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NEWS COVERAGE OF THE CAMBODIAN
INCURSION

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Army War College
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10 March 1972

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CALLAWAY

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USAWC RESEARCH PAPER

NEWS COVERAGE OF THE CAMBODIAN INCURSION

A RESEARCH REPORT

by

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Abstract: The paper is an appraisal of the information presented to the public by the news media and by public officials during the Cambodian operation of May and June 1970. Two questions are of primary importance in the appraisal: (1) Was the Cambodian operation necessary to accomplish stated objectives? (2) Was the operation successful in the accomplishment of those objectives. Answers to these questions are dependent upon the beliefs and attitudes of the American public. Presentation of information by newspapers, news magazines, and television as well as announcements, comments, and addresses of public officials are examined to show how each attempted to influence public opinion. It was concluded that answers to the above question are conditionally affirmative but dependent upon future action by the administration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.	11
CHAPTER I. THE CONFLICT POSED BY CAMBODIA.	1
The Root of Conflict.	1
Methodology	2
Source of Data.	3
II. WAR AND THE AMERICAN PRESS.	7
The War of 1812	7
The Mexican War	8
The Civil War	10
World War II.	12
The Vietnam War	14
III. PRIOR TO CAMBODIA	16
Vietnamization.	16
Cambodia.	17
IV. THE CAMBODIAN INCURSION.	20
The Administration's Story.	20
The Media's Story	26
Newspaper Treatment	26
News Magazine Treatment	33
Television Treatment.	37
V. AN ANALYSIS	40
Discussion.	40
Conclusions	43
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	45

CHAPTER I

THE CONFLICT POSED BY CAMBODIA

One of the most dramatic events of the war in Vietnam occurred on the evening of 30 April 1970 with the President's announcement of US troop involvement in a Cambodian operation. On 30 April 1970 US and South Vietnamese combat forces launched the first of a series of attacks against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army sanctuaries in Cambodia. These sanctuaries had for a period of some five years provided the staging points from which to launch operations against the Republic of South Vietnam.

THE ROOT OF CONFLICT

The conflict which resulted from the Cambodian incursion and the dilemma which faced the President, press, and public arose from a perceived contradiction of purpose. Previous announcements by the administration had assured the American public that the war in Vietnam was winding down. Substantial numbers of US troops had been withdrawn from South Vietnam in the preceding months and some ten days before initiation of the Cambodian operation the President had announced the scheduled withdrawal of an additional 150,000 men. Therefore, the operation launched against the sanctuaries coupled with the internal situation in Cambodia seemed to signal a shift in purpose. This shift, as perceived by at least some of the press

and public, rekindled the smoldering conflict between it and the government with regards to the war in Vietnam.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the portrayal of the Cambodian operation to the American public. An appraisal of this portrayal will be made through a comparative analysis of official pronouncements, news releases, and press coverage. The intent is to attempt to answer two questions. First: Was the Cambodian operation necessary to accomplish stated objectives? Second: Was the operation successful in the accomplishment of these objectives?

Since it is impossible to compare what was with what might have been, answers to these questions must be dependent upon the beliefs and attitudes of the American public as they are formed and influenced by the information which is presented. In this regard, a selected sample of television, newspaper, and magazine coverage of events before, during, and after the Cambodian operation will be used as a vehicle to examine the impact of the news media on public attitudes. This sample will be compared with official pronouncements and releases, made during the same period, which would impact on public attitude towards the Cambodian operation. The objective is to arrive at conclusions as to the effect of information presented on public opinion.

SOURCE OF DATA

Data examined can be categorized into one of three general areas: background information, news media coverage and official pronouncements or accounts. In so far as possible information was obtained from publications available at the US Army War College Library. This was possible with regard to data contained in news magazines and information required for background. Additionally, it was possible to acquire limited information from newspaper files and unit after action reports found in the College Library. However, in order to obtain adequate information on newspaper coverage of the Cambodian operation it was necessary to rely on files found in the Library of Congress. Information on television coverage and official news releases made in Vietnam were obtained from the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs.

Background Information:

In order to obtain perspective and to appraise the effect of the news media on public attitudes it is necessary to know something of the history of press and governmental relations, particularly with respect to matters of war. To satisfy this need several books and publications dealing with this subject were examined to trace the evolution of media treatment and coverage of war. This examination selectively covers this evolution to the period just prior to the Cambodian operation.

News Media Coverage:

Information examined with relationship to television coverage of the Cambodian operation was restricted to that published in the Radio-Television Defense Dialogue. This document compiled by the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs consists of verbatim extracts from television scripts of items of Department of Defense interest. The publication is limited to the extent that only major network news programs are included. However, since these are the most prestigious news programs and considering the fact that they are broadcast to all parts of the nation through affiliated local stations it is logical to assume that the Radio-Television Defense Dialogue represents a fair sample of news presentation to the American public by this means. It was not possible to examine the visual portion of television presentations from which extracts were taken and for this reason no attempt was made to evaluate their effect on public attitudes.

Information examined with relationship to newspaper coverage was obtained from a sample which included six daily publications. In selecting this sample of newspapers, consideration was given to several factors to include editorial attitude, geographic or regional location, circulation, and stature. Consideration of these factors was necessary to provide a sample whose cross section was representative of national news coverage. These publications were: the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, the Atlanta Journal, the Houston Post, and the Los Angeles Times. All

articles and editorials from selected editions of these publications which pertained to the Cambodian operation were examined. With regard to the Washington Post and the New York Times editions examined covered the period 22 April 1970 to 4 July 1970 inclusive. The other publications were examined more selectively and included editions of 1 - 15 May 1970, 1 - 10 June 1970, and 20 - 30 June 1970. In total some 280 individual newspaper editions were examined.

The news magazine sample consisted of four national publications: Time, Newsweek, US News & World Report, and Life. These publications were selected as those most widely read by the public. All editions of these publications from the last week of April 1970 through the first week of July were examined for coverage of the Cambodian operation.

