

Escalation in the Air

"The only American activity in Cambodia after July 1," President Nixon assured the nation last June, "will be air missions to interdict the movement of enemy troops and material where I find that is necessary to protect the lives and security of our men in South Vietnam."

Until this week, American military men insisted they were adhering to that doctrine, although as long ago as last August reports from the field made it clear that United States airmen were going well beyond "interdiction" to furnish close fire support to faltering Cambodian ground forces. Now, with carrier-borne American helicopters, B-52 bombers and other American aircraft openly committed in support of South Vietnamese and Cambodian troops battling to reopen a key highway from the sea to Pnompenh, the Pentagon has taken off the wraps and disclosed the Administration's intention to employ the full range of its air power in Cambodia.

This stretches to the limit the President's pledge of last June. It is contrary to Vice President Agnew's assertion last August during a visit to Pnompenh that he had told Premier Lon Nol that "the United States is not going to become militarily involved in Cambodia." It contravenes the spirit, if not the letter, of new Congressional restraints on Cambodian aid, as Defense Secretary Laird is said to have concluded recently when he denied an initial military request for the use of helicopters to ferry troops and ammunition in the widening Cambodian conflict.

Mr. Laird has now reversed himself, but that does not clear up the legal issue which has been raised by Senator McGovern and which should be vigorously pursued by other members of Congress who have been striving to prevent just this kind of creeping involvement in another Southeast Asian fiasco.

The change in direction of American policy has come in response to the blocking of a highway between the seaport of Kompong Son and the Cambodian capital by a small proportion of the 30,000 to 40,000 North Vietnamese troops believed now to be in Cambodia. When Cambodian troops failed to clear the roadblock, South Vietnamese forces were thrown into the battle. Now American air forces have been sent to the rescue. Can anyone imagine this will be the last such rescue mission?

The expanding air operations in Cambodia, plus new disclosures that American helicopter gunships are supporting government forces in Laos, plus a recent sharp increase in "protective reaction" air attacks against North Vietnam, tend to confirm the prediction on the Op-Ed page Monday of Admiral Sharp, retired Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Theatre, that "the American presence in the Southeast Asia area is going to be large for some time to come." While the policy of Vietnamization proceeds on the ground, the use of American air power escalates throughout Indochina, shattering the illusion of disengagement.

But who can believe that air power alone will achieve victory now, when it has so dramatically failed in the past? What will the President do when reinforced Communist troops strike again in earnest at their real objectives in South Vietnam, where American ground strength is being steadily depleted? Is this the beginning of the end of the myth of Vietnamization?