

Nixon Depending on The Ailing Lon Nol



— Jack Anderson

THE SUCCESS of President Nixon's strategy in Indochina depends heavily upon Cambodia's ailing, erratic President Lon Nol, who is now regarded in Washington as the best bet against a Communist takeover.

If Cambodia should fall under Communist control, South Vietnam would become highly vulnerable to Communist infiltration, isolation and eventual overthrow.

Yet only a few months ago, Washington wanted Lon Nol replaced by a more stable leader. The Central Intelligence Agency quoted prominent palace sources as saying the Cambodian chief executive had suffered a serious stroke and had taken "leave of his senses."

Another source told the CIA that Sirik Matak, a power in Phnom Penh, had confided sorrowfully that "Lon Nol is a sick man, both physically and mentally," and that "his intellectual processes no longer function as they once did."

★ ★ ★

IN ANOTHER secret dispatch from Phnom Penh, the CIA reported that "the cabinet has discussed ways and means of easing (Lon Nol) out of the day to day conduct of government business."

Later, three of his most powerful associates, according to the CIA, urged him to give up the presidency and accept the ceremonial post of Chief of State immediately. Sirik Matak added that a new constitution could be promulgated quickly and it

would be assured that Lon Nol would continue as Chief of State.

"Lon Nol," reported the CIA, "replied that he did not intend to be Chief of State at this time (but) . . . that he would be Prime Minister and head of government under the new constitution as under the old."

The policy makers in Washington privately hoped that Sirik Matak himself, an able administrator, would take over the helm and that Lon Nol could be persuaded to come to America for therapy.

But no longer. Lon Nol has now regained the use of some of his paralyzed limbs and has sharpened mentally although he still isn't the strong vigorous leader he was before his stroke.

★ ★ ★

WASHINGTON considers him the "cementing factor" who can best hold the shaky Cambodian government together and resist Communist encroachment.

President Nixon is anxious, meanwhile, to see the Lon Nol regime remain in power. For the Joint Chiefs have warned that, if the Communists grab Cambodia, reopen its port to military shipments and turn the country into a base for guerrilla operations against South Vietnam, the Saigon regime could not survive.

The President dropped tons of bombs and gambled thousands of American lives to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. That is how Lon Nol suddenly has become a key man in the President's Indochina strategy.