

Cambodia: A Test Case

Washington Said to Feel the Public Will Accept an Expanded Air War

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 21—In expanding American air operations in Cambodia, the Nixon Administration took the calculated risk that Congress and the public would tolerate such a move provided no American ground troops or advisors were involved.

The test of domestic tolerance some officials privately acknowledge, involves much more than the current operations in Cambodia.

News Analysis It gauges public acceptance of the general process of gradually substituting helicopters and attack planes for foot soldiers as American combat units are withdrawn from the Vietnam war.

In Cambodia, as elsewhere in Indochina, the Administration faces the problem of demonstrating power and harassing an active enemy while maintaining a sufficient pace of troop withdrawals to satisfy the American public.

On Dec. 10, President Nixon proclaimed that he would retaliate with bombing raids against North Vietnam if the enemy stepped up infiltration into the south and increased the level of fighting in South Vietnam.

Now, on another front, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird has proclaimed the Administration's intention to use the full range of American air power in Cambodia against the enemy.

Privately, it is conceded that Mr. Laird was preparing the public for future, a possibly larger, air operations, as well as defending those that have already taken place. But some Administration officials were fearful that his tactics might provoke Congress into writing new legislative restrictions on the use of American air power in Cambodia, as it did previously for ground forces.

on himself had said there would be "no United States air or logistics support" for continuing South Vietnamese operations in Cambodia, but only "interdiction" missions. That same day, a White House official added that American aircraft were "not assigned the task of close air support" in Cambodia.

Witnesses Contradicted

During a controversy last August over reports by witnesses that American planes were providing close tactical support for Cambodian units, Mr. Laird went before the press personally on Aug. 6 to deny that American aircraft engaged in such missions.

At his news conference yesterday, Mr. Laird brushed aside such distinctions as "semantics" affirming that American planes provided both "some airlift" and some "air support" for Cambodian and South Vietnamese units fighting in Cambodia.

Why has the change come now — both in the actual air operations and in the public rationale for them?

At the White House and elsewhere, the explanation is that the allies wanted to take the initiative to head off enemy campaigns expected later this spring. Some American officials, worried about the deteriorating situation in Cambodia, expect a major push by enemy forces either in Cambodia or the South Vietnamese highlands.

Moreover, the White House believes that so long as the North Vietnamese are kept at bay in Cambodia and prevented from restoring base areas near South Vietnam, the heavily populated regions of South Vietnam are relatively invulnerable. Hence the need for allied offensives now.

But officials concede there were domestic political considerations as well.

Some acknowledge that last summer and fall, neither President Nixon nor Mr. Laird dared risk arousing Congressional critics while restrictions on American involvement in Cambodia were being debated. Administration advocacy of using air power broadly in Cambodia, it was feared, might have invited tighter restrictions.

Administration officials now argue that Congress, by restricting only ground operations, left Mr. Laird free to use air power as he wished. Hence, the Administration abandoned the limitations it had imposed on itself.

To the reported dismay of State Department officials, including Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Mr. Laird yesterday brushed aside earlier efforts by the Administration to depict American air missions in Cambodia as mere "interdiction" raids, designed to cut off enemy supplies and reinforcements for South Vietnam.

For months, Administration spokesmen had been saying that the United States was not going to provide direct combat air support for operations in Cambodia.

Last June 30, President Nixon