Official Pronouncements and News Releases:

Information pertaining to official accounts, pronouncements, and news releases was obtained from several sources. First and foremost of these sources were the news media which published announcements by high civilian and military officials in whole or in part. Additionally, interviews with these officials were conducted by the media for publication. Therefore, examination of media publications revealed official positions and views which were presented to the public. Daily messages prepared by Military Assistance Command, Vietnam were examined to establish what information had been officially released to the press in Vietnam. These messages were obtained from the office of the

Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs and covered the period 20 April 1970 through 1 July 1970. Added background material which aided in assessment of official and news media accounts of the Cambodian operation was obtained from unit after action reports available in the College Library.

CHAPTER II

WAR AND THE AMERICAN PRESS

The press establishment occupies a position in American society unlike that found in any other nation of the world. This position, initially established by the Constitution, has evolved to the point that the press seems in effect to be a fourth, though unofficial, branch of our government. It seems to have taken upon itself the role of national conscience in addition to its more traditional task of reporting the news and informing the public. Acting in its role as conscience and critic the press has frequently found itself in conflict with national policies and goals established by the government. Nowhere has this conflict been more pronounced than in press commentaries on and reporting of wars, past and present.

THE WAR OF 1812

The conflict between government and press with regard to war and its conduct began at least as early as the war of 1812. Serious opposition to the war was evident at the outset, Congress passing the declaration with about 62% of the vote in the House and 59% in the Senate. Attitudes towards the war generally followed sectional lines with support coming from the South and West and opposition from the North.¹ Press treatment of the war paralleled these sectional views.

¹Samuel Eliot Morrison, Dissent in Three American Wars (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 3.

No apparent attempt was made by the press to field reporters for the purpose of collecting first hand information concerning military operations. Such information as was published was generally provided by untrained observers and was second hand at best. In addition, since methods of rapid transmission of information from remote locations had not yet been developed, such information as was reported on the conduct of the war was considerably after the fact. Given these obvious shortcomings in press techniques and considering the limited circulation of newspapers over wide areas it is obvious that the press lacked the capability of influencing a great mass of the population with comprehensive details of current happenings.² The overall effect of press treatment of the war therefore seems to have been limited to consolidation of previously held opinions rather than pronounced change in public attitudes.

THE MEXICAN WAR

The Mexican War of 1846-48 marked the beginning of modern press coverage of war. For the first time reporters literally went to war with the troops. In an area lacking accommodations for their support they found it necessary to attach themselves to various commands and in some instances took an active part in combat. Some twenty correspondents were present with the Army during the campaign in Mexico. Few were competent military observers and their reports and letters

²J. Cutler Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1955), p. 638.

delt mainly with the exploits of US troops and commanders, items which were however, of great interest to the public.³

Competition between publications in printing the news first was evident in the methods used in transmitting reports and dispatches. Special ships and couriers were employed by the newspapers to bring reports from the war zone to New Orleans where initial publication was made. From New Orleans reports and copies of local papers were sent on to Washington by the most rapid means possible, normally a combination of steamboat and mounted courier. At the time war began some 1,200 miles of telegraph lines were in operation in the United States, mainly north from Washington. Over these lines press reports on the war were transmitted into the more populous middle and eastern states.⁴

Opposition to the war was expressed in the press, notably in the northeastern section of the country. This opposition was based on political and moral beliefs which were in conflict with the expansionist trend of the age.⁵ News reports from Mexico detailing exploits of US troops in one success after another provided little support for opposition to the war. In fact these reports supported the expansionist concept and made it particularly attractive to the urban masses of the Northeast.⁶

³F. Lauriston Bullard, Famous War Correspondents (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1914), p. 353.

⁴Ibid., pp. 354-355.

⁵Frederick Merk, Dissent in Three American Wars (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 44.

⁶Ibid., p. 51.

THE CIVIL WAR

The next stride in press coverage of war began in 1861. Prior to the Civil War newspaper coverage of daily events was of little interest to a public who had become accustomed to reading someone else's opinion of the events of the previous week. Though almost 50,000 miles of telegraph line crossed and recrossed the country the cost of transmitting news reports was considered prohibitive by newspapers for all but the most unusual events.⁷ The attitude of both public and press changed with the coming of war. The press became extravagant in its use of the telegraph and the public became accustomed to and then demanded publication of the news of daily events. In 1864 the Washington telegraph office alone transmitted about 58,000 words of copy during a single day.⁸

Hundreds of reporters representing all of the major newspapers of the day accompanied the army to war and reporters were present during all major engagements. The reports which these reporters prepared for publication varied from accurate and objective to outright lies depending upon the character of the author and pressure from his editor. However, discounting the more flagrant cases of misrepresentation, the public received descriptive and understandable insight into the day to day conduct of the war. Inaccuracies and

⁷ Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War, p. 6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 639.

misstatements which were reported were more often the result of
confusion and unreliable sources than a conscious attempt to deceive.⁹

As might be expected some reports were critical of some aspects of military operations. In many respects this criticism was deserved and was influential in correcting defects. As an example, news reports which were critical of the issue of inferior material and equipment and of mismanagement of medical services resulted in corrective action.¹⁰ Criticism of operations, commanders and troops was in most cases less productive for the press. Had this not been so the Union might well have lost the services of Grant and Sherman as a result of critical and not totally accurate newspaper reports which referred to drinking habits and mental condition.

The Civil War brought yet another innovation to war reporting. For the first time official censorship was imposed on the press. This proved a burden to both government and press and was a constant source of conflict. The newspapers for their part charged that the system made no distinction between sensitive military information which might aid the enemy and criticism of the general conduct of the war and of government policy. Additionally, the rules of the game were subject to change or to interpretation by commanding generals at their discretion. The most serious charge raised against the press was that sensitive military information was provided to the enemy through the daily newspapers. Reports published therein would

⁹ Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War, pp. 643-645.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 103, 113, 640.

often give location, strength, and planned moves of units in great detail. When charged with such disclosures the press would frequently argue that by imposing an official censorship the government relieved the press of responsibility with regard to sensitive information.¹¹ Censorship was practiced throughout the war with varying degrees of ineffectiveness and the system delayed rather than killed reports of events and activities even when operating at its best.

Though the press might criticize conduct of the war, official policies, and officials themselves, there was never any doubt as to the position of the press on the ultimate objective. Throughout the four years of war, the press supported a policy of victory over the Confederate States and restoration of the Union. This position they conveyed to the public consistently throughout the war.

