

Joseph Alsop WXPost

The Cambodian 'Cover-Up'

The Senate Armed Services Committee has resumed its inquiry into what is called "the Cambodian cover-up." If the committee members really want the truth — which is doubtful — they might begin by calling the Senate majority leader, Mike Mansfield.

The truth is that during a visit to Cambodia in August, 1969, Senator Mansfield was forthrightly informed that the U.S. was bombing the Cambodian sanctuaries then being used by the North Vietnamese army. Mansfield's informant was none other than Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The prince "pointed out" to the senator that there were "no Cambodian protests" of the U.S. bombings because these were all in areas only populated by North Vietnamese troops.

In foreign affairs, Senator Mansfield is what Russian peasants used to call a "holy idiot." No doubt, therefore, the senator did not quite understand what his friend, Prince Sihanouk, was telling him. Truly he undoubtedly believes, as he has recently said, that Prince Sihanouk never told him plainly about the U.S. bombing.

But facts are still facts. After his long private talk with Prince Sihanouk, Senator Mansfield gave a careful summary of his just-completed conversation to the U. S. charge d'affaires in Cambodia, Lloyd M. Rives. The charge d'affaires then wired a long report to the State Department, rather heavily emphasizing Prince Sihanouk's remarks to the senator about the bombing of the Cambodia sanctuaries.

Despite Senator Mansfield's denials, in sum, the contemporary evidence about what happened is crystal clear. If the Senate Armed Services Committee wants the evidence, the State Department will no doubt provide the telegram sent by charge d'affaires Rives back in August, 1969.

These particular facts are so interesting for two reasons. To begin with, after the current row about this matter began, the State Department feebly muttered that even Senator Mansfield had known about the "secret" bombing, and had made no protest at the time. The senator then issued his wholly misguided denial; and no one thereafter sought to ascertain the truth of this not unimportant matter. This tells us a good deal about the way hard facts are now being handled.

To go on, the long ago Mansfield-Sihanouk conversation is only one part of the Cambodian story, and not the most significant part at that. When the decision was first reached to bomb the Cambodian sanctuaries, the White House formally gave advance notice to the Democratic leaders of the Armed Services Committee, the late Senator Richard B. Russell and his second in command, Sen. John Stennis. Both senators concurred. Neither saw any need to inform other senatorial colleagues.

More significantly still, the bombing of the Cambodian sanctuaries was at least in some degree a response by the Nixon White House to an actual invitation from Prince Sihanouk. Something has been said of this already; but the true story is far more striking than what has been printed.

In brief, Chester Bowles visited Cambodia in January, 1968. By that time, Prince Sihanouk had fallen out with the North Vietnamese. He therefore told Bowles that he did not want the North Vietnamese in Cambodia, and that although he could not say so officially, he would not mind at all if U.S. planes exercised "hot pursuit."

He would be "very pleased," he further declared, to see the U.S. "force" the North Vietnamese out of Cambodia; and he added that he would cheerfully "shut" his "eyes."

Once again, all that Sihanouk said to Bowles was passed on to the U.S. government. President Johnson did not choose to act on the prince's invitation

—for that is what it amounted to. President Nixon then acted upon it, after being informed about it by Gen. Creighton Abrams. In sum, the then-ruler of Cambodia asked for the "secret" bombing; he was well aware when it started; and he actually welcomed it. But he also wanted no publicity for it.

Once again, if the Senate Armed Services Committee has the smallest interest in the real truth, all of the foregoing facts can be sustained by government documents. These will show the "secrecy" of the bombing only consisted in not telling the whole world about military operations judged to be most important, at a time when we had above half a million men in the Vietnamese war.

As to the "falsifications" that allegedly accompanied the "secret" bombing, it is true that the bombers' targets were not accurately described for the financial records of the Air Force. The internal record keeping system requires every bombing mission to be accounted for, complete with all bombs dropped and the target they were intended for. These remarkably obscure "falsifications" were also unknown to the White House.

In sum, what really happened and what we are now hearing about it offer a most interesting contrast.

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Sen. Mike Mansfield