58. Rationale for the Invasion of Cambodia (April 30, 1970)*

By President Richard M. Nixon

On March 18, 1970, while Prince Norodom Sihanouk was out of the country, General Lon Nol and other anti-communist officials staged a coup that placed Lon Nol at the head of the Cambodian government, as he announced on March 20. Sihanouk had attempted to walk the fine line of neutrality, which was eroded when the Lon Nol military government launched an all-out campaign to destroy any opposition. When Cambodian rebel forces retaliated with ambushes of troops and support for Sihanouk, government forces massacred thousands of ethnic Vietnamese citizens of Cambodia. With the battle between the Lon Nol government and communist forces intensifying, President Nixon, in the April 30 speech excerpted below, announced the invasion of Cambodia.

The United States was already attacking Cambodia by air; but this remained unacknowledged in this speech. The Nixon Administration had launched an intensive “secret” bombing campaign, Operation Menu, against Cambodia in March 1969, and there had been some bombing even earlier. On August 2, 1966, while six Americans were in Cambodia to verify reports of previous US bombing raids, they witnessed another attack on a village by US F-105 fighter bombers.

Although the “secret” bombing was not officially exposed until 1973, it was nevertheless covered in sporadic reports. On May 9, 1969, a “leak” in The New York Times enraged Nixon and Kissinger. The London Times also blew the whistle after a reporter saw B-52s flying while on a commercial flight. The Pentagon confirmed on June 22, 1970, that US raids were going deep into Cambodia, but Pentagon spokesman Jerry Friedheim.


1. For historical background and analysis, see Marvin and Susan Getelman, Lawrence and Carol Kaplan, eds., Conflict in Indochina: A Reader on the Widening War in Laos and Cambodia (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1970).

2. For an informative view of the war in Cambodia from that time until the end, see William Shawcross, Shattered: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia (New York: Pocket Books, 1979).

3. San Francisco Chronicle, August 4, 1966. The Americans were part of “Americans Want to Know” and included author Kay Boyle and Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Throughout the war in Indochina, US private citizens went to the front lines and brought back firsthand information.


5. San Francisco Chronicle, June 23, 1970. Friedheim continued to provide this kind of double and sometimes triple cover-up story for years. On July 19, 1973, for example, he acknowledged providing the Senate Armed Services Committee with a false report the previous month that covered up the...
said they had begun a week earlier. Other reports said they started April 30, at the time of the invasion. The Cooper-Church Amendment, which on December 29, 1969, had banned ground troops in Laos and Thailand, was extended a year later to include Cambodia but did not cover air attacks.

The extent of opposition to the invasion had an immediate effect. On May 8, the day before a huge antiwar demonstration in Washington and four days after the Kent State killings, Nixon announced that most US troops would be pulled out of Cambodia by mid-June and that all would be out by July 1. On June 3, 1970, he said the “only remaining American activity in Cambodia after July 1 will be air missions to interdict the movement of enemy troops and materiel where I find it is necessary to protect the lives and security of our men in South Vietnam.” But clandestine ground-troop operations continued (Reading 57, footnote 13), and after all US troops had been brought home from Vietnam (March 1973), Cambodia was bombed with an intensity it had not experienced before. The San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle reported on April 8, 1973, that attacks by US jet fighter bombers based in Thailand averaged at least 120 strikes a day, and attacks by B-52s (which can carry up to 60,000 pounds of bombs) totaled about 50 a day. On one day of that week, 120 B-52 sorties were flown. The amount of damage inflicted can be measured by what happened on August 6, 1973, when either a single B-52 (according to the Pentagon) or about four B-52s (according to the villagers) “mistakenly” bombed Neak Luong, a “friendly” (rather than an “enemy”) village, killing and wounding hundreds of people in a pre-dawn raid.

On July 1, 1973, Congress passed a law forbidding the use of any funds for combat in, over, or off the shores of Cambodia, Laos, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam as of August 15, 1973. The bombing continued right up to the deadline. Less than two years later, on April 16, 1975, the Khmer Rouge rebels took Phnom Penh.

Good evening my fellow Americans:

Ten days ago, in my report to the Nation on Vietnam, I announced a decision to withdraw an additional 150,000 Americans from Vietnam over the next year. I said then that I was making that decision despite our concern over increased enemy activity in Laos, in Cambodia, and in South Vietnam.

At that time, I warned that if I concluded that increased enemy activity in any of these areas endangered the lives of Americans remaining in Vietnam, I would not hesitate to take strong and effective measures to deal with that situation.

Despite that warning, North Vietnam has increased its military aggression in all these areas, and particularly in Cambodia.

After full consultation with the National Security Council, Ambassador Bunker, General Abrams, and my other advisers, I have concluded that the actions of the enemy in the last 10 days clearly endanger the lives of Americans who are in Vietnam now and would constitute an unacceptable risk to those who will be there after withdrawal of another 150,000.

To protect our men who are in Vietnam and to guarantee the continued success of our withdrawal and Vietnamization programs, I have concluded that the time has come for action.

