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Saving Face by Bombing

Kafka himself, at the very top of his bent for morbid fantasy, could not have invented a more fitting end to the American military involvement in Southeast Asia. The agreement between the President and the Congress to continue bombing of Cambodia until Aug. 15 expresses to the full the moral absurdity in this country's role in the Indochina war.

For the continued bombing can only have the most marginal impact on the range of possible outcome. It is a pure face-saver for the American officials who have staked their reputations on the efficacy of bombing as an instrument of diplomacy.

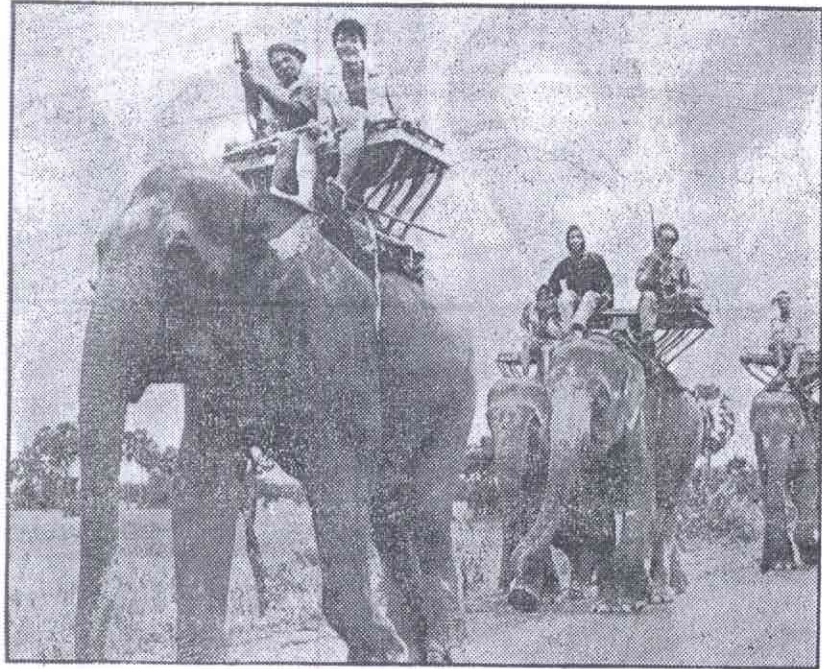
The end result in Cambodia has been a foregone conclusion for months. Eventually there will be a huddle among the various Cambodian factions supported by the different interested parties in the outside world.

The result of the Cambodian huddle will be a political expression of what has been achieved in three years' fighting on the ground. A share of authority can probably be retained for the present American-backed government under Gen. Lon Nol which holds the capital, Phnom Penh.

Some piece of the action will probably have to be accorded, at least temporarily, to a government under Prince Norodom Sihanouk who has the diplomatic support of Communist China and some backing from the North Vietnamese regime in Hanoi.

But the lion's share of authority will have to go to the Khmer Rouge, a Communist insurgency backed in varying degrees by Hanoi, Moscow and Peking. The Khmer Rouge has built an army of 50,000 men from what used to be a ragged force of 3,000. They have come to control most of the country, and if they wanted they could probably take Phnom Penh.

A part of the territory held by the Khmer Rouge is adjacent to the Vietnamese border. Those lands have been made available as a sanctuary for Communist troops hostile to the Saigon regime in South Vietnam. Thus a Cambodian settlement is sure to raise the threat already posed to the Saigon government.



Supplies move into Cambodia, while U.S. prepares to halt air support.

Still the Saigon government, with a force of one million men and the latest armaments, is powerful in its own right. Moreover, there is operating as a diplomatic constraint against any major Communist offensive in Vietnam the rivalry between Peking and Moscow.

In these circumstances, there was division inside the administration last week when the Congress finally began passing measures forbidding the use of funds to support American bombing in Cambodia. The highest ranking State Department professionals, both in the Saigon embassy and in Washington, did not think continued bombing of Cambodia was that important to the ultimate settlement. They were prepared to stop the bombing right away.

But the three top foreign policy men in the White House—President Nixon, Dr. Henry Kissinger and Gen. Alexander Haig—saw it differently. They had widened the war to include Cambodia back in 1970 precisely to rub out the Communist sanctuaries which are now being re-established. More important,

they continue to believe that the bombing of North Vietnam brought the cease-fire agreement which, they claim, was far better than any other agreement that might have been worked out after the bombing. They have, in other words, staked their historical reputation on the efficacy of bombing as the bringer of peace in Vietnam.

So in the face of congressional action, the President and his men hung tough on the right to bomb. For a brief time a constitutional crisis threatened. Then the administration and the Congress came up with a compromise which ends all bombing, unless there is further congressional approval, on Aug. 15.

As an instrument of foreign policy the extension of the bombing until

Aug. 15 is virtually meaningless. If the bombing made all that difference, the Communists could easily put off the Cambodian huddle until after Aug. 15 when the bombing would have stopped.

But in domestic American politics the continued bombing is a victory for the President. He and his aides can claim that the settlement which was in the works was produced by their bombing. Only a few churlish moralists will note that innocent people are being killed so that the President and a couple of his men can look good. Maybe history will understand what Mr. Nixon had in mind when he was pleased to talk about peace with honor. What he meant was an exit, bombing.

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