

JUN 11 1970



Cambodia Sucking In The Vietnam War

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Saigon

OLD VIETNAM hands are already telling jokes about a Fifth Corps area to supplement the four corps areas in which this country is normally divided for military purposes. The Fifth Corps, of course, is Cambodia.

For Cambodia has turned out to be a terrific vortex, sucking in all aspects of the Vietnam war including the local politics. And it will be a near miracle if the United States is not obliged to raise its objectives in the war to include a commitment to defend the Cambodian government of Prime Minister Lon Nol.

The principle of nature and a vacuum explains why Cambodia is such a magnet for forces all around. The new regime has small backing in the country at large, no serious armed or police force, and no experience of the world.

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ONE OF President Nguyen Van Thieu's associates recently explained to me: "We are little brothers to the United States. But to Cambodia we are big brothers." And the moment Prince Norodom Sihanouk fell, Saigon began doing to Phnom Penh what comes naturally to big brother.

Military cooperation was immediate. In the very first week after Sihanouk's ouster, Cambodian units and South Vietnamese forces drove towards Phnom Penh against the Communists along the frontier.

Once the invasion was on, there was no holding the troops. Relatively modest operations planned by American commanders were rapidly expanded. South Viet-

namese forces drove towards Phnom Penh in the easiest going they had experienced in years.

In the last few days, the Americans have come to see that the Cambodian vortex could divert the South Vietnamese forces from the far more serious task of fighting the war on their home grounds. There has been a concerted effort to turn the South Vietnamese back to the job here. The San Clemente statement that American tactical support would not be available for South Vietnamese forces in Cambodia after June 30 is a kind of nudge away from the new war.

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BUT IT WILL BE very difficult for the United States to rein in the South Vietnamese. Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and not a few of the South Vietnamese military are arguing that the war can be won in little Cambodia. President Thieu is not going to be seen visibly holding them back. The United States is not going to break with President Thieu—not, at least, while Ellsworth Bunker is ambassador here. Thus, there is working an inner dynamic, difficult to describe though familiar in practice, that pushes Washington to underwrite "little Cambodia."

Maybe resistance to the dynamic will prevail. Maybe President Thieu can be coaxed to apply the brakes to Vice President Ky. Maybe the genie can be put back into the bottle.

But if not, if the South Vietnamese forces sprawl all over Cambodia, and if the United States gets committed to the Lon Nol regime, then it will be harder than ever to end the war.