WORLD WAR II

When fighting which was to evolve into World War II began in the 1930's the American public was reluctant to become involved. For the most part this attitude was shared by the press. The attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 changed the attitude of both and resulted in the almost total involvement of all segments of national society in prosecution of the war against Germany and Japan. In no war before or since have the American people displayed such a

¹¹ Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War, pp. 648-650.

unity of purpose and a willingness to undergo inconvenience and hardship to attain an objective.

The press was no exception to this attitude and there is no doubt that they considered their profession one of great importance to the national war effort. One of their members, Elmer Davis, appointed Director of the Office of War Information, pointed out this importance:

This is a people's war, and to win it the people should know as much about it as they can. This Office will do its best to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, both at home and abroad. Military information that will aid the enemy must be withheld; but within that limitation we shall try to give the people a clear, complete, and accurate picture.¹²

Though written of the Office which he headed, Davis' words were descriptive of the position of the press.

Immediately after the entry of the United States into World War II the President established the Office of War Censorship and appointed as its head a member of the press. He was directed to censor international communications at his discretion. Concurrently, but outside the authority under which his office was established, the director was asked to set up a system of voluntary, cooperative censorship within the press. The code which was established warned against the release of information which could be detrimental to the war effort but was in no way to influence the editorial opinions of the press. With few exceptions this voluntary code was followed by the

¹²Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism (The MacMillan Company, 1969), p. 765.

press even in situations where incidents and events would not aid the enemy but might effect public or military morale. The success of the press in fully and accurately informing the public on the war without a breakdown in security was a tribute to their efforts.¹³ The performance of the press during this period can rightly be termed, "the greatest achievement of the American press in all its history."¹⁴

THE VIETNAM WAR

Unlike World War II no cataclysmic event such as Pearl Harbor introduced the United States into the Vietnam War. The nation had become involved progressively from the mid 1950's until the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1965. This event, which precipitated the introduction of US ground combat forces into South Vietnam, did not carry with it the certainty of national danger as had Pearl Harbor and thus did not impart a sense of national purpose in the public or the press. Though the introduction of US troops was made with the approval of the public and the Congress the seeds of dissent were present.

During the early 1960's the press and government officials began the conflict which has continued to the present with varying degrees of severity. Through misunderstandings, differences in

¹³Mott, American Journalism, pp. 761-763.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 741.

interpretation of events, and inexperienced personnel on the part of both sides the press and government reached an impasse in the mid 1960's. As a group correspondents in Vietnam during this period believed that they were being lied to by officials in regard to the war and events which were taking place. They further charged that the US Government was attempting to manage the news. These views they passed on to their readers. Government officials on the other hand believed that the press was irresponsible and detrimental to the war effort.¹⁵ These attitudes led to what has become known as the "credibility gap" and created a situation which could not fail to have had an effect on the public view of the war. Though conditions and attitudes on the part of both press and government improved somewhat during the following years of the 1960's, each party continued to view the other with a degree of apprehension and their relationship was not a wholly agreeable one.¹⁶

Unlike past wars of the United States from 1861 on the government did not impose an official censorship. In a manner similar to that used during World War II a voluntary form of cooperative censorship was relied on. As in World War II the press showed a commendable degree of responsibility in avoiding the release of information which could have been of value to the enemy.¹⁷

¹⁵Charles Goodnow, News Coverage of the Tet Offensive (Student Research Paper, US Army War College, 1969), pp. 15-19.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 22-25.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 29.

CHAPTER III

PRIOR TO CAMBODIA

At a press conference on Guam in July 1969 President Nixon signaled a modification in US policy towards Asia. During the conference the President indicated that the US would continue to meet its treaty obligations, but would insist on sharing the burden of preserving the peace with its friends and allies.¹ With respect to South Vietnam the US contribution would be reduced over time to economic and military aid.

VIETNAMIZATION

Vietnamization of the war in Southeast Asia was viewed as the first step in implementation of the new policy. Where before a substantial if not major part of the combat load had been carried by US troops implementation of the policy would result in a phased turn over of ground combat responsibility to South Vietnamese forces. The policy had in fact been put into operation some months before and on 8 June 1969 President Nixon had announced the withdrawal of 25,000 US troops to be completed before the end of August of that year.² Subsequently on 16 September³ and 15 December 1969⁴ the

¹"Nixon Plans Cut in Military Role for U.S. in Asia," New York Times, July 26, 1969, p. 1.

²"Leaders Agree First Cutback Will Begin Within 30 Days," New York Times, June 9, 1969, p. 1.

³"Nixon Announces New Vietnam Cut of About 35,000," New York Times, September 17, 1969, p. 1.

⁴"Nixon to Reduce Vietnam Forces 50,000 by April 15," New York Times December 16, 1969, p. 1.

President announced other withdrawals of 60,000 and 50,000 troops to be completed by 15 December 1969 and 15 April 1970 respectively, While Vietnamization progressed apace with the announced schedule of US troop withdrawals from South Vietnam trouble loomed in Cambodia.

CAMBODIA

In June of 1969 Prince Sihanouk reestablished diplomatic relations with the US following recognition of Cambodian independence, integrity, and neutrality.⁵ Though Prince Sihanouk admitted increased North Vietnamese and Viet Cong activity in the border areas of Cambodia and estimated Communist troops to total some 40,000 men⁶ no drastic action was taken to protest this presence or to expel Communist forces.

In early March 1970, while Prince Sihanouk was absent from Cambodia, anti-Vietnamese demonstrations began. The immediate result of these demonstrations was the sacking of the North Vietnamese and Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (Viet Cong) embassies in the capital city of Phnom Penh. Immediately thereafter the Cambodian government demanded the withdrawal of all Communist troops from Cambodian territory within two days.⁷ On 18 March 1970 Prince Sihanouk was deposed as Chief of State while General Lon Nol remained

⁵"Rogers Says Foe is Curbing Combat and Inflation," New York Times, July 3, 1969, p. 4.

⁶"Hanoi and Vietcong Strength in Cambodia Put at 40,000," New York Times, October 17, 1969, p. 2.

⁷"Cambodia Orders Troops of Hanoi and Vietcong Out," New York Times, March 14, 1970, p. 1.

as Premier.⁸ Later in the year the Cambodian Parliament was to vote the nation a republic and thus end 1,000 years of monarchy.

