

Cambodia

Another step into defeat

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LIBERATION NEWS SERVICE—As the unexpectedly early monsoon rains fell on War Zone “C” by the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border, a U.S. divisional planning officer said, “The people who advised President Nixon to start something like this at this time of year must be the same ones who advised him on candidates for the Supreme Court.”

The rain-soaked army officer was right. Attorney General Mitchell’s counsel had drawn Nixon into the muck of the Carswell and Haynsworth affairs, and it was Mitchell who was the most enthusiastic civilian proponent of the thrust into a Cambodian quagmire.

Perhaps Nixon suspected that the invasion of Cambodia might be no more popular than the Carswell nomination as he labored through eight drafts of his April 30 television speech announcing the move. He described the war in Cambodia as a way to end the war in Vietnam: “We take this action not for the purpose of extending the war into Cambodia but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam.”

Only an “extension” into Cambodia, Nixon claimed, would permit to bring the boys home from Vietnam: “A majority of the American people, a majority of you listening to me, are for the withdrawal of our forces from Vietnam. The action I have taken tonight is indispensable for the continuing success of that withdrawal program.”

The tortured logic of the President did not, of course, forestall criticism ranging from the alarmed to the outraged.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield commented, “There is nothing in past experience in Indo-China to suggest that casualties can be reduced by enlarging the area of military operations. There is nothing in past experience to suggest that the way out of the Vietnamese conflict follows the road of a second Indo-China war. Indeed the road may well meander throughout all of southeast Asia and end nobody knows where.”

But it was not merely bad advice which led Nixon into Cambodia. He is bent on chasing the spectre of victory across southeast Asia, as defeat pursues him. Just how near defeat he obliquely acknowledged in his speech: “But if the enemy response to our most conciliatory offers for peaceful negotiation continues to be to increase its attacks and humiliate and defeat us, we shall react accordingly.” This was the first presidential admission that the United States is in the process of being humiliated and defeated in Vietnam.

A substantial indication of Nixon’s awareness of the dire straits of the U.S. in Vietnam is the fate of the troop withdrawal program. A year ago Nixon said that he hoped to bring home all combat troops by the end of 1970. Now, however, Nixon cannot withdraw all combat troops without overtly conceding defeat, and he is not yet willing to do this.

So it is projected that only half of the 150,000 men Nixon has announced he will withdraw by the spring of 1971 will be combat troops. And to obfuscate the fact that combat troops, under current policy, will have to remain in Vietnam after the date Nixon set last year, the Administration has invented a new phrase: “infantry type security troops.” This term will be given to the combat troops, but connotes the hope that they won’t have to fight.

One of the reasons the U.S. cannot inflict substantial harm on the NLF in this move can be found in this anomaly: although Nixon kept the Cambodian invasion a secret from the Saigon regime, the Cambodian administration, Congress, and most of his own Cabinet, including the Secretary of State, the National Liberation Front knew of the attack three days before it occurred, and dispersed from its bases in the area.

The National Liberation Front is highly mobile: when necessary, they can march 25 miles in one night, carrying their equipment.

One objective of the mission, Nixon said, was to locate and destroy “major base camps.” Major base camps, however, are merely a collection of thatch and bamboo huts and some tents.

But the prize target was to be the NLF headquarters, labeled “COSVN” by the U.S. military. Nixon proclaimed in his speech, “Tonight, American and South Vietnamese units will attack the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam.” Quite aside from the fact that the U.S. has yet to locate this “key control center” which Nixon claimed would be attacked on Thursday night, “COSVN” is an irrelevant target, and if located will be nothing more than some abandoned huts. For COSVN is not a Vietnamese Pentagon, with tons of vital carbon copies in its files; the NLF commanders move every few days, and all essential communications are very mobile.

COSVN was also an announced objective in 1967’s “Operation Junction City,” in many ways a model of the military strategies used in the invasion of Cambodia. Operation Junction City took place in Tay Ninh Province, just southwest of the “fishhook” in Cambodia. The object of the operation was to “search” the area and destroy NLF forces, bases, supplies and property belonging to peasants—rice, livestock, houses—which could be of use to the NLF.

Twenty thousand U.S. and puppet troops were involved, and if there is any hope at all of trapping NLF troops in a search and destroy mission, it was with that operation, rather than with the invasion of Cambodia. For Cambodia is being invaded by tanks and armored track vehicles, giving ample advance warning to the guerrillas. In Operation Junction City, an attempt was made to block escape routes by helicopter landings and a combat jump of a battalion of Vietnamese paratroopers. But the NLF slipped through the trap.

General Westmoreland as commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam presided over “Operation Junction City” and its predecessor, “Operation Cedar Falls.” The strategy of “search and destroy missions” was General Westmoreland’s key to winning the war in 1967; by 1968, it was generally considered a fiasco.

