

Hidden History of U.S. Moves

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A hidden history of American military operations began emerging last week that challenges the basic record of United States involvement in the Cambodian war.

The significance of the piecemeal disclosures concerning Cambodia, plus other clandestine U.S. operations in Indochina that are now arousing congressional inquiry, transcends the dispute that suddenly forced the subject to the surface: falsification of records on secret American B-52 bombing of Cambodia in 1969-70.

New facts now available not only overturn the official version of how the United States entered the Cambodian war, but also illuminate the earliest roots of what has become known as the Watergate scandal.

News Analysis

The small nation of Cambodia, which the Nixon administration calls "the last lingering corner" of the Indochina war, now has come full circle in its rebounding impact on the American scene.

What the Nixon administration perceived as a vital need to conceal its se-

cret actions in Cambodia, and elsewhere in the world, initiated the Watergate psychosis. The congressional rebellion over the sweeping use of presidential power in the Watergate pattern, as an administration official conceded last week, now has undermined presidential influence in the world. The reaction on Capitol Hill to Watergate, in turn, helped to embolden Congress to force a cutoff date of Aug. 15 on American bombing in Cambodia, or any further American combat throughout Indochina.

As a result, the administration now faces the Aug. 15 deadline in a position of extraordinary diplomatic weakness.

in Cambodia Emerging

to bargain effectively to extricate the United States from Cambodia. To magnify the administration's dilemma, it may have to negotiate with deposed Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who charges that he was removed from power as a result of Central Intelligence Agency and U.S. military machinations.

The riots that ripped American college campuses in the spring and summer of 1970 over the April 30, 1970, crossing of Cambodia's border by American troops were based on a highly limited amount of information then available about the U.S. record in Cambodia.

There was no public knowledge that for the previous 13 months the United States had been conducting massive bombings of Communist "sanctuaries" in Cambodia, with 3,620 B-52 runs between March, 1969, and April, 1970.

Nor does the official public record show, even now, that for years before the open American border crossing, CIA and Special Forces units (Green Berets) were clandestinely supporting anti-Sihanouk forces, known as the Khmer Serei, in operations across the South Vietnamese-Cambodian border.

These secret activities are now liable to exposure in inquiries scheduled on CIA operations throughout Indochina,

and further investigation of the falsified bombing reports.

No one can state with certainty what repercussions there might have been on the elections in 1970 and 1972 if the full state of American involvement in Cambodia were known in 1970.

President Nixon said last May 22 that the American reaction to known events in Cambodia reached "critical proportions" in mid-1970. He cited "nearly 1,800 campus demonstrations," "nearly 250 cases of arson on campus," and fatal clashes with law-enforcement forces on the campuses of Kent State

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University in Ohio and Jackson State University in Mississippi.

Administration alarm over the risk of exposure of its secrets about Cambodia and other subjects of high sensitivity led to creation of the "plumbers" unit in the White House, and the spreading web of officially authorized wiretapping and break-ins to find security leaks.

What concerned the Nixon administration was not so much what had already been leaked by Daniel Ellsberg in the Pentagon Papers about American activity in Vietnam under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The Nixon administration was appalled about the risk of disclosure of its own secret operations and negotiations.

Public attention was focused last week on only the narrowest consequence of Cambodian secrecy, the officially falsified bombing reports. Assistant Defense Secretary Jerry W. Friedheim on Friday acknowledged that senior Pentagon officials made "a blunder of some magnitude" by sending Congress falsified reports that listed 3,630 bombing raids as having taken place in South Vietnam.

If that were all that has been revealed, or is now subject to disclosure in greater detail, the Nixon administration would have suffered an awkward, but not grievous, embarrassment.

Instead, the whole official U.S. history of how the Nixon administration enmeshed itself in Cambodia is now open to question.

On April 30, 1970, President Nixon startled the nation by announcing that attacks by American and South Vietnamese armed forces "are being launched this week to clean out major enemy sanctuaries on the Cambodian-Vietnam border."

This kind of operation was often proposed to President Johnson by U.S. military leaders, and repeatedly rejected in grounds it would be a dangerous widening of the war with unpredictable consequences.

President Nixon said there was a sudden, drastic change in the situation.

For five years, he said, "North Vietnam has occupied military sanctuaries all along the Cambodian frontier with South Vietnam," using them for "hit-and-run attacks" on American and South Vietnamese troops across the border.

"North Vietnam in the last two weeks," President Nixon said, "has stripped away all pretense of respect-

ing the sovereignty or neutrality of Cambodia."

The North Vietnamese troops, he said, suddenly had moved westward, in the opposite direction of the South Vietnamese border; "thousands of their soldiers are invading the country from the sanctuaries; they are encircling the capital of Phnom Penh. "If "this enemy effort succeeds" in controlling Cambodia, the President said, "Cambodia would become a vast enemy staging area and a springboard for attacks on South Vietnam along 600 miles of frontier," jeopardizing the lives of Americans there and the entire U.S. program of troop withdrawals from South Vietnam.