The Cambodian government was unable to enforce its demand for Communist withdrawal from the border areas with its small ill-trained army of 35,000 troops. In fact what little control of the border areas the government had retained was lost and Communist forces soon began to expand their control to the interior. Seemingly this expansion was directed toward securing border sanctuaries and also routes from the coast over which large amounts of supplies had been transported to these sanctuaries.

By the middle of April 1970, the situation had become critical for Cambodia as North Vietnamese forces approached the capital city of Phnom Pehn. Lon Nol made a general request to all nations for military aid in order to forestall the Communist forces.⁹ A few days later Cambodia requested military aid from the United States. After serious consideration the United States agreed and the decision was made to extend limited support in the form of small arms and ammunition.¹⁰

The situation was one which could also become critical for the United States and South Vietnam. A Communist dominated Cambodia,

⁸"Sihanouk Reported Out in a Coup by His Premier," New York Times, March 19, 1970, p. 1.

⁹"Cambodia Appeals to World for Arms," New York Times, April 15, 1970, p. 1.

¹⁰"Cambodia to Get Rifles From U.S.," New York Times, April 23, 1970, p. 1.

wherein North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces had free use of the border and coast could seriously threaten South Vietnam and bring to a halt the withdrawal of US troops from that country. The threat was sufficient to cause steps other than limited arms aid to Cambodia to be taken. On 29 April South Vietnamese forces, backed by US support, crossed the Cambodian border in strength for the purpose of destroying Communist sanctuaries and relieving pressure on Phnom Pehn and Cambodian forces.¹¹ The stage was set for the participation of US ground combat forces which was to begin the following day.

¹¹"U.S. Aids Saigon Push in Cambodia with, Planes, Artillery, Advisers," New York Times, April 30, 1970, p. 1.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAMBODIAN INCURSION

The Cambodian operation, with the participation of US ground forces, burst upon the national scene on the evening of the last day of April 1970 with an effect unlike any event of the Vietnam war with the probable exception of the Tet Offensive of 1968. Vietnamization was in progress and withdrawal of US forces, started some months before, was underway. The undertaking of combat action by US forces in an area previously off limits to US units was seen by some as a shift in US policy. A shift which would result in deeper more extensive US participation in the war and which would delay extraction of US forces from Southeast Asia for an indefinite time. Concurrently, with initiation of the operation the government began publicizing the reasons for and the objectives of the action in order to reassure the public that there had been no shift in policy. Media reaction was immediate and vehement.

THE ADMINISTRATION'S STORY

Lacking an official means for publicizing its side of an issue the government must rely upon the media for presentation of official policy on causes and effects to the public. Since the business of the media is presentation of newsworthy information to the public government officials have little trouble in making their views and positions known. Any statement by a public official may be and, if

pertaining to a current situation of interest to the public, will most certainly be publicized before the nation. The Cambodian operation was one of those events and the government made full use of the resources available through the media. Later, during and after the operation, these same resources were used to convey the government's assessment of accomplishments during the operation and advantages gained. Use of media carried with it the probability that a hostile press would attempt to second guess any information furnished by official sources for the purpose of strengthening its own point of view.

American participation in the Cambodian operation began on the morning of 1 May 1970, Saigon time. For the first time in the course of the Vietnam war US troops were ordered to strike across the border into Cambodia. The purpose of the operation was first explained to the public by President Nixon during a television address to the nation on the evening of 30 April 1970. The objective of the operation as expressed by the President was:

In cooperation with the armed forces of South Vietnam, attacks are being launched this week to clean out major enemy sanctuaries on the Cambodian-Vietnam border.

In further qualification of the operation's objective the President continued:

Tonight American and South Vietnamese units will attack the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam. This key control center has been occupied by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong for five years in blatant violation of Cambodia's neutrality.

This is not an invasion of Cambodia. The areas in which these attacks will be launched are completely occupied and controlled by North Vietnamese forces.

Our purpose is not to occupy these areas. Once enemy forces are driven out of these sanctuaries and once their military supplies are destroyed, we will withdraw.¹

These were the objectives of the Cambodian operation as outlined by the President. He went on to indicate that the operation was necessary to permit successful Vietnamization and continued withdrawal of US forces.

In the days immediately following the President's announcement of the Cambodian operation, other high officials sought to clarify the objectives outlined initially and to explain limitations which had been imposed. One of the limiting factors which received immediate attention from the press was that of time. The Secretary of Defense addressed this question on 2 May:

Question: Mr. Secretary, there seems to be some contradiction. The White House said this operation was going to go on for six weeks to eight weeks and now you are talking about one week or ten day operation.

Secretary Laird: The operation as far as the military operation is concerned to locate the facilities, which is the sweeping operation, we hope will go from one week to ten days. Now to destroy the facilities and the bunkers as far as the destruction of the facilities are concerned, that will take a longer period of time.²

¹"Transcript of President's Address to the Nation on Military Action in Cambodia," New York Times, May 1, 1970, p. 2.

²Melvin R. Laird, Secretary of Defense, at a Pentagon News Briefing on May 2, 1970.

The limitation on duration of the operation was further clarified by the President's later announcement that all US forces would be withdrawn from Cambodia not later than 1 July 1970. Thereafter, this date became the deadline to which all officials held. At the same time the President announced the date for withdrawal of US troops he also defined the depth of penetration into Cambodia which would be allowed. This penetration he limited to a maximum of 30 kilometers or 21.7 miles.³

The military objectives of the operation also received immediate attention from the press and their interpretation of the President's 30 April address were wide and varied. Vice President Agnew in an address on 8 May had this to say concerning the objectives of the operation:

We have no expectations of capturing the actual headquarters personnel, nor do we know that they are in any one area at a given time. Their headquarters personnel move around in those two base areas, plus an area of South Vietnam adjoining it. The probability was always that the personnel would have left by the time we move in. Our objective is to destroy their communication facilities and above all, their supply dumps. This objective we are achieving and expect to complete. Let me stress that the significance of these base areas is not personnel but the supply depots and communications network that have taken a period of many months to accumulate.⁴

³In Search of an Elusive Foe, Time, May 18, 1970, p. 24.

