

Cambodia: Nixon's Doctrine in 'Purest Form'

"Cambodia is the Nixon Doctrine in its purest form . . . because in Cambodia what we are doing is helping the Cambodians to help themselves . . . rather than go in and do the fighting ourselves, as we did in Korea and as we did in Vietnam."

—President Nixon, press conference, Nov. 12, 1971.

In extenuation of Watergate, we are regularly advised by President Nixon's supporters and by the President himself to cast aside such petty matters and to concentrate instead on the splendors of Mr. Nixon's foreign policy. This, we are told, is what history will remember—the break-through with China, the rapprochement with Russia, the Vietnam disengagement, the SALT agreement, the building of structures for peace. Well, perhaps so, for the President has obviously accomplished quite a lot in foreign policy, and in any case we would not wish to take anything away prematurely from Mr. Nixon's place in history; time will test the enduring virtue in all these accomplishments.

But if it can reasonably be said that the Nixon Doctrine is the centerpiece, the master plan for foreign policy, as he himself has proclaimed it to be, and if "Cambodia" was the Doctrine "in its purest form," then it is not unreasonable to take a look at where we are in Cambodia, compared with where we were four years ago. For we are at a critical juncture, with an American cease-fire, for all practical purposes, presumably due to go into effect in Cambodia and the rest of Indochina tonight at midnight by an act of Congress forbidding further air support. We say "presumably" because we now know that there was clandestine bombing for 14 months at a time when strict respect for Cambodia's integrity was being publicly pledged; we have the record now of tactical air strikes deep in Cambodia when only carefully limited "interdiction" of bombing in border areas was being publicly acknowledged; we have heard of falsified reports to Congress about these bombing attacks, and we are hearing disingenuous denials of responsibility for these false reports. Finally, for the sake of a face-saving compromise between the Congress and the President, we have had several weeks of senseless bombing of Cambodia by B52s in the face of a fixed cutoff commanded by law—a period in which there have been at least three serious cases of innocent persons being slaughtered by misplaced bombs.

In short, the record does not encourage a belief that this administration will abide by its public account of what it is doing in Cambodia, or that it will not seek some other furtive way to influence the outcome there. Consider the historical background. In a press conference on May 8, 1970, just after the "incursion" by American ground forces, Mr. Nixon said, "The United States is, of course, interested in the future of Cambodia, and the future of Laos, both of which, of course, as you know, are neutral countries. However, the United States, as I indicated in what is called the Guam or Nixon Doctrine, cannot take the responsibility to send American men in to defend the neutrality of countries that are unable to defend themselves." Secretary of State William P. Rogers was more explicit; on June 7, a month later, in an interview on "Face the Nation," he made it abundantly clear that it was no part of the administration's central purpose to save the government in Phnom Penh. He described its fall as something that would be "unfavorable" but "not unacceptable in the sense that we would use American forces to support the government." While he conceded that the bombing of supply lines leading from Cambodia to South Vietnam might have a dual benefit of helping shore up the Cambodian government, he insisted that "our purpose is to interdict communications and supply lines."

At yet another point he said:

"But the fact is, and I think people forget this, that at the present time, the South Vietnamese have about 1,100,000 men trained and armed. There are about

100,000 Thais. There are about 100,000 Laotians; now probably, 50,000 Cambodians. All together, that total about three times the strength of North Vietnam. So there is no reason why those forces, the forces of freedom, cannot compete successfully against the forces of communism . . . There is just one enemy, North Vietnam, supplied by the Russians and the Chinese. And there are three times as many armed forces in the friendly nations, and they have about three times the combined population of North Vietnam."

So what happened? First, of course, the initial, clandestine bombing had failed to knock out the sanctuaries, which was why we invaded Cambodia with ground forces. But the ground "incursion," while it wrecked havoc with the sanctuaries, hardly lived up to its billing as a "decisive act." Afterward there came the invasion of Laos and then the great North Vietnamese offensive in upper South Vietnam, and finally the mining of Haiphong and the resumption of the bombing of the North which is generally credited with producing last January's cease-fire agreement.

And now what do we have? Well, we still have North Vietnam as the common enemy—but there is almost no evidence that the "forces of freedom" can compete successfully. The Canadian cease-fire observers in their farewell statement described a continuing state of war in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese buildup continues at record rates, with rising alarm about a new Communist offensive. In Cambodia, the squeeze tightens around Phnom Penh, and the celebrated sanctuaries are at the full disposal of the North Vietnamese.

It is hard to imagine a sorrier record of performance in terms of what this country was led to expect from our initial involvement in Cambodia. And this leaves aside, of course, what all this says about the nature of the Vietnam "cease-fire" about which so much has been made in connection with the President's competency in foreign policy. The real tragedy of it is that the President was right the first time, at least in what he said publicly, and yet he still does not seem to recognize how right he was. For Cambodia was never ours to win or to lose or to neutralize. That is what we had thought the Nixon Doctrine so wisely recognized. Had Mr. Nixon himself applied it he would now be accepting as unfortunate, but "not unacceptable," the natural consequences of a policy which did not presume American omnipotence and which never pretended to guarantee a happier outcome than the Cambodians were capable of achieving by their own efforts and their own will. Instead he has been talking about the terrible consequences, which he is pleased to hold Congress accountable for, of "abandoning a friend," and he has been threatening some sort of reprisals against "fresh aggression or further violations of the Paris agreements" by the North Vietnamese.

"The American people would respond to such aggression with appropriate action," the President told Congress 10 days ago, and this we submit, is a stunning claim to make in the name of a people who have never been consulted about any of the most important aspects of our Cambodian policy over the past four years. Instead, we were given the Doctrine which was never applied until Congress finally got around to applying it by law over Mr. Nixon's objections.

That, in effect, is the meaning of tonight's bombing halt, for what the President will now be left to work with is the same combination of foreign and military aid, together with his diplomacy which he assured the American public was all that was needed and all that he intended to employ in this pure application of his foreign policy. For this, he is prepared to blame Congress for everything that now ensues in Indochina. But Congress need not shrink from acceptance of this responsibility. On the contrary, if the President's famous Doctrine is as sound as he professes it to be, he can prove as much by taking his cue from Congress and applying it himself.