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Cambodia a Smart Move

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THE CAMBODIAN episode has so far receded that it is barely mentioned any longer. But simply as a study in the ways of modern government, it is worth reporting how new figures have now proved the extreme shrewdness of President Nixon's decision to invade Hanoi's Cambodian sanctuaries.

The decision was based, to begin with, on two related considerations: First, the value to Hanoi of the sanctuaries themselves; and second, the even greater value to Hanoi of the Cambodian supply system, which was continuously replenished by Communist ships unloading at the port of Sihanoukville.

The question of the Cambodian supply system, in turn, had long before touched off one of those bureaucratic comedies in which the U.S. government seems to specialize. In brief, the civilian side of the government did not wish to believe that such a system even existed; hence it long refused to do so, despite the solid evidence produced by the military in Vietnam.

Finally, about two and a half years ago, the evidence became too strong to overlook. But naturally, since the mere fact of the Cambodian supply system had been so long denied, the next step was to downgrade its importance by every means possible.

EVEN LAST YEAR, therefore, our government had two competing estimates, both official, of the tonnages of arms the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong were getting through Sihanoukville. The civilian estimate was a maximum of 8,000 tons a year. The military estimate, made by the U.S. headquarters in Saigon, was 15,000 tons a year.

The difference was important. The lower estimate gave the Cambodian supply

system relatively marginal importance, whereas the higher estimate meant that almost enough arms were being brought in through Sihanoukville to nourish the entire war effort of the enemy in the lower half of South Vietnam. In consequence, the difference caused a sanguinary bureaucratic war, which raged between Washington and Saigon for month after disputatious month.

Even after the invasion order was given, the difference still had its effect. The lower estimate was in truth the basis for the nonsensical reports from Saigon, that Hanoi was rapidly organizing a "substitute" for Sihanoukville, by expanding the supply lines running through Laos. These were much quoted, to prove that the Cambodian adventure would not have decisive effects.

BY NOW, HOWEVER, the enormous masses of enemy documents taken in Cambodia have finally been analyzed. The arms deliveries through Sihanoukville have been meticulously traced. And the result has been to prove that the Cambodian supply system was actually providing the enemy with more than 21,000 tons per annum.

Here you see the effect, on even the most sober judgments, of wanting to believe what you want to hear. But here you also see why the Cambodian adventure has, in fact, been even more decisive than its few defenders dared to hope at the outset.

With more than 21,000 tons of arms a year coming in through Cambodia, the enemy had far more than

enough to supply all his units in III and IV corps. But with the supply flow stopped—as it was instantly stopped when the sanctuaries were invaded—the units in III and IV corps were left without any supply at all.

The result has been what anyone but a certain sort of U.S. senator would naturally expect. In the rich delta provinces of IV corps, for instance, three South Vietnamese divisions of fine quality had had their work cut out for them before the Cambodian invasion.

THEY WERE MAKING progress, but it was fairly slow progress, in part because Hanoi had sent five North Vietnamese regiments into the delta to brace up the locals. Now, however, only remnants of two NVA regiments continue to hang on there; and their early expulsion can be confidently expected.

The chief American in IV corps, Col. John Paul Vann, has no record of excessive optimism. Yet he now believes that his corps area will be able to get on without one of its three South Vietnamese divisions before this year ends, and will be able to spare another division early next year. Meanwhile, the enemy's strongest and most ancient redoubts in the delta are currently being seized and held.

Altogether, when you reflect on the past impact upon policy of the bureaucratic comedy above-described, this is a cautionary tale.

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