⁴Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, Address at an Idaho Republication Dinner, Boise, May 8, 1970.

Officials of the government stressed this position on the military objectives from the time of the President's announcement to the conclusion of the operation. The objective in the government's view was simply the destruction of war material and the disruption of Communist activity which would endanger the continued withdrawal of US forces from Southeast Asia. The capture or destruction of COSVN was never a stated objective though such an event would have been a welcome occurrence. Consideration of the continuance of the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia was never an objective though this too would be a welcome occurrence.

On 30 June 1970 the last US forces were withdrawn from Cambodia and US ground participation in the operation was ended. On the same day the President reported to the nation on his assessment of the operation and his hopes for the future:

Together with the South Vietnamese, the Armed Forces of the United States have just completed successfully the destruction of enemy base areas along the Cambodian-South Vietnam frontier. All American troops have withdrawn from Cambodia on the schedule announced at the start of the operation.

The allied sweeps into the North Vietnamese and Vietcong base areas along the Cambodian - South Vietnamese border:

- - will save American and allied lives in the future;
- - will assure that the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam can proceed on schedule;
- - will enable our program of Vietnamization to continue on its current timetable;

- - should enhance the prospects for a just peace.

According to latest estimates from the field we have captured:

* * * * *

And while our objective has been supplies rather than personnel, the enemy has also taken a heavy manpower loss.

These are impressive statistics. But what is the deeper meaning of the piles of enemy supplies and the rubble of enemy installations?

We have eliminated an immediate threat to our forces and to the security of South Vietnam -- and produced the prospect of fewer American casualties in the future.

We have inflicted extensive casualties and very heavy losses in material on the enemy -- losses which can now be replaced only from the North during a monsoon season - -

We have ended the concept of Cambodian sanctuaries - -

We have dislocated supply lines and disrupted Hanoi's strategy in the Saigon area and the Mekong Delta.

We have effectively cut off the enemy from resupply by the sea.

We have, for the time being, separated the Communist main force units -- regular troops organized in formal units similar to conventional armies -- from the guerrillas in the southern part of Vietnam. This should provide a boost to pacification efforts.

We have guaranteed the continuance of our troop withdrawal program.

We have bought time for the South Vietnamese to strengthen themselves against the enemy.

We have witnessed visible proof of the success of Vietnamization as the South Vietnamese performed with skill and valor and competence far beyond the expectation of our commanders or American advisers.

These then are the major accomplishments of the operations against the Cambodian base areas. Americans can take pride in the leadership of General Abrams and in the competence and dedication of our forces.⁵

THE MEDIA'S STORY

The media sample has been examined to determine what information was provided the public in relation to the questions: Was the Cambodian operation necessary to accomplish the stated objectives? and Was the operation successful in accomplishment of these objectives? Where appropriate conflicts in opinions and or position within the media and between the media and government sources are pointed out. The objective of the examination is to determine the impact which media presentation and interpretation of events had on public attitudes and answers to the above questions.

Newspaper Treatment

Newspaper portrayal of the Cambodian operation varied from publication to publication. This was particularly true with respect to editorial position. Of the six newspapers sampled two, the New York Times and the Washington Post, were anti-administration in position; two, the Chicago Tribune and the Atlanta Journal, were pro-administration; and the remaining two, the Houston Post and Los Angeles Times, leaned towards an anti-administration stand, but not so vehemently as did the first publications mentioned.

⁵"Text of the President's Report Upon Completion of the U.S. Operation in Cambodia," New York Times, July 1, 1970, pp. 16-17.

As might be expected editorial coverage was heaviest during the first few days of the operation. The New York Times was particularly vehement and persistent in its editorial treatment of the operation as was the Washington Post. With respect to the questions of the necessity for the action and the validity of the objectives both were highly critical. On 1 May, the day after President Nixon's address announcing the Cambodian operation, the New York Times published an editorial entitled "Military Hallucination - Again." The publication's view of the credibility of the Administration and its objectives are treated in the first two paragraphs:

President Nixon's assurance in his address last night that his decision to send American troops against Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia will save lives, hasten the withdrawal of American forces and shorten the war has a familiar and wholly unconvincing ring.

This is the same kind of rhetoric Americans have heard from their leaders at every stage of this country's long, misguided plunge into the Southeast Asian morass. Time and bitter experience have exhausted the credulity of the American people and Congress. Presidential assurances can no longer be accepted in an area where actions, as Mr. Nixon's aides have observed in another context, speak louder than words.⁶

On 2 May the Washington Post in an editorial called the operation at best a "Quick-fix" if a fix at all and an action which impacts on our world wide credibility.⁷ Both publications took the position of

⁶"Military Hallucinations - Again," Editorial, New York Times, May 1, 1970, p. 34.

⁷"Quick-fix," Editorial, Washington Post, May 2, 1970, p. A12.

questioning the credibility of the Administration and thereby its contention as to the necessity for the action.

The Atlanta Journal and the Chicago Tribune on the other hand supported the President's position and approved of actions which were being taken.⁸ The Tribune of 2 May, after assessing the reasons for the operation went on to say:

There are of course, some men in Congress and some other Americans who seem passionately committed to defeat and humiliation of the United States. We believe most Americans, however, have the will and character to support whatever has to be done to protect the lives of our men in Viet Nam until they can be withdrawn without the defeat and humiliation of the United States.⁹

The Los Angeles Times featured stories and articles during the first week of May 1970 which supported, opposed, or took a wait and see attitude towards the President's position on Cambodia. One columnist whose articles appear in this publication approved of limited raids into Cambodia by South Vietnamese forces, but felt that the use of US troops was a mistake.¹⁰ Several days later the same columnist called the operation "a bold move to close out an apparently interminable war."¹¹

⁸"Nixon's Stand," Editorial, Atlanta Journal, May 1, 1970, p. 22-A.

⁹"The President Would Rather Be Right," Editorial, Chicago Tribune, May 2, 1970, p. 10.

¹⁰"An Indochinese Primer, How Best to Get Out," Los Angeles Times, May 1, 1970, p. 7, Part III.

¹¹"A Bigger but Shorter War," Los Angeles Times, May 5, 1970, p. 8, Part 6.

