

Washington Merry-go-round

Officials are not telling the truth about the United States role in Cambodia

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WASHINGTON — A secret exchange between Washington and Phnom Penh reveals that officials aren't telling the truth about the U.S. role in Cambodia.

Because of congressional hostility, the Nixon Administration has pretended to take no active part in raising funds from other nations to support the tottering regime of Cambodian strongman Lon Nol.

The secret cables show, however, that the United States not only is bringing political pressure on other governments to contribute to Lon Nol but has actually prepared a solicitation letter for Lon Nol's signature.

Apparently, U.S. policymakers don't trust the Cambodian leader to write his own letters on such a delicate matter. The appeal was supposed to be addressed "on a personal basis" to other heads of state who might have a little cash to spare for Cambodian aid.

Congressmen have balked at financing Lon Nol because of the dismaying similarity between his regime and some of the corrupt, floundering South Vietnamese regimes that have cost the American taxpayers a fortune.

In an earlier column, we quoted from secret dispatches that described Lon Nol as "a sick man, both physically and mentally," and told of widespread incompetence and corruption throughout his government.

'Compulsive Womanizer'

Even some of the able men under him were characterized, respectively, as "an inveterate gambler," "a compulsive womanizer" and a leader whose "personal authority is diluted by a tendency toward financial corruption."

American Ambassador Emory Swank, in one secret report, criticized "Lon Nol's haphazard, out-of-channel and ill-coordinated conduct of military operations." The result is that communist hit-and-run harassing operations have developed — apparently much to the Viet Cong's surprise — into a serious military threat to the Cambodian capital.

Similar reports about some of South Vietnam's earlier political corruption and military bungling were kept secret from the American people. If the truth had been known in time, the United States might have

been spared some of the lives and resources that have gone down the drain in Vietnam.

Because of the Vietnam experience, Congress is keeping a tight pursestring on Cambodian aid. The Nixon Administration has gone behind congressional backs, however, to sneak military supplies into Cambodia through South Vietnam and Indonesia.

Now the Administration has resorted to deception again to raise exchange support funds (ESF) for Cambodia.

Cambodia "has undertaken to do its own representations to elicit donors for the ESF," a State Department spokesman told us blandly.

Secret Instructions

But secret instructions were called to the American Embassy in Phnom Penh, declaring: "We believe political approach necessary lest finance ministries, who are generally opposed to new aid programs, arrange for an evasive or negative reaction to (the Cambodian) appeal."

Department believes high-level political appeal needed to improve chances for success. Letter from

Lon Nol to heads of prospective donor governments could help nail down (contributions)."

The suggested letter begins: "Excellency: I am writing this note on a personal basis in order to bring to your Excellency's attention directly the economic problem that we are now confronted with in the Khmer Republic. . . ."

It winds up: "I am asking that your government make a contribution of . . . to the fund for 1972 at a meeting to be held in Phnom Penh (on January 14)."

All Lon Nol had to do was fill in the blank space with the correct amount for each country. The sums that will be sought are: U.S., \$12.5 million; Japan, \$7.5 million; Australia, \$3 million; Britain, \$500,000; New Zealand, \$300,000; Indonesia, \$250,000; Malaysia, \$250,000; Singapore, \$250,000; Thailand, \$250,000; and the Philippines, \$250,000.

Despite the State Department's public pretense that Lon Nol is running his own fund-raising drive, here's what the secret instructions add:

"Once letters sent, we prepared urge our embassies in key countries make high-level approaches in support of Lon Nol request. We understand that Japanese will then move out and actively lobby for participation in ESF. We can, on a selective basis, do some lobbying here, especially with UK and Australia."

These secret instructions, like the India-Pakistan revelations, demonstrate, sadly, that the government of, by and for the people cannot always be trusted to tell the people the truth.