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Cambodian Withdrawal

The debate that has opened on the Cooper-Church amendment now gives the Senate a chance to vote a proposal that would bind President Nixon to his promise of withdrawing American troops from Cambodia. It would also make sure that he did not send them back without Congressional consent.

These reasonable objectives deserve reasoned discussion, not the "stab in the back" and "jubilation in Moscow" rhetoric employed in an attempt to discredit the amendment yesterday by some Administration supporters.

Administration arguments that the measure would hamper the President in his constitutional responsibility to take action to protect American troops merely confuse the issue. Nothing in the proposal would keep the President from carrying out the present Cambodian operation, all the more so since repeated statements by Mr. Nixon and Defense Secretary Laird assert that the operation is ahead of schedule and proceeding successfully. Mr. Laird, in fact, has publicly dismissed as unnecessary military pleas for more time to search for Communist arms in the sanctuary bases.

What the Cooper-Church amendment would do is cut off funds to retain American troops in Cambodia after the current operation is completed on June 30. It would also prohibit American advisers or air support for Cambodian forces.

However, the sponsors of the proposal have not attempted to bar limited arms aid for Cambodia nor American air interdiction of Communist supply lines through Cambodia to South Vietnam. Neither is there any attempt to rule out American air support to South Vietnamese forces should they return to Cambodia at a future date, although President Nixon has said that air support for the current South Vietnamese operation would halt by the end of next month.

The importance of the Cooper-Church amendment is twofold. It gives the Senate an opportunity to put on record the strong opposition within that body to a prolongation of military operations in Cambodia. And it would announce the Senate's determination to reassert Congressional prerogatives in foreign policy and defense, areas marked in recent decades by Presidential dominance—and tragic errors.

The real constitutional issue differs from the one the Administration is trying to make. The Constitution vests control over the nation's warring power in both the President and the Congress. No one can doubt the need for Presidential decisionmaking when split-second questions of nuclear war or peace may be involved. But there never has been such urgency in the Presidential decisions on Vietnam and Cambodia, now under challenge.

By adopting the Cooper-Church amendment and thus reasserting its right to be consulted before the country is taken into war again, Congress will strengthen not weaken the American position in the world. What Vietnam has shown is that it is a war undertaken without popular consent that undermines American credibility abroad, not the opposite.