

WASHINGTON—When South Vietnamese troops moved in 1970 to destroy Vietcong supply bases in Cambodia, the necessary and useful attack was called an "incursion." Infuriated doves in the United States insisted the foray against bases used by North Vietnamese in a neutral country should have been termed an "invasion."

It turned out to be an intursion; the South Vietnamese forces ended the use of much neutral Cambodian territory as a Communist resupply and staging area, and returned within a few months. "Incursion" was not a euphemism after all.

Now, however, we are being treated to a tender phrase to hide a very harsh recommendation. As if by unwitting orchestration, on a single day this week, the delicate wording appeared in three places:

A dispatch from Phnom Penh to a Washington newspaper quoted an unnamed diplomat as saying: "It might not be fair, but the only logical outcome now is a transfer of power to the other side."

A story coming out of a television interview with Hubert Humphrey quoted that potential candidate as demanding we cut off military assistance and "try to arrange for a transfer of power."

And in an Op-Ed column of The New York Times, a colleague of mine suggested that the choice of pivotal figures in Congress is "to help in the orderly transfer of power." (All italics mine.)

To Americans, the orderly "transfer of power" is that marvel that takes place in our democracy when a member of one party is elected to succeed a member of the other party. A President-elect pays a courtesy call on the lame-duck President; the aides of both confer; and the process called "the transfer of power" takes place.

ESSAY

By William Safire

But that is not the process Senator Humphrey and the others are talking about. The word that they are so laboriously straining to avoid is "surrender." In plain words, they want to force the Cambodian Government (which they now call a "regime") to run up a white flag and throw itself on the mercy of those Communists who are now deliberately firing rockets into schoolyards.

That is properly called "surrender," not a "transfer of power." Changing the name does not add bravery to the advice. But the very reluctance of the euphemizers to use the harsh word, "surrender," is tacit admission of shame—at suggesting we cravenly force such an action, or at the shame Americans would feel at denying supplies to an ally that is willing to fight.

But wait, say the power-transferrers: Our aid only prolongs the agony. Since the non-Communist forces are doomed, why try to help a loser?

Perhaps surrender will turn out to be the Cambodians' only choice, but the decision to fight on or give up should be theirs, not ours. Many of those here who now wish to speed up the "transfer" were absolutely certain that South Vietnam's "corrupt, dictatorial regime" would collapse as soon as the last American troops pulled out. That was over two years ago.

Those defeatists do not like to be reminded how wrong they were about the ability of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves, using our weapons against Soviet weapons. Incredibly, our allies are blamed for breaking peace agreements, despite the plain evidence of tens of thousands of North Vietnamese troops steadily

moving down across the border to launch a new offensive.

News reports from besieged Phnom Penh continually stress how unhappy the people are with their Government; how hard it is to enlist soldiers; how palindromic Lon Nol has not taken Thomas Jefferson as his model. Thus victims become villains; where are the reports of the courage of the defenders or denunciations of the sustained brutality of the Communist attackers?

No; that would hardly serve to speed the "transfer of power" or to assuage our consciences for refusing to supply any more bullets to people trying to defend themselves against well-supplied Communists.

You see, we are supposed to believe that the war in Cambodia is our fault; that we corrupted those peaceful Cambodians. But were the Khmer Rouge troops, now slaughtering children, indoctrinated by our Green Berets? Hardly; they are local Communists bent on seizing control, using rockets supplied by Hanoi, Peking and Moscow to kill their Cambodia countrymen.

Our visiting Congressmen, who felt the cold fear of the people surrounded in Phnom Penh, are less inclined than Hubert Humphrey and Hugh Scott to demand surrender. A sensible idea has been put forth to "index" aid—that is, to key continued American support to the level of support other outside powers provide local Communists.

Indexed aid to help people fight for their survival against Communist takeover is more in our foreign policy tradition than adoption of the old "better Red than dead" line.

The defenders of Phnom Penh may offend some of us by having the temerity to die all over our television screens; but we must not be the first generation of Americans to force the surrender of a beleaguered people in a fog of bloodless phrases.