Philippe Devillers

Cambodia, Laos and the Vietnam War

By 1970 the NLF and Hanoi were ready to fight a protracted war—until the Americans were ready to accept the full independence of Vietnam—which meant that they had to give up their military offensive and shift their activity from the countryside to the cities. This meant that the war was maintained at three levels: militarily at a low level; politically, winning the right-wing, centre and religious people of the cities by propaganda to the idea that the Americans were enemies who wished to destroy Vietnam; and diplomatically, winning recognition of the Provisional Revolutionary Government by China and the Soviet Union and obtaining their backing throughout the world. The Americans understood it as a directive to proceed to a brush-war or small-unit strategy, but in fact the new policy was the result of a compromise between the pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese wings in Hanoi not to proceed to protracted war but to wait.

Nixon, to placate American public opinion, was obliged to announce the proposed withdrawal of American troops. Thieu and Ky realised that when the American Army left, and it would probably leave fairly quickly, they would be left with a demoralised army, a demoralised population and with the NLF winning the cities. So they asked the American troops to remain until the end of 1971 at least. The American generals therefore said that they would have to remain in their bases until at least 1971 and probably even until 1972. They relied on the Vietnamisation programme. The object of this is by killing about 35,000 people in search and destroy missions to smash the infrastructure of the NLF and thus the Vietcong. The strategy of the military is to completely isolate North from South Vietnam by chemical defoliation, saturation bombing, to bomb Laos and the Ho Chi Minh trail so that front line cadres cannot be reinforced and to withdraw from Vietnam as slowly as possible.

However, Washington, for political reasons, wanted them to withdraw from Vietnam as quickly as possible. At the beginning of 1970 the idea was that they could not withdraw if they did not first mop up the Cambodian sanctuary from which supplies and propaganda were coming. So they decided both to mop up Cambodia

Philippe Devillers is a French political scientist and acknowledged expert on Indochina, who was a visitor to the National Anti-War Conference held in Sydney in February. This article is the second part of a talk he gave at the Politics Department of Monash University. (The first part appeared in ALR No. 30).
and boost the Vietnamese army's morale by giving them the job. Apparently, and I have this from a good source, this decision came as a complete surprise to the State Department and the CIA in the United States. It was entirely the decision of the military command and CIA in Saigon and the Saigonese.

The Cambodian affair was created after a bourgeois revolt against Sihanouk which had specifically Cambodian causes. The notion was to make Cambodia a really neutral country which would intercept North Vietnamese supplies and ally with South Vietnam, thus making it a pro-South Vietnamese neutrality. But when Lon Nol conducted the coup he was immediately isolated and the pro-North Vietnamese and pro-Sihanouk party struck back. The Americans had to come in to save Lon Nol. This created a completely distinct operation in Indochina. The Vietnamisation program had its own timing but now the Americans and the Vietnamese are committed to keeping the Lon Nol regime in power.

The Cambodian operation has become the major one in Indochina. Because of this the American position at the Paris peace talks has been since early 1970: either the NLF and Hanoi recognise the Saigon government and talk with it and agree to a mutual withdrawal, in which case the Americans would endeavour to bring about peace; or, the NLF and Hanoi refuse these terms and the Americans proceed to withdraw at their own pace depending on the effectiveness of Vietnamisation, in which case they would do nothing to secure peace and ultimately the NLF would have to come to terms with Thieu and Ky. The Cambodian affair has now become a mode of bringing pressure on the other side to recognise the Thieu and Ky government which is supported by Lon Nol.

I will now turn to the military situation. The Laotian situation is not linked to that of South Vietnam. There is no prospect of any great battle or great confrontation in South Vietnam for months and years to come. The South Vietnamese army occupies the country by compromise with the local people. The peasants want to be left alone. The NLF has changed the character of the struggle to a political one and there will only be a political struggle for years to come. So the military affair is Cambodia which becomes a gigantic new sanctuary for a new peoples army, the People's Army of Cambodia. The main interest of China and Vietnam now is to build this army up against Lon Nol. The Ho Chi Minh trail is being used to equip this Peoples Army, and already three-quarters of the territory of Cambodia is controlled by it. They follow the Sihanouk government in exile in Peking. If the Americans do not intercept the Ho Chi Minh trail which is supplying Cambodia and Laos they
will face a new communist state in Cambodia very soon, because the People's Committees and People's Army are controlled by the communists and their allies. This is why they have extended the war: to keep the whole of Indochina safe for them.

On the other hand, a withdrawal of American troops has to take place because Nixon has to face a presidential election in 1972 and if he has not withdrawn all combat troops by the time the convention is held in July 1972 he will be in a very shaky political position and may not win the election at all. He has either to win the war or withdraw by the end of 1972. The North Vietnamese must be forced to the table by that date. In the meantime he has to continue to say that Vietnamisation is proceeding well and to withdraw troops without losing the war. He will, therefore, intensify the operation in Laos and Cambodia in order to cut the trail. Last May I heard it said in Washington that if "these guys" don't understand there are other means of making them understand. We cannot preclude a resumption of the bombing above the MacNamara line and the possibility that tactical nuclear weapons will be used. The Americans say that they will bomb North Vietnam if there is any response to the intervention in Laos. It also appears that the American military command will resist the withdrawal on the grounds that they have to extend the war.

The other side have now proposed a limited cease-fire between themselves and the Americans, Australians and other allies provided that a firm date for withdrawal is fixed. If a date is set, even 1981, then there will be an immediate cease-fire and an exchange of prisoners. It is to cloud this that Nixon has started the emotional campaign about the treatment of American prisoners. Even had he set a remote date for withdrawal all prisoners would have been returned.

So now the Americans and the Saigon government have on the table at Paris precise demands for a political and military settlement and the question is why the Americans won't talk about these proposals. There is only one explanation: They are not at all sure that the Vietnamisation process is going well. They wish to keep their troops there as long as the Vietnamisation programme is unsuccessful. There is also the consideration of the political and domestic situation in the United States. If Nixon were re-elected in 1972 he would continue to support the regime but if not then he could blame the Democrats for the disaster of Indochina and the failure of Vietnamisation if he can hold out until then. So the proposal of the other side for a cease-fire is ignored to gain time until 1972 and to win the war. However, the other side have also realised that he must gain time and are acting accordingly.