

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, May 22—Through all the years of war and frustrated negotiation and plans for American withdrawal, there has been one central question for the United States in Vietnam: to what extent would we be committed to the objectives of the Saigon Government?

Successive American Presidents have tried to limit the commitment, to loosen the connection with General Thieu and Marshal Ky. And successively they have been outmaneuvered by those two shrewd figures and their clique of American diplomats, generals and hawks.

The Cambodian adventure shows with rare clarity how the process works.

In making his original decision, over the doubts of his closest civilian security advisers, President Nixon was evidently influenced to a major degree by the desire of the Thieu-Ky Government to take advantage of the changed political situation in Cambodia. Supporting that desire were the American generals and the U.S. Ambassador in Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker, who operates much of the time as a lobbyist for President Thieu.

President Nixon told the American people that it would

be a short, sharp operation, limited in objective and duration. Presumably he meant that. But with that glorious contempt for its great partner that is Saigon's trademark, the South Vietnamese have just made plain that they intend to pay no attention to such notions. "A silly argument of silly people" was Marshal Ky's phrase for the idea that his troops should withdraw from Cambodia by June 30 or any other date.

**Tail Wagging the Dog**

The brazen quality of such remarks might lead some innocent to think that South Vietnam was the dominant partner in this war effort. In fact, she is a tiny tail wagging the dog. The United States supplies not only much of the ground strength and most of the military support in the war but the money for most of the South Vietnamese budget.

In this situation, it may be useful to remind ourselves once in a while who Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky are and what they represent. Why are they entitled to automatic American support?

President Thieu and Vice President Ky won those jobs in an election in which it was a crime to advocate what is the stated object of American policy

in Vietnam—a political settlement with the other side. They represent, at best, small if powerful segments of South Vietnamese society quite divorced from the peasant mass: the upper middle-class, importers and exporters, army colonels, some generals, black-marketeers.

They make no pretense of democracy. They have not even tried to attract broader popular support. The runner-up in their election, Truong Dinh Dzu, is in jail.

A British Broadcasting Corporation correspondent on the scene has just said that he found it reassuring to return to Saigon after a few months' absence and find everything "jogging along more or less the same. A few more newspapers shut down by the Thieu Government, a few more students losing fingernails in the course of making voluntary confessions, a terrific black market in currency—in fact, a fairly normal South Vietnamese situation."

**Playing on Fear**

How do such people manage to twist the tail of the greatest power on earth? By playing on the fears of men like Mr. Bunker that their whole past policy will prove a disaster, and on the concern of Ameri-

can politicians about a right-wing backlash at home. Let us down, they say, and South Vietnam will collapse; then America will pay the political price.

If the United States is ever going to say no to a group of men whose interest is in continuing the war and thus preserving their power, Cambodia is the time and place to do it. For the South Vietnamese cannot effectively make Cambodia a permanent new theater of the war without our help.

The alternative to saying no at once is to do the exact opposite of President Nixon's pledge: to spread the war out into Cambodia and make the engagement there a general struggle for power as it is in Vietnam proper, not a brief punitive raid to destroy enemy supplies and bases.

But there is something else involved, and that is the integrity of the American political process. Richard Nixon is much concerned about the power of the American Presidency. The way to preserve that office is to show that he, not General Thieu, occupies it. How much more American money will we have to spend before someone understands that—how many more American lives, how much more destruction of American society?