

Nixon's Stress Is on Credibility

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WASHINGTON, June 30—The main point of President Nixon's final report on the Cambodian operation today was that he has proved himself a man of his word who ought now to be trusted by his people at home and taken seriously by his adversaries abroad.

Yet, simultaneously, by a vote of 58 to 37, the United States Senate declared in effect that it no longer fully trusts any President in the conduct of the Indochina war.

Thus, even before anyone knows the real reaction of Hanoi, Moscow, Peking and the other nations that Mr. Nixon lumped together as "the enemy," the Cambodian venture stands as a vivid symbol of the many-sided problem of Presidential credibility.

Heading into Cambodia two months ago, the President now clearly acknowledges, he sought not only tactical military advantage but also a demonstration "to the enemy, whether in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, that the word of the United States—whether given in a promise or a warning—was still good."

Coming out of Cambodia this week, the President asks to be believed as a man who has kept all his promises of gradual disengagement and who would be fair and flexible toward Hanoi at the bargaining table.

As the attitude of the Senate shows, there is a built-in conflict in this continuing effort to try to impress an adversary, appease a war-weary nation and fight a limited war for limited objectives all at the same time. President Johnson lost the battle to reconcile the conflict and President Nixon has obviously not yet won it.

No Serious Reservations

He says now that he knows he is addressing the nation on June 30 that "we might be at a crossroads in Cambodia," yet neither his speech nor the questions by his aides offered any serious reservations on his vision of an early peace.

Mr. Nixon said on April 30 that American troops were storming the headquarters of the entire Vietnamese Communist military operation in South Vietnam, a promise that was quickly abandoned.

Both at the start of the venture and at its finish, Mr. Nixon suggested in one passage, the danger of attack from enemy bases in Cambodia was immediate; in another passage he suggested that it was several months or a year away. He said in one passage today that the North Vietnamese could, in time, rebuild their Cambodian bases and in another passage that "we have ended the concept of Cambodian sanctuaries."

Not until today, three and a half months after the event, did Mr. Nixon take note of the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, which started all the trouble, and deny any American involvement in the coup. And not until today did he attempt to define the degree of American commitment to the Government of Premier Lon Nol, saying indirectly that he did not want to be involved in the "permanent direct defense of Cambodia."

The long and confusing evolution of this war and Presidential statements about it have created a climate here in which literally every word is tested in an acid solution of skepticism.

Is the President then committing the nation to the temporary indirect defense of Cambodia? What is indirect? How long is temporary?

Leashing Commander in Chief

Are today's policy "guidelines" not to send ground personnel back into Cambodia firm for the foreseeable future or subject to change with new perceptions of a threat to the lives of American troops? Are the new guidelines for bombing Cambodia drawn in a deliberately vague way to permit periodic tactical support of allied troops?

Experience has taught members of Congress and others here to read policy declarations in such a legalistic manner. And it is because so much is at stake now that the White House that the Senate

persisted through the days of debate, in an attempt to leash the Commander in Chief right in the middle of a war.

The Senate's words are ambiguous. As repeatedly attempted to gather votes, the partisan amendment—sponsored by Senators John Sherman of Cooper of Kentucky and Frank Church of Idaho and attached to a bill on arms sales abroad—would deny funds for the repositioning of American forces in Cambodia when none are now there, for the activities of American advisers in Cambodia and for all combat in direct support of Cambodian forces.

Moreover, it denies any intention to impugn the President's power to protect the lives of American troops. The sponsors interpret that as mere rhetorical recognition of constitutional authority not inhibiting their intended denial of funds. But some supporters of the Administration contend that the provision leaves the President free to repeat the whole Cambodian venture if, as before, it is defined as a protection of American troops.

The only direct conflict between the Senate's strictures and Mr. Nixon's new guidelines is on the issue of paying the troops of other countries, like Thailand, to serve alongside Cambodians. The Senate would forbid it but the President argued strongly that such support goes to the heart of his policy of replacing Americans in the defense of Asian lands.

Even though the Senate's declaration is unlikely to become law in its present form, it stands as a mild censure of the President for his failure to consult Congress before moving into Cambodia.

Above all it stands as a symbol of the credibility problem: Will Hanoi now regard Mr. Nixon as a tougher opponent than before or will it only take heart from the domestic outcry? Has the President now persuaded Hanoi that the allies will hold out "months or years," as he put it, for a settlement or has he left the enemy convinced that Cambodia was a last American gasp in the war zone?

The issue for both sides remains the same: Whose side is time on?