

Matter of Fact

Cambodia--The Great Leap Forward

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WHAT THE PRESIDENT will do about it, remains to be seen, but it can already be said with confidence that the report he got from General Creighton W. Abrams "would have sounded damn near euphoric, if it hadn't come from a man who never goes in for euphoria."

Among other things, General Abrams is known to have told the President that the Cambodian operations might easily turn out to put forward the Vietnamization program by a year or more. And this came from the same field commander who was, quite justifiably, asking Mr. Nixon for "a pause" in Vietnamization only three months ago!

It is probably useless to explain the logic of General Abrams' changed assessment to the U.S. Senators who cannot see why enemy troops should not go right on fighting without weapons or ammunition. But for more rational citizens, a good place to begin the explanation is the huge III Corps region that centers on Saigon.

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THOUGH pacification was going great guns, III Corps was still threatened from two directions only three months ago. One threat was from the Parrot's Beak in the south, where the Cambodian border thrusts up and out towards Saigon like a dagger. The Parrot's Beak was bulging with enemy supplies, and contained over a regiment of North Vietnamese troops plus the in-sanctuary higher headquarters for the Viet Cong for about half of III Corps.

The other threat was from the very empty, very wild provinces on the northern fringe of III Corps. Here three more North Vietnamese regiments were lurking

in jungle hideouts, well forward from the Cambodian border. So what has happened now, to these threats?

The supply lines of North Vietnamese regiments in northern III Corps have been cut at the source, by the Cambodian operations. It is a down-to-earth estimate that they cannot stay where they are for more than about a month and a half.

The Parrot's Beak, meanwhile, has been cleared of enemy troops and supplies, as have the other enemy sanctuaries on III Corps' borders, like the fishhook. In this process, the entire Viet Cong high command for about half of III Corps has been just about abolished. Thus the total enemy threat in III Corps has been drastically reduced.

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THIS IS WHY the Vietnamization program can eventually take a great leap forward. At present, the U.S. has in III Corps two divisions, plus two independent brigades. But rather soon, two U.S. brigades, or at most one division, will be quite enough.

III Corps, in short, will soon be far down the road that has been already travelled by IV Corps, where there are no U.S. ground troops at all.

It is staggering to hear solid, responsible, extremely knowledgeable men who want no defeat in South Vietnam talking about "taking care of III Corps with two brigades; and on an interim basis at that."

If these men have not gone off their rockers, in fact, the whole pattern of the war has been radically transformed by one bold stroke in Cambodia.