Since 1954, Mr. Nixon said, it had been U.S. policy "to scrupulously respect the neutrality of the Cambodian people."

"For five years," he said, "neither the United States nor South Vietnam has moved against those enemy sanctuaries because we did not wish to violate the territory of a neutral nation. Even after the Vietnamese Communists began to expand these sanctuaries four weeks ago, we counseled patience to our South Vietnamese allies and imposed restraints on our own commanders."

No longer, however, the President said, could the United States sit by "like a pitiful, helpless giant" when "the chips are down."

Last week, U.S. officials, in the course of explaining the falsified B-52 bombing report, gave a drastically different account of how the United States first came to take major military action against the "sanctuaries" in Cambodia.

Very early in the Nixon administration, they said, the subject of U.S. troop withdrawals was directly linked to suppressive military action against the Communist bases in Cambodia.

In March, 1969, Pentagon spokesman Friedheim said on Tuesday, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the U.S. commander in South Vietnam, "was beginning to get his forces ready for the first withdrawal increment" of U.S. forces — although that was not announced until June, 1968, an initial pullback of 25,000 men.

Friedheim recalled that Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, the prime promoter of the program of U.S. troop withdrawals from South Vietnam, visited South Vietnam in March, 1969.

Laird "went precisely to see in what manner it would be safe to accomplish the withdrawal program that the ad-

ministration wished to accomplish over the next few years," said Friedheim.

In the discussions with Laird, the spokesman continued, "General Abrams said if you want me to withdraw half a million Americans in a safe way, I would like very much to be able to deal with the threat which comes from these sanctuary areas."

"It was determined that that was a reasonable request for the U.S. commander to make," said Friedheim. The United States, he said, mounted "a major interdiction campaign" of B-52 bombing raids against the sanctuary areas.

The target areas were "essentially the same ones" later to be struck by ground troops. Friedheim acknowledged: the "Fishbook" area where the Cambodian border projects deeply into South Vietnam, "the tri-border area" and other Communist base areas.

A newsman asked Friedheim last Tuesday:

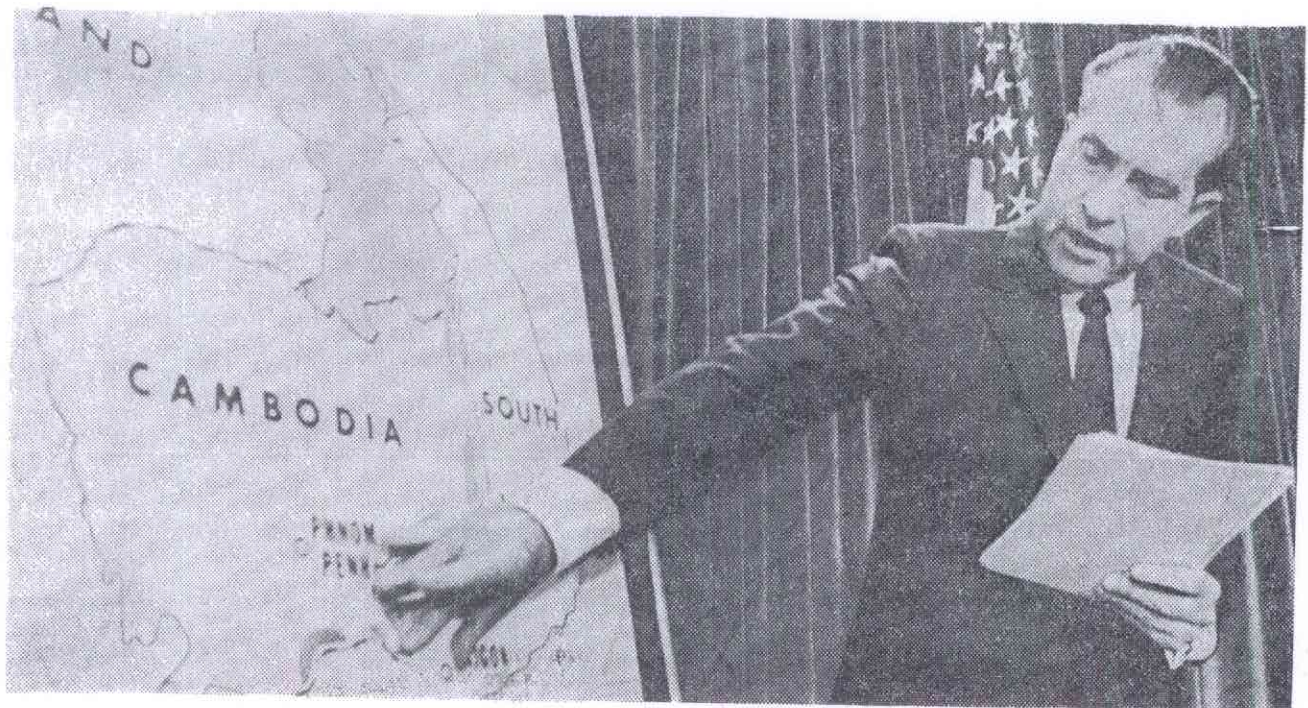
"You're sort of implying that the [68-500] raids weren't very effective, that we had to go in on the ground afterwards?"

