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**The Cambodian Incursion: Tactical and Operational Success and its Effects on  
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## *Table of Contents*

	<i>Page</i>
Disclaimer.....	i
Preface.....	ii
Executive Summary.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Background-Diplomatic Situation.....	2
Background-Military Situation.....	5
Prelude to Incursion-Internal Cambodian Unrest.....	7
Incursion-The Plan.....	8
Tactical and Operational Success.....	11
Unintended Consequences-Vietnamization.....	14
Conclusion.....	18
Appendices.....	21
Notes.....	32
Bibliography.....	37

## Preface

After conducting initial research on the Cambodian incursion, I intended to write on how it was a tactical and operational success, but a strategic failure. I initially believed that the strategic failures occurred on the home front, that the incursion damaged Vietnamization and that it did not provide any advantage at the negotiation table in Paris. I quickly realized that I needed to narrow the scope of this paper to one of the items. I chose to focus on the Cambodian Incursion and its effect on Vietnamization. My thesis is a direct argument against the central idea of US Air Force Major Boenisch's paper titled The Cambodian Incursion: A Hard Line for Change. He wrote that the primary objective of the Cambodian incursion was to prove that Vietnamization was working and going to succeed. Major Boenisch presented a valid argument, but I believe that he misjudged the strategic success of the United States Army and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) during the Cambodian Incursion. I will prove in this paper that the ARVN's success during the Cambodian incursion led United States military and civilian leaders to assume that the ARVN was much better prepared to take on the North Vietnamese Army than it actually was.

I would like to thank Dr. Doug Streusand for his assistance, patience and guidance while mentoring me during this effort. I broke my wrist before the first draft was due and he allowed me to work through my first draft crippled and ineffective. I would also like to extend my sincerest appreciation to my family while working on this paper, especially to my son, Jackson, who greatly assisted me in transcribing my notes. My wife, Ozelle and youngest son Graham, were patient and understanding during the entire process. Thank you all.

## Executive Summary

**Title:** The Cambodian Incursion: Tactical and Operational Success and its Effects on Vietnamization

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**Thesis:** The United States incursion into Cambodia in 1970 was a tactical and operational success, but these successes led MACV and Nixon administration officials to draw false conclusions in regards to the performance and capabilities of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). United States (US) and South Vietnamese Forces achieved tactical success during cross border missions. The incursion set the North Vietnamese forces back at least a year by denying them much needed war materiel. MACV and Nixon administration officials equated this success to a competent and capable ARVN, which in the summer of 1970 was not the case. These false conclusions led to the failure of Vietnamization.

**Discussion:** On 30 April 1970, President Nixon announced that United States and ARVN forces would invade Cambodia in order to destroy known North Vietnamese Army (NVA) sanctuaries across the border. Ulterior motives included relieving pressure on the newly formed Lon Nol Cambodian government and its military forces, destroying the Central Office South Vietnam (COSVN) headquarters (North Vietnam's representatives controlling Viet Cong operations), and buying time for Vietnamization to succeed. If the Government of South Vietnam could not fight its own fight, the United States could not continue its troop withdrawals.

The initial US and ARVN actions produced tactical and operational successes. The ARVN were successful because of the amount of US air and artillery support they received. They also used their best troops, faced limited enemy resistance, and deployed formations below the division level. US leaders translated this ARVN success to mean that they were prepared and capable of standing alone against the NVA and Viet Cong. Over inflated after action reports and leader assessments would lead to overconfidence in ARVN leadership. No one was willing to admit that the ARVN were not at the level US leaders had hoped. ARVN forces invaded Laos alone a year later and failed to achieve their objectives. They were not prepared to execute the war against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong without US support.

**Conclusion:** The gross overestimation of ARVN capabilities during the Cambodian Incursion by US military and civilian leaders would lead to the ultimate failure of Vietnamization. MACV and Nixon administration officials would force the ARVN to take on exceedingly more difficult missions and roles, which they were not yet prepared to execute. Had these US leaders seen the results of the Cambodian incursion as a "good start" vice a proof of principle, Vietnamization may have proceeded at a controlled, manageable pace, ending in success. The failures of Vietnamization provide us with many lessons that we can apply to our process of raising, training, and equipping the Iraqi Army today. The greatest lesson we can apply is to not throw the Iraqi army into the breach before they are ready.

## INTRODUCTION

America's involvement in Vietnam began in earnest in the 1960s and continued until 1975. The United States (US) involvement cost billions of dollars and the lives of over 58,000 US service members. A sometimes overlooked but important part of the Vietnam War was the Cambodian Incursion, which occurred in 1970. This paper will examine how the tactical and operational success of the combined incursion led some US and Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) leaders to misjudge the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) performance and capabilities.

In order to understand the results of the Cambodian incursion, it is necessary to understand the reasons why the US chose to invade. This paper will begin by discussing the events that lead up to the invasion from March 1969 until April 1970. It will cover the incursion, focusing on the plan and the tactical and operational successes. It is important for the reader to understand how and why the ARVN were successful before he can understand how and why leaders made the wrong conclusions regarding ARVN performance and capabilities. The paper will conclude with the author's analysis of the Cambodian incursion and discuss takeaways for future military operations.

The United States incursion into Cambodia in 1970 was a tactical and operational success, but these successes led MACV and Nixon administration officials to draw false conclusions in regards to the performance and capabilities of the ARVN. United States and South Vietnamese Forces achieved tactical success during cross border missions. The incursion set the North Vietnamese forces back at least a year by denying them much needed war materiel. MACV and Nixon administration officials equated this success to a competent and capable

ARVN, which in the summer of 1970 was not the case. These false conclusions led to the failure of Vietnamization.

