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ABROAD AT HOME

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, March 9—For the last dozen years, through assassinations and endless wars and Watergate, some of us have been telling the skeptics that there is an American system worth preserving. In the end, we said, democracy will work. The men of violence, the totalitarians, the anarchists are all wrong. Reject their evil counsel, have faith.

It will be extremely hard to maintain that faith if Congress gives way to the Ford Administration's campaign of pressure for extra arms aid to Cambodia. For there has probably never been a weaker case for continued American intervention in a foreign civil war. If Congress does not have the courage to say no this time, when will the system work?

Last December, just three months ago, Congress made an extraordinarily explicit decision about the U.S. role in Cambodia. It put a ceiling on all aid, for the stated purpose of limiting American involvement. Absolutely nothing has happened since then that the Pentagon had not anticipated and fully argued. So Congress is effectively being asked to say that its December decision was frivolous.

Nor is there any rational ground of policy or law or security to send more American arms to the failing Lon Nol government in Phnom Penh. That conclusion is plain if one studies not only the words of the critics but the admirably honest testimony of that tough old Indochina hand who is Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, Philip Habib. These points emerge:

1. There is no legal United States commitment to Lon Nol: no treaty, no agreement, no Congressional resolution. Indeed Congress, in voting aid previously, wrote into law that it did not constitute a commitment.

2. We have no illusions about the effectiveness of Lon Nol's government.

3. Even those who still believe in the domino theory cannot claim that Lon Nol's fall would have such effects; Mr. Habib said it would not, for example, "make much difference" to the fighting in South Vietnam.

4. Cambodia is not crucial to American security.

5. There is no assurance that additional American aid would affect the eventual outcome of the war, which the Cambodians opposed to Lon Nol have virtually won.

6. Nor is there any assurance that delaying the military end would lead to a negotiated settlement. There are no negotiations at hand, nor any stated reason to expect them.

In light of those facts, more American military aid—if it has any effect—can only prolong the agony of Cambodia. American officials in Phnom Penh have advised Washington that the only practical possibility now is to transfer power in an orderly way.

President Ford, in arguing for more military aid at his press conference the other night, spoke of "humanitarian" concerns. His argument would have delighted George Orwell. For it was Newspeak right out of "1984."

Mr. Ford talked of food and medicine. But not a penny of the \$222-million in extra funds he sought for Cambodia is for food or medicine. All of it is for arms and ammunition.

We do have one legitimate humanitarian concern in Cambodia now and Congress can rightfully want to express it. That is to get out of the country those leaders who have relied on us and cannot properly be abandoned to the Khmer Rouge.

That concern moved Congressman Paul McCloskey, after his trip to Indochina, to suggest that we continue aid until June—to let our friends get out—and then definitively end the American role. The trouble with the McCloskey idea, as he really knows, is that the Administration will only be back for more in June. If we want to evacuate people, as Senator Mike Mansfield has asked, why not now?

The seriousness of Congress's claim to an equal voice in government is bound to be judged by the Cambodian decision. There can be no excuse of political obligation. The people who elected this Congress were not for more aid to Cambodia. The spotlight will specifically be on such key individuals as Hubert Humphrey, chairman of the Senate foreign aid subcommittee.

Senator Humphrey and other pivotal figures in Congress recognize the realities in Cambodia now—their comments at the hearings make that clear. Their unfettered choice would surely be to vote aid only for genuine humanitarian needs and to help in the orderly transfer of power.

But there is a political worry on Capitol Hill: that the Ford Administration will blame Congress for "losing Cambodia." And so, in the end, the question in these next two weeks of decision will be Congress's courage and will—which is to say, a question of faith in the system.

President Ford said the other night that if we let Cambodia fall—let the Cambodians decide their own civil war, that is—we would have a "deep sense of shame." He made me think of the scene in Shakespeare's "Henry the Fifth" after the French defeat at Agincourt, when the Duke of Bourbon takes out his anger by killing defenseless English boys. Before he sweeps down on them, he shouts:

"Shame and eternal shame, nothing but shame!"