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Nixon Cambodia Report Backs Impression of a Weak Leader

THERE WAS a large, historic case to be made for the Cambodian operations. But President Nixon chose instead to enter a highly defensive personal plea for self-vindication.

His written report on Cambodia thus confirms the impression of a weak President, singularly ill-equipped to resist the tremendous pressures that keep dragging this country deeper and deeper into Southeast Asia.

The historic case for the Cambodian operation rests on the extraordinary role played by the former ruler in Phnom Penh. Prince Norodom Sihanouk was the centerpiece of an infinitely tangled diplomatic system. He balanced North Vietnam against South Vietnam, China against North Vietnam, Russia against China, the United States against Russia.

When the Prince was unseated on March 18, this system collapsed. It was a case of after him the deluge. In these chaotic circumstances it made sense for this country to take the military gains that were available through assault on the enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia. And the military results—which are certainly not bad—can be said to clinch the case.

But Mr. Nixon apparently felt the need to do more than justify the Cambodian operations. He felt the need to vindicate himself and every aspect of his original decision. So for that purpose he went back to the beginning, and made a case based on benign American actions folled by the dirty, rotten Commies.

THE PRESIDENT'S case begins with the ouster of Sihanouk on March 18. The

United States, he claims, felt at that time that "a neutral Cambodia outweighed the military benefits" of a move against the Communist sanctuaries. So "we made clear through many channels that we had no intention of exploiting the Cambodian upheaval for our own ends."

That effort, however, ran "afoul of Hanoi's designs". As the President tells it, the Communists first broke off negotiations with the new government in Cambodia; then launched assaults on Cambodian troops; and then moved to strike "deep in Cambodia". His report says: "It was the major expansion of enemy activity in Cambodia that caused allied troops to end five years of restraint and attack the Communist base areas".

In fact, as Mr. Nixon and his advisers know very well, the picture was nothing like that one-sided. Just before unseating Sihanouk, the present Cambodian regime inspired demonstrations against North Vietnamese and Vietcong diplomatic installations in Phnom Penh. It followed up with an ultimatum that North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops had to leave Cambodian soil within 72 hours. It cut enemy supply lines. But though these acts were clearly prejudicial to the other side, the United States immediately embraced the new regime in Phnom Penh as "neutral."

Moreover, border action against the Communist troops in the sanctuaries began as early as mid-March. A study by two members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—James Lowenstein and Richard Moose—shows South Vietnamese military strikes at the Communist troops in

Cambodia beginning on March 15 and growing through assaults on March 17, March 27, April 14 and April 20 until the big push of April 30. Thus the steps Mr. Nixon describes as provocations by the other side could well have been moves taken to protect their own position.

THE POINT of course, is not that one side or the other is to blame. On the contrary, the point is that the history of what happened is murky beyond the capacity of either side to prove a clear case. And the serious question is why the President should choose to rest his argument on such a dubious record.

The answer, I think, is that Mr. Nixon is trying to prove a point about himself. He is trying to show that he is a tough guy, a fellow that can't be humiliated, a leader who won't stand for being pushed around, a giant who is not pitiful and helpless.

Just why he feels obliged to make this point is not so clear. Perhaps it is a matter of unavowed self-doubt. What is clear is that a leader determined to show his toughness is a born victim of circumstance in Southeast Asia.

He has no defenses against the tremendously powerful forces that sucked three successive Presidents into the Vietnamese war. He is an easy mark for the many statemen and soldiers—American and native—who keep telling him that the other side will fold or come to terms if only he shows a little valor. And that is why even now there is reason to fear that American commitments are still creeping upwards in Southeast Asia.

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ASIA / CAMB
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7-70