Washington: President Nixon's Three Theories

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, May 12 — In explaining President Nixon's sudden decision to invade Cambodia, his foreign policy aides point to three Nixon theories about how to deal with the Communists in general and the Soviet Union in particular. These are worth examining.

The first is that you cannot show weakness in one part of the world without encouraging Moscow to believe that you will be weak and vulnerable in other parts of the world.

The second is that unpredictability is often a virtue in dealing with the Soviets, for if they cannot be reasonably sure of how the U.S. will react, they may be more careful about moving against you or your allies.

And the third is that sudden bold moves that take the enemy by surprise are likely to be more effective than small moves which give the Communists time to adapt.

Bold and Dangerous

These are bold and dangerous theories, but there is obviously something to them. For example, on the first point, President Kennedy was convinced that Moscow took the big risk of trying to put missiles in Cuba because Kennedy launched the Bay of Pigs invasion against Castro but weakened in the end and didn't see the invasion through.

It is a fair speculation, supported by some of Mr. Nixon's principal advisers, that he had this wider theory of world policy in mind when he struck Cambodia. In almost every speech since he started withdrawing troops from Vietnam, he has inserted a warning that he would act if the enemy took advantage of him, and since Hanoi would not negotiate on his terms and kept building up the sanctuaries, followed by Moscow's sending its pilots into operations over Egypt, he moved suddenly and secretly.

This was in keeping with his second and third theories. He did not follow what seemed to be the predictable line of steady withdrawal, but made the *unpredictable* lunge at Cambodia and revived the bombing of North Vietnam, surprising not only Hanoi but Moscow, and many of his own associates and the Congress.

He explained later in his press conference that whereas President Johnson moved against the enemy "step by step," the Nixon invasion of Cambodia was "a decisive move."

The only trouble with these neat theories is that they don't always fit the facts. The Congress was surprised by his unpredictability, but the enemy wasn't, so we won't know till later if it was "decisive." It may be that the men in the Kremlin regard the President's invasion as unpredictable and even irrational, considering how it divided the American people and didn't find the enemy; but by the President's way of thinking, he may still have made the Soviet leaders think they must be careful in dealing with an incalculable man who has so much power and is willing to use it despite the opposition of Congress and members of his own Cabinet.

Two points need to be made about these Nixon theories. First, the United States did not react to Moscow's savage invasion of Czechoslovakia, yet Moscow did not then assume it could bluff Washington on Berlin or press its advantage to change the balance of power against the United States in Western Europe. Nor did the United States assume that the Soviet Union was "weak" just because Khrushchev tried to put his missiles in Cuba and turned back when challenged.

Personal Power

Second, whether Mr. Nixon's theories are correct or not, acting on them against a sovereign nation without the knowledge of any but two or three of his closest advisers and without consultation with the Congress places enormous reliance on secrecy, the big strike, and on the judgment of the President alone. If he is free to hit Cambodia in secret, why not Hanoi? Why not the Soviet ships bringing arms from the real sanctuary? That would be even more bold and unpredictable. All Presidents tend of course to take a highly personal view of their historic role, and many of them make the tragic error of thinking they are what they merely represent, but few have been quite so personal about it as Mr. Nixon.

As he said, "I knew the stakes that were involved. I knew the division that would be caused in this country. I also knew the problems internationally. I knew the military risks. . . . I made this decision. I take responsibility for it. I believe it was the right decision. I believe it will work out. If it doesn't, then I'm to blame. . . ."

But what about everybody else concerned? In a world of atomic weapons, even if we concede a certain Machiavellian logic to the three theories, this is a startling assertion of personal authority: Never mind the Congress, never mind the division of the country. "I knew the stakes . . . I know the divisions . . . I knew the risks . . . I believe it will work out. If it doesn't. . . ." Let us pray!