

What's It All About

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Some 20,000 to 25,000 American troops plus about as many South Vietnamese troops are by now reported to be on Cambodian soil. The American people, assured a few days ago of the impending withdrawal of another 150,000 men from the war in Vietnam, faces in disbelief and bewilderment the expansion of that war into a new Indochinese conflict. Why?

The Administration's Case

For several years, North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces have used Cambodian territory as privileged sanctuary from which to launch operations into South Vietnam. According to intelligence reports, a series of major base camps, including the supposed "nerve center" headquarters for all Communist operations in South Vietnam, are strung out for hundreds of miles a short distance inside the Cambodian border.

In his address to the nation a week ago, President Nixon stressed that it was essential to our program of phased withdrawal from Vietnam to clean out these sanctuaries. Indeed, the Cambodian invasion would speed the conclusion of the war.

Apparently there were also intelligence reports that the North Vietnamese were "responding" to Nixon's announcement of further troop withdrawals by enlarging the Cambodian sanctuaries in preparation for an expanded "liberation" movement that would encompass Cambodia and Laos as well as South Vietnam. If this was Hanoi's answer to our peace overtures, it was determined, it must be induced to think more peaceful thoughts by an allied blitzkrieg in Cambodia. For this to be a "quick and dirty" affair: we have presidential assurances that our troops will be out of Cambodia in three to seven weeks.

Background

Cambodia, the modern manifestation of the ancient Khmer empire, is a country about the size of Wisconsin or Georgia. Located at the tip of the Indochinese peninsula in Southeast Asia, it is nestled between South Vietnam in the east and Thailand in the West, with Laos to the north and the sea to the south.

Historically, the Khmer people have occupied a territory of varying size, the stronger Thai and Vietnamese neighbors periodically picking up some extra real estate. With a population of only six to seven million, a modest economy, and a weak army, Cambodia has survived to this day more by good luck and fast talking than by exertion of national power.

In the heydays of colonialism, Cambodia became a French Protectorate. As one administrative unit of French Indochina (with Laos and Vietnam), Cambodia was left pretty much to itself, its royal authority intact. When the Japanese drove the French out in the Second World War, a sham "independence" was granted. However, at the conclusion of the war the French, not yet awake to the realities of the twentieth century, reimposed colonial authority. The first Indochinese war was not long in coming. Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, an old Vietnamese Communist whose guerillas had led the resistance against the Japanese, France was fought to a standstill. The Geneva Agreement of 1954 sealed the doom of the French empire in Southeast Asia.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk

In 1941, before the French were ousted by the Japanese, they maneuvered a moon-faced 19-year-old onto the throne of Cambodia in the hope that he might prove more pliable than his relatives who actually had prior claim to kingship status. It was realized too late that the youth had considerable gumption, and that he was armed



with the fastest tongue in the east.

In 1953 King Sihanouk decided the auspicious moment had come. He flew to Paris to demand independence. The French sent him packing. Undaunted, he resorted to what has since become his peculiar trademark: exile. Pouting in neighboring Thailand, he sought every opportunity to needle the French, who did not feel any particular need for a political crisis in the midst of their futile Indochinese struggle. Grudgingly, they granted independence to Cambodia and its spirited king, who returned to his capital Phnom Penh in triumph.

Two years later, in 1955, Sihanouk abdicated his throne in favor of his father and did a rather unusual thing for a king. He led a political party into battle, and emerged victorious. As Prime Minister, he chartered a nonaligned or neutralist course in foreign affairs. But he executed that policy more dramatically than most. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that he has over the years been found on every conceivable side of every conceivable issue. The guiding principle? Join the winning side. Few barometers have measured more accurately the tide of Southeast Asian power struggles than Sihanouk's stance.

The Coup d'Etat

Prince Norodom Sihanouk's nonalignment policy was sufficiently flexible to allow him to strike some seemingly anomalous postures. In the face of mounting evidence to the contrary, he vehemently denied that Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops were

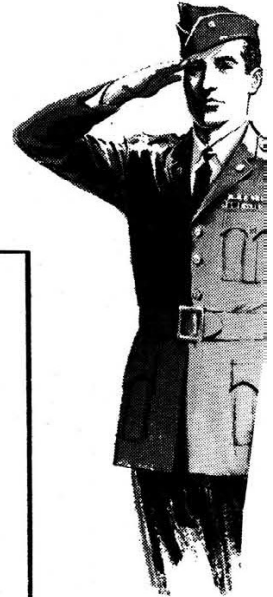
using Cambodian territory as sanctuary from pursuing U.S. and allied forces. Simultaneously, and much to the chagrin of allied commanders, he would scream and hoody murder every time an American or Vietnamese soldier set foot on the wrong side of the border (the location of which, incidentally, is a matter of dispute). Furthermore, large quantities of supplies for the Communist forces were allegedly being shipped into the brand-new Cambodian port Sihanoukville, and from thence up the mighty Mekong River into the heart of the war zone. For whatever reason, the ostensibly neutralist Sihanouk chose to look the other way.

It is not yet clear whether these

west of Cambodia, right across the country from the allied invasion forces; and that Gen. Lon Nol's forces control only Phnom Penh and a few big towns.

It leaves us with Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces advancing on Phnom Penh (last account had them 20 miles away), and with U.S. troops committed to advance no further than 21 miles into Cambodia without Congressional approval. Phnom Penh is more than 21 miles inside the border, and Congress is in a sticky mood.

So it leaves us — bewildered.



From: N.Y. Times

The New York Times reported on April 20 that "a month after the event (the Coup d'Etat in Cambodia), the officials are tending to doubt that American interests are likely to be served after all." This would tend to indicate that the coup in Cambodia was, from the start, done with the fondest hopes that general U.S. backed efforts in and throughout Southeast Asia, would benefit. Exactly the extent of what our interests are in Southeast Asia are few, outside the privileged informed elite of the White House and Pentagon, can guess. It would be safe to assume that they involve a great deal of U.S. money and U.S. lives.

That same issue reported an unidentified White House source as saying that if the Geneva Conference were resurrected the request by Cambodia for arms should be denied because "It would create another Laos-type situation and make the Nixon Doctrine impossible to implement in Southeast Asia. Again it appears the major concern of the White House is to keep United States Foreign Policy aggressive and at the same time keep our unblemished record of war of aggression.

In regard to our involvement in Cambodia White House sources said "The decision was based almost entirely on estimates of

dangerous enemy activity." It is deplorable that major military decisions are based so heavily upon unsubstantiated estimates. The Cambodian Government, in whose territory we are conducting military operations, was not consulted beforehand.

Cambodia has made a direct request for arms and materials from the U.S. but has not asked for the deployment of ground forces or anything else. But, Richard Nixon seems to be more concerned with deployment of troops over whom he, as commander in chief of the armed forces of the United States, has the ultimate control.

The question over the past few days has been the legality of our move into Cambodia. The only reason that Nixon has thus far mentioned outside of the "it protects our boys in Viet Nam" garbage is that he will not allow our perfect war record to be tarnished and that he would rather be a one term president (which he might be in any case) and see this country carry out a bloody fruitless military effort than be a two term president and witness this country become a second rate world power. The only thing that he and Agnew haven't said but must obviously believe in is "All power to the press!" Which by pure coincidence they, for all practical purposes own and control.