



Cambodian 'Success' Masks Military Flop

WASHINGTON — The President could not wait until the troops were out of Cambodia—he opted for an “interim report” this week. This column was written before the report, but it will confirm that the purpose of the Cambodian invasion has become not to save the lives of American soldiers but the face of American generals and the seats of Republican congressmen. Mr. Nixon may list the weapons, the ammunition and the rice we have taken and destroyed. But the weapons and the ammunition can be replaced, by the Russians if necessary. The hundreds of Americans who will have died in Cambodia cannot. What cannot be avoided, once all the “success” language is cleared away, is that Cambodia was not only a political setback of major consequence for the administration but a military failure as well.

Item: We do not even claim that the “central headquarters” for the Viet Cong has been captured. On earlier offensives, such as Operation Cedar Falls and Operation Junction City in 1967, we reported it overrun—bunkers, communications equipment and all. This time it seems to have passed to the control of the Scarlet Pimpernel and eluded us. No matter—six months after the last time we captured it the enemy launched the Tet offensive.

Item: Simultaneous leaks from what seems to be the same Pentagon source to selected newsmen last week indicate major efforts to mask the failure of Vietnamization which the Cambodian campaign revealed. In the first two weeks, while our casualties went sharply up, those of the South Vietnamese went as sharply down. Morale in the ARVN, it is reported, has never been higher. It is, apparently, an army which prefers bullying Cambodian civilians to fighting the Viet Cong at home. It is no wonder that Thieu and Ky want to stay indefinitely.

Item: High South Vietnamese sources now say that the cost of remaining to “assist” the Cambodian Army will run at the rate of \$200 million. This is a heavy cost for the American taxpayer, who may not understand why he must pay the South Vietnamese to Cambodianize one war while still paying something on the order of \$30 billion to Vietnamize the first one.

Item: Our military planners—eager to take advantage of Prince Sihanouk's overthrow—ignored the historic hatred between the Vietnamese and the Cambodians.

The report that Thai “volunteers” will defend Phnom Penh merely increases the problem. Thais are also unwelcome in Cambodia. Furthermore, one wonders how much we will pay to provide the Thai volunteers.

Item: The new Cambodian government has imposed martial law and will crack down on its own citizens, understandably restive over the presence of the South Vietnamese and—more important—over the fact that since the invasion the North Vietnamese have taken over a number of provincial capitals and have tightened their grip in the areas they already held.

Item: The ease with which the enemy seized and briefly held Dalat, South Vietnam's ninth largest city, over the weekend suggests just what Vietnamization has come to. Areas once thought pacified have fallen again to the Viet Cong, now that the South Vietnamese are off in Cambodia improving their morale by fighting women and children.

Item: Since the fighting began in Cambodia, American casualties in South Vietnam have remained above the earlier “tolerable” level.

Item: The Viet Cong now controls more of Laos than it did before the Cambodian invasion.

The President's interim report may boost his popularity for a while. It may even nudge a senator or two to vote against the Cooper-Church amendment to stop funds for more operations in Cambodia. But the facts remain:

“Vietnamization” was always doubtful—any army which would not fight with Americans was a poor bet to fight without them. Now, the failure is plain through all of Indochina. The generals have never known what this war was about, and the President—like his predecessor—had no reason to believe that they did.