Tonight, I shall describe the actions of the enemy, the actions I have ordered to deal with that situation, and the reasons for my decision.

Cambodia, a small country of 7 million people, has been a neutral nation since the Geneva agreement of 1954—an agreement, incidentally, which was signed by the Government of North Vietnam.

American policy since then has been to scrupulously respect the neutrality of the Cambodian people. We have maintained a skeleton diplomatic mission of fewer than 15 in Cambodia’s capital, and that only since last August. For the previous 4 years, from 1965 to 1969, we did not have any diplomatic mission whatever in Cambodia. And for the past 5 years, we have provided no military assistance whatever and no economic assistance to Cambodia.

North Vietnam, however, has not respected that neutrality.

For the past 5 years—as indicated on this map that you see here—North Vietnam has occupied military sanctuaries all along the Cambodian frontier with South Vietnam. Some of these extend up to 20 miles into Cambodia. . . .

For 5 years, neither the United States nor South Vietnam has moved against these enemy sanctuaries because we did not wish to violate the territory of a neutral nation. Even after the Vietnamese Communists began to expand these sanctuaries 4 weeks ago, we counseled patience to our South Vietnamese allies and imposed restraints on our own commanders. . . .

North Vietnam in the last 2 weeks has stripped away all pretense of respecting the sovereignty or the neutrality of Cambodia. Thousands of their soldiers are invading the country from the sanctuaries; they are encircling the capital of Phnom Penh. Coming from these sanctuaries, as you see here, they have moved into Cambodia and are encircling the capital. . . .

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

A major responsibility for the ground operations is being assumed by South Vietnamese forces. . . .

There is one area, however, immediately above Parrot’s Beak, where I have concluded that a combined American and South Vietnamese operation is necessary.
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 Vietcong for 5 years in blatant violation of Cambodia's neutrality.\footnote{The Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), headquarters for the guerrilla war in South Vietnam, was never found, not in Cambodia or anywhere else. It was also used as a reason for bombing Cambodia. Many lives were lost in the search for COSVN. Particularly interesting is Seymour Hersh's account of a Green Beret mission sent to capture COSVN. When the Green Berets were ordered to try a second time after what happened the first time, they refused to go (The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House [New York: Summit Books, 1981], pp. 65-64).—eds.}

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.\footnote{In fact, the American troops encountered and destroyed Cambodian villages. William Shawcross (Sideshow, pp. 150-151) describes this destruction, including the killing of civilians. When the officer in charge was asked why he had to destroy a village, he replied, “We had no choice. We had to take it. This was a hub of North Vietnamese activity.”—eds.}

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

We take this action not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam and winning the just peace we all desire. We have made—we will continue to make every possible effort to end this war through negotiation at the conference table rather than through more fighting on the battlefield.

Let us look again at the record. We have stopped the bombing of North Vietnam. We have cut air operations by over 20 percent. We have announced withdrawal of over 50,000 of our men. We have offered to withdraw all of our men if they will withdraw theirs. We have offered to negotiate all issues with only one condition—and that is the future of South Vietnam be determined not by North Vietnam, and not by the United States, but by the people of South Vietnam themselves. …

The action that I have announced tonight puts the leaders of North Vietnam on notice that we will be patient in working for peace; we will be conciliatory at the conference table, but we will not be humiliated. We will not be defeated. We will not allow American men by the thousands to be killed by an enemy from privileged sanctuaries.

The time came long ago to end this war through peaceful negotiations. We stand ready for those negotiations. …

But if the enemy response to our most conciliatory offers for peaceful negotiation continues to be to increase its attacks and humiliate and defeat us, we shall react accordingly.

My fellow Americans, we live in an age of anarchy, both abroad and at home. We see mindless attacks on all the great institutions which have been created by free civilizations in the last 500 years. Even here in the United States, great universities are being systematically destroyed. …

If, when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.

It is not our power but our will and character that is being tested tonight. …

I have rejected all political considerations in making this decision.

Whether my party gains in November is nothing compared to the lives of 400,000 brave Americans fighting for our country and for the cause of peace and freedom in Vietnam. Whether I may be a one-term President is insignificant compared to whether by our failure to act in this crisis the United States proves itself to be unworthy to lead the forces of freedom in this critical period in world history. I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and to see this Nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history. …

It is customary to conclude a speech from the White House by asking support for the President of the United States. Tonight, I depart from that precedent. What I ask is far more important. I ask for your support for our brave men fighting tonight halfway around the world—not for territory—not for glory—but so that their younger brothers and their sons and your sons can have a chance to grow up in a world of peace and freedom and justice.

Thank you and good night.

59. Vietnam Veterans Against the War: Testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee (April 22, 1971)*

By John Kerry

US troops were told during training that they were being sent to “saw” the South Vietnamese from communists. As soon as they got involved in South Vietnam, many began to question what they were doing. A widely published report (Associated Press) on September 30, 1965, quoted a letter from a Wichita, Kansas, soldier: “There are so many Cong here that in three

*From the Congressional Record, May 3, 1971. The statement was made April 22, 1971, during the week of antiwar protests by Vietnam Veterans Against the War.