

War helps to explain 'The Frustrated Americans'

WASHINGTON—One of the most eloquent passages in President Nixon's State of the Union message followed his assertion that "as the forces that shape our lives seem to have grown more distant and more impersonal, a great feeling of frustration has crept across the land."

To the millions affected by that frustration, Nixon said, "Let us say, 'We hear you and will give you a chance. We are going to give you a new chance to have more to say

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about the decisions that affect your future—to participate in government . . ."

And then the President added: "The further away government is from people, the stronger government becomes and the weaker people become. And a nation with a strong government and a weak people is an empty shell."

Nixon was specifically addressing himself to domestic affairs, and he made clear that he would take up foreign policy in a later message. When he does, however, he is going to find it hard to avoid the clear meaning of this ringing promise to let Americans "have more to say" about government policy; he can hardly suggest that the people's frustrations and his own pledges run only to the water's edge.

The action in Cambodia

In the meantime, the action in Cambodia suggests that in going about what it conceives to be its business in Southeast Asia, the administration is managing to rise above what a great many people have already had to say. The vehement reaction against the Cambodian invasion last spring was by no means confined to students; it was broadly enough based to influence Nixon's pledge—scrupulously kept—to get American ground troops out of Cambodia by June 30—as well as his statement on that date that "there will be no new U.S. air or logistic support" of future South Vietnamese operations in Cambodia.

Throughout 1970, and particularly after the Cambodian invasion, the Senate extended itself to put what limits it legitimately could on military operations in Cambodia. In the end, the prohibition did not exclude air operations over Cambodia, but the Senate's intention was clearly that there should be no wider war in Southeast Asia—certainly no

use of American military power to sustain the Lon Nol regime in Pnom Penh. And it was generally understood that air power would be used only to interdict supply lines and troop movements that threatened the American troops' withdrawal from South Vietnam.

Some of them senators

A good many frustrated Americans, some of them senators, therefore believe that recent American air operations in Cambodia flouted both last spring's public disapproval of the invasion and the Senate's clear intent to avoid a Cambodian war. Those air operations were in direct combat support of South Vietnamese and Cambodian troops trying to reopen a vital supply route to Pnom Penh.

How were the operations justified? The administration says that the air operations really were designed to protect American troop withdrawals, because those withdrawals would be endangered if the North Vietnamese were to overrun Cambodia. This is a classic case of two-way reasoning—the Lon Nol regime may not be supported directly; but American troops may not be endangered; hence the Lon Nol regime can be supported directly because otherwise American troops will be endangered.

But Secretary of Defense Laird was not willing to rest on this stunning proposition. American air operations in Cambodia, he says, are also justified by the Nixon Doctrine—which, somehow, had theretofore been pictured as a contraction, not an expansion, of the American combat presence in Southeast Asia and the world. Moreover, Laird claims the use of air power in Vietnam was specifically permitted by Congress because it was not specifically prohibited.

What Senate feared all along

All of this graphically demonstrates what the Senate feared all along—that the involvement in Cambodia would lead inevitably to further involvement, as had already happened in South Vietnam; and that in pursuit of its own ends the military juggernaut would take any step not precisely forbidden to it. Is it not likely, for instance, that American ground troops would be in action again in Cambodia if Congress had not expressly prohibited it?

As for the frustrated Americans of whom Nixon spoke so sensitively, he seems unable to see that one of the things that frustrates them most is war without end and without reason, about which they seem to have so little say.