Completely discredited, search and destroy missions were abandoned. Now, as Chief of Staff of the Army, Westmoreland has urged the same discredited tactic in the invasion of Cambodia.

The clearest result of Operation Junction City and Operation Cedar Falls was to develop loyalty among the people for the NLF. The American atrocities were so awful, as they must be in a “search and destroy” mission, involving the destruction of the village of Ben Suc in Operation Cedar Falls, for example, and the expulsion of its inhabitants into concentration camps, that hatred of the U.S. invasion intensified, and adherence to the NLF increased.

This counter-productive effect of U.S. invasion is well understood by the Vietnamese. Vietnamese military strategist and theoretician General Vo Nguyen Giap has explained that direct foreign invasion of Vietnam (or Cambodia) only exposes more clearly that the regime in power can maintain itself only with outside support and that the regime does not serve the interest of the Indochinese people.

The invasion of Cambodia, like the earlier search and destroy missions, is perpetrating the outrages that turns victims into insurgents. Already, for instance, the U.S. 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment has burned five villages in the Fishhook, each with thirty to forty homes.

“I had orders to burn everything,” a tank commander whose force had just razed two villages told AP correspondent Peter Arnett.

The invading forces have been told to burn homes and shoot livestock belonging to Cambodian peasants because the property might be of use to the NLF.

U.S. air strikes have blown up the town of Mimot -until the invasion, the Mimot Plantation was the largest functioning rubber plantation in Indochina. As the rubber workers’ homes are demolished and their relatives killed, they can be expected to flock to insurgent forces.

The Lon Nol coup which ousted the neutralist Sihanouk in March has supplemented the U.S. invasion of Cambodia in pressing the country's peasants into rebellion. Repression of pro-Sihanouk demonstrations among the peasants towards the end of March in which hundreds of Cambodians were shot, swelled the bands of insurgents.

Many peasants, fearful of arrest after the demonstrations, took to the jungle rather than return to their homes. As early as April 22, *Le Monde* reported that "Khmer peasants in Viet Cong areas are now armed and trained. The nucleus of a liberation army is probably being constituted."

A diplomat in Phnom Penh is quoted as saying, "A couple of weeks ago, I would not have spoken this way. It did not surprise me in the least to hear of liberated zones being established or of a liberation army being formed.

"It would not surprise me either if the Viet Cong say they are pulling out of certain zones and that from now on, dealings should be with the 'new Khmer authorities.'"

By the end of April the insurgency strategy was evident. "The NLF in Cambodia is not trying to capture the capital, but to establish freed zones where the Red Khmers can establish their own army." *Le Monde* reported.'

"The North Vietnamese do not behave the way the Russians did in Prague; they would rather arm the peasants than establish a puppet regime."

By May 1 reports were being received of large units of regular Cambodian army defecting to the rebels.

According to a May 2 Associated Press dispatch, many of the troops that Lon Nol's army is fighting are Cambodians.

According to AP, "In some cases North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops act as advisers to these Cambodians."

The AP report continues that, "Junior officers who naively describe how many Cambodians are fighting with the enemy" are being strongly "rebuked" by their commanding officers, who are "fearful of the implications."

According to numerous reliable sources, the Cambodian rebels have liberated over one-third of their territory. The liberated territory includes the western jungle mountains along the Thai border which are hundreds of miles from the frontier with Vietnam, the large underpopulated northeast bordering Laos and most of the populous rice, fish and rubber plantation lands in Cambodia's Mekong River region around Phnom Penh.

The Red Khmers are fighting within the recently organized National United Front, which deposed Prince Sihanouk nominally heads. On May 5, Sihanouk and the Red Khmers proclaimed that they had formed a revolutionary Government of National Unity.

The strength of the Red Khmers originates in the old resistance bases which fought against the French in the first Indochina war. After the Geneva Agreements of 1954 guaranteed Cambodia neutrality, the rebels, while retaining their infrastructure, decided not to oppose Prince Sihanouk militarily. They believed that Sihanouk had genuine nationalist and progressive tendencies.

In 1963, however, numbers of students and professors from Phnom Penh began filtering into the countryside to rebuild Communist bases of support. Most of the present insurgent leaders joined their comrades in the countryside in 1967.

According to U.S. intelligence sources, the present leaders are three popular former elected deputies of the Cambodian National Assembly. All three of these leaders, Hu Mim, Khieu Sanphan and Ho Youn, disappeared from public view in 1967, reportedly to live with the peasants in semi-liberated areas.

The Red Khmers began to organize along guerrilla lines in 1967, especially in the west and northeast areas of the country. Since that time there were occasional reports of clashes with the regular Cambodian army.

The rebels have grown tremendously in the last months, and now number "into the thousands," according to sources which include U.S. intelligence. According to copies of their leaflets found in Cambodia, the Red Khmers, like the Viet Cong, are first of all nationalists. With arms provided by the NLF, the Cambodian peasants have rapidly developed their own people's war for national liberation.

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