

Washington: The President's Report on Cambodia

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, June 4 — President Nixon made Cambodia sound so good on the TV the other night that it almost seems a pity to leave the place. "All our military objectives have been achieved," he said, and the whole adventure was "the most successful operation of this long and difficult war."

Well, maybe so, but the President has a way of making complicated and even disastrous things sound so simple and even triumphant that one wonders. His "interim report" on Cambodia was more like a lawyer's argument or even a TV commercial, but its political wallop should not be underestimated.

The President's Dilemma

He was talking to a country that neither wants to pay the price of victory or defeat in Southeast Asia. It wants out without seeming to give up, and Mr. Nixon understands this.

Accordingly, he passed over lightly the division in the country over the invasion, the weakness of the Cambodian Government, the extension of the war, the uproar about Cambodia in the Senate, and the military problem next spring after another 150,000 Americans come home.

He dealt primarily with the immediate problem and con-

centrated on the immediate military success. He had been criticized unmercifully, he said, for going into Cambodia, but the invasion was an unqualified success which crippled the enemy, demonstrated the growing confidence, skill, and valor of the South Vietnamese, saved American lives, shortened the war, and reassured his timetable for withdrawal.

Who wants to argue against all this—especially since it will take at least a year to estimate the strategic effects of the invasion? Nobody is in a position to question the President's figures on the captured enemy equipment. Nobody is against saving American lives, shortening the war, or bringing the U.S. expeditionary forces back home. The President's appeal for popular support came during the Senate debate on limiting his authority in Cambodia—and he timed his withdrawal of 50,000 more men from Vietnam for Oct. 15, just before the Congressional elections.

His military strategy is not so clear, and it has obviously changed since he launched the invasion. Originally, he left the impression that once the Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia were destroyed, all U.S. military action in that country would cease. In his latest report, however, the President confirmed that while all U.S.

ground troops would be withdrawn by July 1, he would insist on the right to go back in with "air missions to interdict the movement of enemy troops and matériel where I find this necessary to protect the lives and security of our forces in South Vietnam."

Also, when the President ordered the invasion of Cambodia, he said at his May 8 news conference that he expected the South Vietnamese troops would come out approximately at the same time (by July 1).

In his TV broadcast, however, Mr. Nixon put no limit on the South Vietnamese activity in Cambodia in the future. On the contrary, he said that the South Vietnamese activity would "be determined by the actions of the enemy." In other words, they would be free to act as they pleased against the enemy in Cambodia and be assured that American air power would at least bomb the North Vietnamese supply routes.

The Cynical View

It would be easy to be cynical about all this, but one should be very careful. The President has said publicly that he expected the violent reaction he got to the Cambodian invasion, but if our reports are even reasonably accurate, he was startled by the opposition both at home and abroad, and

is now determined to speed up the withdrawal of American troops from the battlefield.

No doubt he is still hoping that his bold and unexpected lunge into Cambodia will persuade the enemy to make a negotiated settlement. He almost pleaded with them in his broadcast to do so, and threatened them with the consequences if they didn't, offering them to choose between his hand and his fist.

Accordingly, we can only guess at what he is doing in the face of this dilemma. The guess here is that, while he still hopes the North Vietnamese will compromise, and the South Vietnamese will be able to defend and unify their country on their own, he is determined to pull out, and is preparing the way to do so, regardless of what Hanoi or Saigon do.

This is a very delicate operation. It involves proclaiming victory and condemning his critics, while pulling out as fast as he can. Peace and withdrawal were the main themes of his TV broadcast, and while they were blurred by his political maneuvers, by his claims of victory and the glory of the South Vietnamese, it would probably be wise to wait and see whether he is not really following the policy of Senator Aiken of claiming victory and coming home.