During the same period another writer compared the President's announcement and the operation with those of the previous administration.¹²

The implication being that of a lack of credibility. Other writers did not doubt the ability of US forces to accomplish assigned missions, nor did they doubt that the operation would compound Communist problems. They did however, imply doubt as to the long range effects and questioned whether the results would be worth the effort.^{13,14,15}

Comments contained in the Houston Post during this period were somewhat critical of the operation and one columnist wrote that the war had been expanded and extended for an indefinite period of time.¹⁶ However, in the letters to the editors column some five days after initiation of the operation, letters from readers were predominantly in favor of the President's action.¹⁷

As time wore on into the second and third week of the operation editorials concerning the action became more infrequent, though retaining initial positions. The New York Times was an exception. This publication continued to express its opposing position on the operation well into the last week of May after which the subject of Cambodia received only cursory editorial treatment.

¹²"Shadow of Tonkin," Los Angeles Times, May 1, 1970, p. 1.

¹³"Long Range Advantage of Raid May be Slight," Los Angeles Times, May 1, 1970, p. 1.

¹⁴"Nixon's Options Shrivell Away," Los Angeles Times, May 3, 1970, p. F 6.

¹⁵"Nixon's Dangerous Gambit," Los Angeles Times, May 3, 1970, p. F 6.

¹⁶"It Looks Like a Lengthy War," Houston Post, May 8, 1970, p. 2, Part 3.

¹⁷"Sound Off: Most Favor the Cambodian Thrust," Houston Post, May 5, 1970, p. 3, Part 3.

During the entire period of the action all publications in the sample featured stories based on reports from or written in Vietnam and Cambodia. As nearly as can be determined all such stories were factual as to the events which they described, that is the who, when, and where elements. When a correspondent reported that a particular unit was engaged in an action at a specific location at a given time the report was invariably correct regardless of the publication in which his article appeared. The treatment of what took place could vary widely however. The attack against Snoul Cambodia on 5 May 1970 is an excellent example. The Chicago Tribune reporter accompanying the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment reported the combat action that took place and recounted the difficulties overcome by US troops in taking the town which was being held in strength by North Vietnamese forces. He further explained that inhabitants had been forced to evacuate the town by the North Vietnamese forces prior to the action.¹⁸ The Washington Post on the other hand treated the action very nearly as a war crime by laying special and heavy emphasis on looting in the town after its capture by US troops. The lead in to the story was heavy with sarcasm:

The Battle for Snoul:
An Instant Editorial.

In cooperation with the armed forces of South Vietnam, attacks are being launched this week to clean our major enemy sanctuaries on the Cambodian - Vietnam border.

¹⁸"Yank Unit Meets 1st Heavy Resistance, Crushes Cambodian Town," Chicago Tribune, May 6, 1970, p. 16.

President Nixon in his speech
announcing the decision to
invade Cambodia.¹⁹

Needless to say that even though what the correspondent observed and reported might actually have taken place, his article did not give a full, true, or unbiased account of the action. Some two weeks after the action, the New York Times published an article in which the reporter interviewed residents who had returned. The lead sentence conveys the gist of the story:

None of the people here understand why it has
happened to them.

Apparently the reporter was equally as ignorant of the reason for no attempt was made to recount the combat action which took place. Reference to looting was however made in the closing paragraph. The reporter related an interview with an American serviceman who took part in the action:

Asked about reports that American soldiers had
looted in Snoul, he said that he had helped take
out some cases of soda and Scotch from 'a tavern'.

'I don't know what kind of Scotch it was because
the label was in Cambodian', the soldier said,
'but it wasn't bad at all'.²⁰

¹⁹"The Battle for Snoul: An Instant Editorial," Washington Post,
May 7, 1970, p. a 18.

²⁰"Ruined Cambodian Town Can't Understand Why," New York Times,
May 23, 1970, p. 23.

Newspaper coverage of the Cambodian operation was heaviest during the first week to ten days of May and front pages were filled with accounts and assessments of the action. Also during this period editorial writers for all publications gave particular attention to the operation, establishing positions which for the most part they retained throughout the entire action. With the exception of the New York Times, noted previously, the attention of most editorials was diverted to other matters after the initial burst of attention given to Cambodia. All, however, continued to report actions and events which occurred in Cambodia. As activity there became limited to searches of areas already overrun and to destruction of facilities and material which was uncovered, the sensational aspects of the action ended. From this point on reports on Cambodia were relegated to the same relative position occupied by those from Vietnam before 30 April 1970, of interest, but not of overbearing importance.

As might be expected the New York Times, after President Nixon's report upon completion of the Cambodian operation, took one final editorial shot. In part it read:

Mr. Nixon asserts that the two-month operation in the border sanctuaries, which cost 339 American lives, has inflicted heavy losses in manpower and material on the enemy; has eliminated 'an immediate threat' to allied forces; has diminished the enemy's capacity for offensive operations in southern South Vietnam, and will save American lives and assure the scheduled withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. These claims may largely be justified, although the accuracy of most of them remains to be demonstrated.²¹

²¹"Fruits of Cambodia," New York Times, July 1, 1970, p. 44.

News Magazine Treatment

The news magazines sampled did not react so vehemently as did the newspapers. Positions taken by these publications, pro and anti, were not so strongly stated as was the case with the newspapers. This may well be a reflection of the longer period of time available between the occurrence of an event and publication of the next issue of the magazine. This would play a part in avoiding over reaction as seems to be the case with regards to Cambodia.

Time and US News & World Report come closest to being termed pro-administration with respect to the Cambodian operation. US News & World Report in its 11 May issue assessed the President's 30 April announcement and the action being taken without any attempt to second guess. It further pointed out the importance of conditions in Cambodia to the prosecution of the war in Vietnam.²² At the same time it published the views, pro and con, of selected national leaders.²³ Time in its 11 May issue also reported on the President's announcement of the operation and commented extensively. In addition to the stated objectives Time took the position that the operation was necessary to prop up the Lon Nol regime. It took this position because in its view privileged sanctuaries tolerated by a neutralist government might be accepted, but a government beholden to Hanoi

²²"If Cambodia Falls to Reds," US News & World Report, May 11, 1970, pp. 15-17.

