

# Some War Questions

By TOM WICKER

IN THE NATION

Saigon, reads the dateline, and part of the story goes as follows:

"The reported drive is . . . aimed at keeping North Vietnamese forces away from South Vietnam's Military Region III. That region includes Saigon and eleven surrounding provinces and shares 231 miles of border with Cambodia.

"Other objectives . . . are to disrupt North Vietnamese supply routes and to destroy enemy base camps and matériel in order to prevent the enemy assaults against South Vietnamese bases."

Sound familiar? It certainly does, but this is not May 1970 and those are not American but South Vietnamese troops staging an "incursion" into Cambodia. Otherwise, not much has changed; the sanctuaries still have to be cleaned out, North Vietnamese supplies still have to be destroyed, enemy build-ups still have to be countered, despite the glowing claims of other days.

Of course, the B-52's were out ahead of the 25,000 South Vietnamese who mounted this most recent assault into Cambodia. From above the clouds, the Americans piloting them spread the random destruction that is their hallmark, while nearer the earth Amer-

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ican-supplied helicopters and fighter planes played close-support roles. As in earlier invasions, some of these, now or later, may even be flown by American personnel.

Farther to the west and north of Phnompenh, meanwhile, the American-supplied and trained Cambodian Army has suffered major setbacks at the hands of tough North Vietnamese forces. American officials believe Hanoi's operations in Cambodia are directed primarily at easier military access to South Vietnam, rather than at Cambodia itself; but any way you study the situation, it hardly augurs well for Cambodia.

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It is true that Mr. Nixon has reduced the American ground combat role and its consequent casualties, and no doubt he intends to cut them even further; it may also be true that constant pounding has reduced North Vietnamese and Vietcong strength. But there is nothing to show a slackening of will on Hanoi's part, and the Cambodian operations are ominous portents for the future.

**Will pulling out American ground troops end the war for Americans?** It is by no means clear that Mr. Nixon plans to pull them all out, but even if he did the United States almost certainly will have to retain a major role in the wider war now being fought and that remains in prospect for the future.

For one thing, the United States is the principal supplier of both the Cambodian and South Vietnamese armies and owns Laotian forces lock, stock and gunbarrel. For another, the only thing that comes close to equalizing these forces with those of North Vietnam and the Vietcong is American air power. And these factors, which suggest that the United States is nowhere close to extricating itself from Indochina, are reinforced by still another question.

**Can South Vietnamese forces defend Cambodia as well as South Vietnam?** The South Vietnamese have not even established their ability to defend themselves, once more American combat troops are out of the war zone and if a determined Communist offensive begins. Most certainly, the Cambodian Army, improved though it may be, has yet to show that it can seal off the Cambodian approaches to South Vietnam.

The plain truth is that Cambodia flanks South Vietnam to the west, and that no matter how well Saigon's army may defend its own territory, it can only do so if that flank is secure. Further setbacks to Cambodian forces may well spread the South Vietnamese too thin in both countries, a situation that could result in even greater commitment of American air power—or worse, the reintroduction of American ground forces to help hold the line.

So these questions are in order, too: Is Mr. Nixon's Vietnamization program building toward a final triumphant withdrawal of ground forces just before the election—or toward a new Communist onslaught and the possibility of a major military setback? And what are his intentions, if that possibility should become a probability in the year ahead? Can even he answer those questions with any certainty?

Aside from the fact that it was precisely this kind of situation that the American invasion of 1970 was supposed to prevent, the continuing battle in Cambodia raises some pointed questions, the answers to which could have loud reverberation in American politics.

**Is the war really "winding down"?** Obviously, it is not. The Nixon Administration has resumed the bombing of North Vietnam any time it declares a military necessity to do so, and the shadowy fighting in Laos continues;