

## Washington Insight



# Colonel P. Talks About Cambodia

**Joseph Kraft**

### Phnom Penh

A STOCK FIGURE in the recurrent drama of Washington's commitments to uncountrys with no bearing on anybody's national security is the fatuous American military man who keeps sighting victory until the eve of disaster. And one reason to be pessimistic about chances of avoiding American entanglement here in Cambodia is that just such a character is already on the spot.

Colonel P., as I shall call him, is a creature of comedy and maybe pathos, chiefly distinguished by the wearing of a white bartender's jacket. What follows is an account of a background interview he gave the other day.

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COLONEL P. began on a note of high confidence regarding the ability of Cambodian forces to resist the Vietnamese Communists: "I sincerely believe these people have the capacity to pull out of danger by themselves without anybody helping them. I'd say they have a good 50-50 chance. With help from the outside, the chances will naturally go up."

Colonel P. then pointed out that in fact help was coming from South Vietnam and Thailand. "I hear there is even help from Laos," he said. He felt that what was shaping up was the application of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization which includes the United States. "SEATO," he said, "has never been tested before."

It was pointed out that former Secretary of State Dean Rusk had repeatedly argued that Vietnam was a test of SEATO.

At that point, Colonel P. paused, and

then, as if struck by a revelation, resumed: "Now here's a line for you. What we're seeing is a reverse domino theory. People are standing up to be counted — the Vietnamese, the Thais, the Cambodians. The enemy is on the run. He's running for his life.

"Let me speak not as a colonel but as a man in the street, as Mr. U.S.A. I think that what President Nixon did was a brave decision. If there was anything wrong, it's that he waited as long as he did. Even so the enemy is hurt. The enemy is taking a licking. I'll bet my professional reputation that we'll bring it off."

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COLONEL P. was asked about reports that the town of Set Bo, only ten miles south of Phnom Penh, had been taken by the Communists. He said:

"All right. So they take it. So what can they do? The enemy can wander all over Cambodia and it won't do him any good. He doesn't have enough weapons and he doesn't have enough food. He's going for the population centers where the government has stored food and weapons. He's scored one or two successes. But I'm not about to give aid and comfort to the enemy by telling you what they are. I will say that when the rainy season comes he'll be out in the boondocks getting wet. If the government holds through the rainy season, he'll be through. He'll be dead."

As we left, Colonel P. asked if he could have our calling cards. He said: "When this is all over, I'm going to have in my house a room entirely papered with the cards of the ewspapermen that have come to interview me."