the underlying facts of the situation reassert themselves like the tide washing out footmarks in the sand.

"The ultimate fact reasserts itself: the Americans do not live there; everyone knows that their presence is destined to be temporary; everyone knows the realities which will prevail over them."

Of course victory of a kind is available to the United States.

The other day American forces went into a little Cambodian town called Snoul. They bombed it and burned it and then looted the few pathetic belongings left. A colonel said, "We had no choice." A soldier, looking at the body of a child killed by napalm, said, "I've seen worse, but I hate to see the kids get it."

We Must Leave Sometime

And that sort of victory, even if we are ready to pay the moral price for it, will still not secure Mr. Nixon's political objective. Some day, as Mr. Powell said, we shall have to go, and then the Vietnamese and the Cambodians will settle their own future. The North Vietnamese like to say that they have fought off foreign invaders for a thousand years, and they will be there long after the Americans are gone.

The longer we stay in Vietnam, the more painful and humiliating will be our eventual exit. "It is the futility of American policy," Enoch Powell said, "which constitutes its culpability." We can still bargain. But when the American Government at last strips away its illusions, it will adopt a policy with a single objective overriding all others: to get out of Vietnam.