

In The Nation: The Specter of Ronald Reagan

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, June 29—American ground troops are out of Cambodia on schedule. That is all to the good and emphasizes, rather than diminishes, the need for the Senate to pass the Cooper-Church amendment on Tuesday.

Barring last-minute changes, the amendment would prevent the return of ground combat troops to Cambodia, the presence of American advisers with South Vietnamese troops in that country, American air combat activity over Cambodia, or American support for troops of other nations fighting there.

Uncertain Exodus

There is plenty of evidence that the exodus of American troops has not ended the need for such prohibitions on future actions. For one thing, it is now clear—and Lon Nol has so stated—that American aircraft have been flying tactical support missions for Cambodian ground troops. This is direct contravention of the Administration's insistence that it is not trying to maintain the Lon Nol regime in Pnompenh.

There is no suggestion that this air activity will end with the American combat presence on the ground; in fact, Lon Nol

has said that he has Defense Department assurances that the air support will continue, although—ominously—he would not comment on whether it would at some point include B-52 bomber attacks.

Seeds of Return

Equally important, the Cambodian Premier said that if his country's military situation continued to deteriorate—as it gives every indication of doing—he would ask President Nixon to return American ground troops to help in its defense. This would put heavy pressure on Mr. Nixon, since he has already intervened in Cambodia once, is providing continuing logistical and air support for the Lon Nol Government, and is helping supply South Vietnamese troops fighting in Cambodia.

Moreover, President Thieu of South Vietnam made it plain last week that his troops will continue operating in Cambodia, if not indefinitely, at least for the foreseeable future. In their presence, too, lie the seeds of a possible American return.

Mr. Nixon could hardly let a substantial portion of the troops to whom he hopes to turn over the war in South Vietnam be wiped out or cut up in Cambodia. Nor can he hope to main-

tain Vietnamization on schedule if Mr. Thieu keeps large parts of his army across the border, instead of replacing American troops in the fight against the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese at home.

All of this took on sharp domestic political point in remarks yesterday by Senator Mark O. Hatfield of Oregon, a dove on the war and an experienced Republican politician. He suggested that if the war is still going on and the economy continuing to slide in 1972, the party might "dump" Mr. Nixon for Gov. Ronald Reagan of California. The Senator pointed out that many on the Republican right probably preferred Mr. Reagan even in 1968, although they went along with Mr. Nixon; and he further suggested that a large part of the Nixon Administration's policy was being shaped to appeal to the South and to undercut the Reagan-led right wing.

If it is true that the specter of Ronald Reagan haunts Mr. Nixon's policy—and many here have long suspected that it is true—Cambodia could enter the picture in two ways. The first is that its precarious situation obviously increases the pressure on the President to intervene, since he could hardly wish to see Cambodia go "down the

drain" to Communism, and thus give the hawkish Mr. Reagan a political opening.

The second is that, in fact, Mr. Nixon's domestic political situation would be strengthened against such critics if the Senate were on record against further American intervention or proxy-warfare in Cambodia. Even if the House did not pass the Cooper-Church amendment, the Senate would have given plain warning that it was not prepared to vote further money, supplies or political support for war in Cambodia, and thus Mr. Nixon could plausibly reply to his own right wing that Congress had severely inhibited him from further extending the conflict in Indochina.

Easing the Burden

"Inhibited," not "prevented," because Congress, even if the House should concur in the Cooper-Church amendment, has no power to suspend the Constitution or the powers of the Commander in Chief. Mr. Nixon could always take any emergency action required; but the amendment would clearly tell him to think twice before going further without consulting Congress, an admonition that just as clearly would take a lot of political responsibility off the President's shoulders.