"Certainly they were not satisfactory in and of themselves apparently, in the military judgment involved," Friedheim agreed.

Through a peculiar combination of circumstances, Prince Sihanouk, who was then Cambodia's ruler, never acknowledged the bombing raids. That was the original U.S. justification invoked for keeping them secret, that Sihanouk privately "acquiesced" in the air attacks because the uninvited Vietnamese Communist presence in his country was expanding to intolerable lengths.

Sihanouk, since his ouster in a coup launched in March 18, 1970, by anti-Communist and pro-American Lon Nol, the current President of the American-supported regime in Cambodia, has remained silent about the secret American bombing raids of 1969-70. But Sihanouk has charged that he was overthrown by an American-plotted coup arranged with Lon Nol and his supporters, which Nixon administration officials then and now firmly deny.

The sequence of U.S. operations in Cambodia now spread on the public record, however, and the still unacknowledged history of clandestine American and South Vietnamese operations across the Cambodian border in the 1969-1970 period and earlier years, is bound to revive questions about the



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President Nixon, in his speech announcing the 1970 incursion into Cambodia, points to targets of the operation.

circumstances of Sihanouk's overthrow.

Elliot Richardson, now Attorney General, on May 24 at a farewell press conference on his brief tenure as Defense Secretary said in a discussion about secrecy in the Indochina war:

"Of course, you know the circumstances under which the bombing of Cambodia was kept secret—I think there were some legitimate considerations in that context when Sihanouk in effect was anxious not to be put in a position in which he was aware of it or had acquiesced in it. But once Sihanouk was out [March 18, 1970] that consideration disappeared."

But that obviously was not the premise on which the Nixon administration bureaucracy operated until last week, when the falsification of the bombing reports was first revealed as a result of congressional challenge.

Moreover, the Nixon administration's claim of continuing "military operational and diplomatic sensitivities" still withholds from the public record the history of years of American clandestine involvement in Cambodia.

Although some of these secret activities have leaked into public print, the distinction between official and unofficial disclosures can be enormous in public—and political—consequences. A prime example is that there was a partial disclosure of the secret B-52 bombing of Cambodia as early as May 9, 1969, first printed in *The New York Times*.

That news leak touched off some of the early alarm inside the Nixon administration which precipitated cre-

ation of the White House "plumbers" group. But the intensity and duration of the B-52 bombing was never hinted at until last week, nor was the significance of that prolonged action on the entire course of developments in Cambodia.

Sihanouk once said of his once-placid kingdom of 7 million people, "We are a country caught between the hammer and the anvil."

For years he balanced delicately between the United States, China, North Vietnam and the Soviet Union. In 1965 he broke diplomatic relations with the United States, charging CIA plotting against his regime and flagrant violations of his border by American planes engaged in the Vietnamese war.

Between 1965 and 1969, Sihanouk secretly permitted supplies for the Vietnamese Communist forces to be transported across Cambodia. His underdeveloped nation, he said, had little choice in the matter.

Last month, in an interview in Romania, Sihanouk said that "my greatest mistake was 1963, when I rejected American aid," but he said the terms for aid had become humiliating.

Sihanouk said that to placate his army—then headed by Lon Nol—which was dismayed over the loss of American military assistance, he opened the port of Sihanoukville to Chinese ships to deliver military supplies to Vietnamese Communist forces emplaced on Cambodia's border with South Vietnam.

"There was two-thirds [of the supplies] for the Vietcong, and one-third for my army," Sihanouk said.

But by 1967, Sihanouk began protesting publicly that his nation was getting the worst of the bargain from all directions.

Sihanouk said the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong were supporting "the Khmer Vietcing," or pro-Communist Cambodian rebels against his regime, and "because the Khmer Communists have mistreated us, we are compelled to repress them." But from the other direction, he said, "the Khmer Serei, Americans, Vietnamese, Thai and South Koreans [based in South Vietnam] have joined forces in attacking us."

In June, 1969, however, as he saw signs that the United States appeared to be preparing to pull out of Indochina with its halt to the bombing of North Vietnam in late 1968, Sihanouk feared that he might be left to grapple alone with the Vietnamese Communists in his country; he renewed diplomatic ties with Washington.

The Lon Nol regime, which replaced Sihanouk, presented an outright ultimatum to the North Vietnamese and Vietcong to withdraw, and closed the port of Sihanoukville to their forces.

This was a threat the new regime in Phnom Penh woefully lacked the physical capacity to sustain. It appealed to the United States for urgent military support.

To many U.S. military leaders this was "a golden opportunity" rather than a crisis to be shunned; an opportunity to strike on the grounds at the Communist "sanctuaries" that had survived 13 months of B-52 bombing.