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How Far on Cambodia?

Both White House and State Department insist that Vice President Agnew did not change Administration policy on Cambodia when he said: "We're going to do everything we can to help the Lon Nol Government." But, when coupled with his implication that a Communist takeover in Cambodia would make it impossible to withdraw American troops from Vietnam, that assertion certainly bears scant resemblance to what Administration leaders have said before.

At a news conference last May, Secretary of State Rogers said the United States "has no intention of getting involved in Cambodia with American troops in support of the present Government of Cambodia or any other government of Cambodia." Even now, the White House is giving out a different version than Mr. Agnew of the American stake in Lon Nol's survival. Asked about the Vice President's remarks on the Pnompenh regime, Presidential press secretary Ron Ziegler said that "obviously," from Washington's viewpoint, "it would be better if the present Government did not collapse, but it's not fatal if it does collapse."

To be fair, Mr. Agnew, at another point in his press conference—held in flight en route for his second Asian visit this year—insisted that "we have no commitment to Cambodia," but this seemed clearly at odds with his earlier promise of "everything we can to help."

There might be a disposition to dismiss this episode as another example of the Vice President's propensity for careless rhetoric if the Administration policy on Cambodia had not been marked for months by similar abrupt shifts in emphasis or direction. The day after Mr. Agnew spoke, in fact, the State Department announced a \$40-million military aid program for Cambodia and officials said the Administration also plans a multimillion-dollar economic assistance package.

Little wonder that Senate Majority Leader Mansfield sees in all this a "renewal of the pattern of Vietnam." If that is not what the Administration intends, the President should state clearly the limits of Washington's plans for Cambodia—even at the risk of contradicting or embarrassing the Vice President.