²³"GI's Into Cambodia - Americans React," US News & World Report, May 11, 1970, pp. 18-19.

which would allow the enemy free use of its border areas and coast could not be permitted.²⁴ In its treatment of the stated objectives of the operation Time approved, but went on to comment on the presentation by the President:

The move was tactically sound and represented acceptable military risks. The disturbing element was the rhetoric suggesting that it was also much more than that: a short-cut to peace and so critical that if it failed, the US alternatives were either defeat or continued wider war.²⁵

Life and Newsweek also reported on the Cambodian operation in their issues of 11 May. Newsweek gave comprehensive coverage to the President's announcement and to the aims of the operation, presenting pro's and con's in a somewhat detached manner, but closed with the following comment on the President's action:

Whether the President's purpose served the real interests of the nation - and whether his fellow citizens would support him - remained very much an open question.²⁶

Life's report was cursory, pointing out that the US has attempted to take a middle course by its operation into Cambodia. No action could lead to a Communist backed Cambodia friendly to the North Vietnamese and Vietcong, while direct aid to support the Lon Nol regime could lead

²⁴"Raising the Stakes in Indochina," Time, May 11, 1970, pp. 11-13.

²⁵"Raising the Stakes in Indochina," Time, May 11, 1970, p. 11.

²⁶"Nixon's Gamble: Operation Total Victory," Newsweek, May 11, 1970, pp. 22-28.

to a wider war. Life indicated that such a middle course may not exist.²⁷

During the remaining period all magazines continued to publish stories and comments on the Cambodian operation, each taking its own position and line of direction. All for the most part were well balanced and seemingly accurate. Subject material was diversified and Time gave special emphasis to South Vietnamese performance. In the 8 June issue an article pointed out the greatly improved morale of the South Vietnamese troops who were engaged in Cambodia. Specific emphasis was given to their performance and improved quality of leadership, but pointed out that improved as they were more was needed before they could stand alone.²⁸ Another continued this line with a highly complementary story on a South Vietnamese general commanding troops in Cambodia.²⁹

The most comprehensive treatment on the results of the operation were made by Time and Newsweek in their 6 and 13 July issues. Time's assessment of the operation indicated a belief that the objectives had been achieved at considerably less cost than anticipated. It felt however, that the results gained might well be a short run military advantage with the ultimate outcome still unseen and in the future. The assessment closed on this note:

²⁷"Cambodia: The Perils of Moving In," Life, May 8, 1970, pp. 36-37.

²⁸"Cambodia: A Cocky New ARVN," Time, June 8, 1970, p. 30.

²⁹"The Patton of the Parrot's Beak," Time, June 8, 1970, p. 35.

Still, by demonstrating to the President the fragility of American public opinion about the war and the deep weariness of the U.S. with any course that does not lead troops home, the invasion of Cambodia may well, by limiting Nixon's options, ultimately shorten the war. That, of course, was the President's aim in deciding to go into Cambodia in the first place. It is just that it may be working out in ways that he did not expect and would not have chosen.³⁰

Newsweek in its assessment commented that the operation raised the question of the President's sincerity of intention to withdraw from Vietnam. If this was the case then the operation would have failed. Further assessment of the operation was given in two articles of opposing views. That written by Arnaud de Borchgrave called the operation a failure. His contention being that: the bulk of enemy units and supplies were withdrawn before the operation; it was a diplomatic failure which strengthened China's position and required shoring up of the Lon Nol regime; South Vietnamese forces were now over extended; and finally North Vietnamese and Vietcong units were already moving back into the area.³¹ The positive view was expressed by Maynard Parker. In his assessment of the operation he indicated the accomplishments as: the best US military situation since 1965; the North Vietnamese and Vietcong have suffered a heavy blow in loss of men and material; and finally, seaborne resupply routes have been cut off. All considered he believed the operation to be at least a short range military success.³²

³⁰"The Cambodian Venture: An Assessment," Time, July 6, 1970, pp. 16-17.

³¹"A View from Phnom Penh," Newsweek, July 13, 1970, pp. 23-24

³²"A View from Saigon," Newsweek, July 13, 1970, pp. 24 & 29.

Television Treatment

Coverage of the Cambodian operation by television began with the major networks evening news broadcasts. They immediately began to place heavy emphasis on their interpretation of the President's announced objectives for the operation. This tendency is evident in the

Huntley-Brinkley Report of NBC:

Chet Huntley: The allied attack in Cambodia by 8,000 American and 12,000 South Vietnamese drove forward today encountering little opposition. Its objective to trap, if it could, thousands of North Vietnamese and Vietcong in the eastern part of the country. Or at least to destroy their bases and supplies.³³

As is evident from the quote this newscaster placed emphasis on the destruction of enemy forces as the primary objective of the operation. The destruction of facilities and supplies was indicated to be a secondary and less desired result. This view was held generally by the television networks through the initial phase of the operation and was contrary to the position taken by the Administration. Officials of the government were given the opportunity to appear on various television networks and immediately began to clarify the objectives which had been established.^{34,35} Secretary Laird in a clip shown on 4 May stated the objectives as:

Well the mission in Cambodia as far as the sanctuaries are concerned is primarily aimed to destroy the facilities.

³³"Huntley-Brinkley Report," NBC-TV, 6:30 pm, May 1, 1970.

³⁴"Face the Nation," CBS-TV, 12:30 pm, May 3, 1970.

³⁵"Huntley-Brinkley Report," NBC-TV, 6:30 pm, May 4, 1970.

* * * * *

The headquarters as such, of course, is a moving headquarters. Our mission is to destroy the facilities, and we have already destroyed in a very substantial way over 400 of these bunkers - underground facilities.³⁵

The networks persisted in their contention as to the objectives well into May when a shift was noted. This shift, at least in the case of CBS, came in a rather backhanded way. On 9 May on the CBS-TV evening news Roger Mudd reported:

The Nixon Administration acknowledged the goal of the US Cambodian operation has shifted - shifted from the capture of the Communist headquarters to the capture of enemy supplies.

