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How Not to Get on With the Nation's Business

Mr. Nixon, in his New Orleans speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, offered a sorry demonstration of how he means to put Watergate behind him and to "get on with the urgent business of our nation." To make an effective demonstration, he would have had to take hold of a particular problem—in this instance, the current crumbling in Cambodia—and to cope carefully and realistically with it. Instead he chose to defend his secret bombing of Cambodia in 1969-70 and to do so in sloganistic terms and in a defiant tone virtually certain to aggravate the running dispute over that episode. Can Mr. Nixon really believe that such a display of "toughing it out" will restore the momentum which he says the country's "obsession" with Watergate has cost his presidency? Nothing could suggest more strongly that Watergate has "obsessed" the President himself.

Mr. Nixon's bombing defense might be ignored if it did not compound so seriously his original fault. The President, who at the time insisted he was respecting Cambodia's neutrality, now states it would have been "ludicrous" to respect Cambodia's status while North Vietnam was not doing so: given Hanoi's use of Cambodian territory, he argued, the United States was under "no moral obligation" to honor Cambodian neutrality. Secrecy was required, the President went on, to assure the Cambodian government's quiet approval of bombing conducted against North Vietnamese targets on its soil—one only wishes he were half as solicitous of the American people's approval. As for his claim that "congressional leaders" were told of the bombing, a third grader knows that the "leaders" were those who the administration was confident would support the policy and keep it secret.

The central fact of the Indochina war was and is that

the United States has been attempting to impose a result which it lacked the means to bring about. Attempting to cover that gap, Richard Nixon—like Lyndon Johnson before him—was forced to commit excesses of violence and deception which would not have been employed if American policy had been shaped to fit the Indochina realities. President Nixon presents his various forms of intervention in Cambodia as the only course open to a commander-in-chief charged with protecting the lives of American soldiers. Actually, his leading purpose has not been to protect American lives but to secure a particular political outcome, one which he deemed important enough to *expose* and *risk* American lives for. In exactly that spirit, Mr. Nixon now leaves in besieged Phnom Penh the 200-plus members of the American mission; other countries have withdrawn their representatives. Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.) has warned that this American decision not only endangers the Americans but also opens the possibility of their becoming cause or pretext for further military intervention conducted in the name of "protecting American lives."

The President seems to feel the American people demand some further American effort to justify or complete past efforts in Indochina. We believe he is wrong. We believe the people would understand and accept from him a plain statement that the United States has done all that it properly can to fight at the side of the governments in South Vietnam and Cambodia and that it is prepared to live with whatever are the results of the local struggles there. Such a statement would indeed demonstrate that Mr. Nixon was "getting on with the urgent business of our nation." His speech in New Orleans—tendentious, defensive, jingoistic—did not.