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Nixon Invasion Rationale Floats Along with COSVN

WASHINGTON—By last Wednesday, the cat was not only out of the bag but roaming around. According to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, "several thousand" U.S. troops had already been withdrawn from Cambodia; even according to U.S. military spokesmen in Saigon, almost 2,000 had come out. The President, after he boldly marched up the Cambodian hill with his April 30 address, marched right down again at his May 8 press conference. The "great majority" of American troops would be out by mid-June, he said, and all by the start of the fiscal year on July 1.

Suddenly the problem at the Pentagon was no longer to find the "central headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam," as the President had grandly called it when the invasion began. Now it had become how to meet the President's timetable for withdrawal. Marshal Ky—South Vietnam's vice-president and a certified leader of the Free World—held a news conference inside Cambodia and said he had no intention of meeting the timetable. South Vietnamese troops were in Cambodia, said Ky, at the request of the Cambodian government and would remain for at least many months until the Cambodians could take over their own defense.



Marshal Ky

It is a novel doctrine. While we are in Vietnam for another year, Vietnamizing our war, the Vietnamese army will be off in Cambodia, Cambodianizing another war. It is a joke, but the 5,000 to 10,000 Americans who will die in the process make it a sick one.

Marshal Ky had apparently not heard President Nixon's press conference. In response to a question of whether the South Vietnamese would abide by our pullout deadlines, the President said he thought they would. The reason, said Mr. Nixon, is that "when we come out, our logistical support and air support will also come out with them." Our President, at least in these unguarded moments, shows that he knows who is the organ grinder and who is the monkey.

But COSVN has been forgotten. This is the vaunted "Central Office for South Vietnam," a title our generals in Saigon long ago gave to what they imagine as the counterpart of our Pentagon East.

When the Cambodian invasion began, it was a sophisticated network of underground bunkers, full of electronic equipment and documents, and manned by thousands of fanatic armed Communist clerks.

The purpose of the invasion, we were told, was to "clean out" this headquarters. Vice President Agnew, asserting his credentials in the field of military strategy, announced that we had never before attacked the major Viet Cong headquarters.

The Vice President, by the way, has been let down by his research people—and not for the first time. We have attacked a major Viet Cong headquarters before; indeed, it was the same one—we called it COSVN then, too—and it was attacked in 1967 as part of an epic sweep called "Operation Junction City."

Junction City—just three years ago—was designed to clean out the headquarters, and Gen. William Westmoreland hailed it as a great success. U.S. troops went to the Cambodian border looking for COSVN and apparently found it. We destroyed, according to those precise Pentagon statistics, 1,140 bunkers, 384 shelters and 59 underground tunnels. Also, to be sure, thousands of weapons, plenty of ammunition and lots of rice.

When the rains came, we withdrew, after pronouncing Junction City a great victory. By October, the Viet Cong was back in full strength, and three months later came the Tet offensive.