One reason for this shift was suggested by Vice President Agnew when he said, 'we don't know where the headquarters is, at any given time'.³⁶

This report would lead the listener to believe that a change was made only after the "initial" objective had become impossible of achievement. This was not the case however, as had been explained by Vice President Agnew and Secretary Laird on 2, 3, and 4 May the objectives were facilities and supplies, not people.^{2,34,35}

Another area wherein television networks placed heavy emphasis was in the interview of US troops and obtaining their reaction to entering Cambodia. CBS and NBC in particular reported the reluctance of troops to enter Cambodia. NBC reported what it termed a near revolt

³⁶"CBS Evening News," CBS-TV, 6:30 pm, May 9, 1970.

of troops who had been ordered into the operation and recounted the protests of several individuals.³⁷ Gary Shepard reporting for CBS also conducted the same type interview and reported the same situation. Reasons for the reluctance given by Shepard were low morale, scared, no supplies, no information, and just don't want to go. He went on to point out that all moved out on order.³⁸ In contrast to these reports George Watson and Dave Bell reporting for ABC at a somewhat later date, found an entirely different attitude. Watson reported, that based on interviews, most troops agreed that the move into Cambodia was proper and necessary. He added that he found lots of normal griping.³⁹ Bell found the same to be true with the troops he interviewed.⁴⁰

As with the newspapers, television reporting of the Cambodian operation tapered off after the initial burst of attention. As other events seemingly became more news worthy and the operation became more routine the TV networks also relegated news of the Cambodian operation to a position like that of the Vietnam war before 30 April 1970, of interest, but not of overbearing importance.

³⁷"Huntley-Brinkley Report," NBC-TV, 6:30 pm, May 5, 1970.

³⁸"CBS Evening News," CBS-TV, 7:00 pm, May 5, 1970.

³⁹"ABC Evening News," ABC-TV, 6:00 pm, May 14, 1970.

⁴⁰"ABC Evening News," ABC-TV, 6:00 pm, May 16, 1970.

CHAPTER V

AN ANALYSIS

DISCUSSION

By the early spring of 1970 the objectives of the United States with regard to the Vietnam war had clearly changed. No longer was a clear military victory desired or to be pursued by this nation. This shift in objective was clearly the result of the changed attitude of the American public. Though divided as to the rate the public was overwhelmingly in favor of withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam and disengagement from the war.¹ Any action which could be perceived by the public as deviating from this path would cause an immediate reaction. Since, in the public view, disengagement of US forces from Vietnam is the principal goal of this nation with respect to the war, answers to the questions: Was the Cambodian operation necessary to accomplish stated objectives?; and, Was the operation successful in accomplishment of these objectives?, are dependent on their attitudes and beliefs.

As to the first question; Was the Cambodian operation necessary to accomplish stated objectives?; press and official views were frequently in conflict. The Administration on its part explained that

¹"Even Split Found on War - Gallup Says About Half Now Favor Early Withdrawal," New York Times, March 15, 1970, p. 6.

the overall of the operation was the continued withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam. It pointed out that conditions in Cambodia, if allowed to run their course, would threaten US troops in Vietnam and would thereby seriously slow or halt further withdrawals. It was explicit in its definition of the limits placed on the operation and in its explanation of the immediate military objectives which it hoped to achieve. It was careful to avoid any inference that the operation was in any way designed or intended to support the Cambodian regime of Lon Nol and consequently an expansion of the war.

Segments of the news media immediately attacked the position of the government principally in the area of credibility, both of the overall purpose of the operation and the limits and immediate objectives stated, they viewed the action as an expansion of the war which led the nation into deeper involvement in a larger area. The story which they conveyed to the public, particularly in editorial comments, was one of a shift in the policy of disengagement to one which sought a military solution, and which in their opinion was impossible of attainment. Television newscasters in particular questioned the immediate objectives stated by the Administration and in their presentations to the public provided their own interpretations. Their initial contention that the objective was the capture or destruction of COSVN headquarters personnel was clearly contrary to the objectives stated by the government.

With regard to the second question; Was the operation successful in accomplishment of these objectives?; press and official views were

in partial agreement. There was no question on the part of any segment of the press as to the fact that significant quantities of supplies and extensive base areas had been destroyed. Nor was there widespread disagreement with the official position that the Communist forces had suffered a heavy blow to their ability to conduct extensive combat operations in southern South Vietnam. The disparity in views of the achievements occurred with respect to ultimate advantages gained. The Administration's position was that the operation had removed the threat to US troops and by doing so had insured the continuation of troop withdrawal and disengagement from Vietnam. The media on the other hand took a more skeptical view of the outcome, contending that the truth of the matter lay in the future.

Answers to the previous questions lie not in the statements made or the positions taken by press and government, but in the attitude of the American public. The preceding discussions have been made with the intention of showing the information presented by government and news media which tend to influence this attitude. No direct method for measuring the degree of influence exerted on public attitudes with respect to these questions is available. However, if one assumes that answers will be reflected in the public's view of the individual responsible and the way he performs his duties, a conclusion can be reached. In the case of the Cambodian operation the responsible party, in the view of the public, was the President of the United States. Surveys conducted by the American

Institute of Public Opinion before, during and after the Cambodian operation with regard to the President's performance should therefore reflect answers to the questions posed. The survey question asked in establishing the public's view of the President was: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nixon is handling his job as President?" Responses given in late April 1970 before the operation indicated a rate of approval amounting to 56%. In the first survey run after initiation of the Cambodian operation this rate was found to be 57%, not a significant increase, but one which indicated majority approval.² As the operation continued the rate of approval continued to climb, 59% in late May,³ and in July, shortly after US troops had withdrawn from Cambodia, it reached 61%.⁴

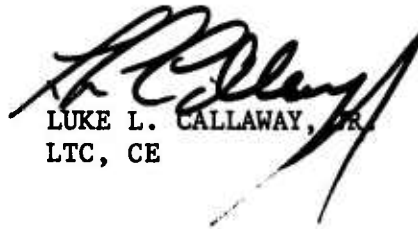
CONCLUSIONS

The above leads to the conclusion that in general the American public agreed with the position taken by the President and his Administration in the Cambodian action. It further appears that this approval is conditional upon the further and continued withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam and ultimate disengagement from active participation in the war.

²"Gallup Poll Finds 57% Support President on Cambodia Policy," New York Times, May 10, 1970.

³"Nixon Popularity Increases in Poll," New York Times, July 7, 1970.

⁴"Nixon Popularity Up in Gallup Poll," New York Times, October 18, 1970.



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