On April 30, 1970, President Richard Nixon announced to the nation that United States and South Vietnamese military forces would enter Cambodia. The objectives were the elimination of the cross border sanctuaries and the North Vietnam and Viet Cong soldiers defending and using these depots and safe havens.<sup>1</sup> The US military involvement would last nearly two months and would include units from the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment. The ARVN would use over 16,000 soldiers and would continue operations in Cambodia for several months.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will discuss the Cambodian incursion and its connection to the failure of Vietnamization. This failure proved costly to the South Vietnamese and hastened the North Vietnamese's ultimate victory, but provided important lessons for our development of the Iraqi Army today.

#### BACKGROUND-DIPLOMATIC SITUATION

When Richard Nixon became President on 20 January 1969, he inherited what had been Lyndon Johnson's war. One of his campaign promises was to end American involvement in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> Although he did not have a clearly outlined plan to do so, he did have ideas that included taking a page from President Eisenhower's Korean War strategy. That approach included fighting and negotiating at the same time, with each side trying to improve its lot prior to ending hostilities. President Nixon selected Henry Kissinger as his National Security Advisor just prior to moving into the White House.<sup>4</sup> In January 1969, Foreign Affairs magazine

published Kissinger's plans for ending the Vietnam War. Kissinger had written these prior to joining Nixon's team. The plans included ending the attrition-based warfare that General Westmorland had used and minimizing the results of the 1968 Communist Tet offensive. Additionally, Kissinger favored negotiations that had separate military and political tracks. Both Nixon and Kissinger desired an honorable end to the US involvement in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

With Henry Kissinger and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, President Nixon decided upon two lines of operation that would help extricate the US from Vietnam. Nixon had to ensure that South Vietnam had the opportunity to stand on its own (i.e. Vietnamization) and that the US held enough face cards at the negotiation table to continue successful talks in Paris.<sup>6</sup> In his book, No More Vietnams, President Nixon referred to a five-point strategy to ending the Vietnam War. The five points were Vietnamization, Pacification, Diplomatic Isolation, Peace Negotiations, and Gradual Withdrawals. It is important for the reader to understand how Vietnamization fit into President Nixon's overall strategy and to understand that all five points were connected.

Vietnamization was the process of turning over the fight in Vietnam to the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces. This included organizing, training, and equipping the army. Melvin Laird, Secretary of Defense, coined the term Vietnamization. Although the strategy was connected, Vietnamization had to succeed in order for the US to withdraw. Pacification involved subduing the countryside. The Nixon Administration attempted to accomplish this by securing the local villages, reinstating local politics and getting the villagers involved with this process. An additional goal of pacification was to provide economic opportunities to the villagers. ARVN forces would assist US forces in this process.

Diplomatic Isolation was the process that the Nixon Administration chose to involve the Soviet Union and China in the negotiation process. Nixon felt that this tactic would force Hanoi into accepting a negotiated settlement much quicker than if the two communist powers still openly supported the North Vietnamese. Peace negotiations were a Nixon administration goal of ending the war without a decisive victory. Nixon understood that in order to succeed at the negotiation table in Paris, he needed decisive military victories to use as a bargaining chip. He also chose to keep the peace talks in the public eye in order to convince the American public that he was considering all options in ending the war, not just military options.

Gradual withdrawals would continue from 1970 throughout the Nixon Presidency. Nixon knew that the American people must see physical evidence that the war was ending. He also believed that this strategy would provide impetus for the South Vietnamese government and military to assume a more active role in the defense of its nation.<sup>7</sup>

The impetus behind Vietnamization was to position the government of South Vietnam so that it could successfully execute the war against North Vietnam and defend its borders after the full withdrawal of US forces. General Creighton Abrams replaced General Westmorland as the MACV Commander in late 1968. President Johnson made the change because of General Westmorland's prosecution of the war, perceived inappropriate use of his forces and failure to meet his and the Joint Chiefs' of Staff expectations.<sup>8</sup> In 1969, the Nixon Administration sent General Abrams new orders that included prioritizing efforts towards Vietnamization, increasing support to pacification and interdicting the enemy's logistics networks.<sup>9</sup> Pacification in the new mission statement referred to the classic counter insurgent technique that aimed to protect villages, increase local governance and to separate the insurgents from the population.<sup>10</sup>

## BACKGROUND-MILITARY SITUATION

Central Office South Vietnam (COSVN), the NVA command and control element orchestrating operations in South Vietnam, issued Directive No. 71 on January 31, 1969. This directive called for a large-scale offensive in South Vietnam. The target of this offensive was the US military forces and installations as well as critical command and control nodes. North Vietnam Army (NVA) forces comprised the bulk of the fighting elements. The attacks ranged in size from one-man sappers to battalion and regimental sized units. Although the US military had foreseen the attacks and defeated most vigorously, the casualties began to mount. Close to 400 soldiers died each week. President Nixon, in office for a little over a month, had no choice but to react and to do so with a heavy hand.<sup>11</sup>

General Creighton Abrams, commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), had requested approval for B-52 raids on North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia in February 1969. He based the request on intelligence sources that included a Viet Cong defectors testimony, reconnaissance photographs from over-flights and analysis by the MACV J2 section. The target of these raids was the COSVN headquarters located in Base Area 353 in Cambodia.<sup>12</sup> Nixon finally approved General Creighton Abrams' request. Operation Breakfast would last for 14 months and included over 3,630 raids. Although small units had crossed into Cambodia and Laos before, this was the first time that a President had approved large scale cross border operations into either country.<sup>13</sup> The decision to bomb Cambodia defined the administrations' conduct of the war for years to come. In other words, Nixon was not afraid to cross a border or a boundary if he believed the results would assist in ending the war.

General Abrams knew that to stop or slow the NVA/Viet Cong success, he needed to destroy their logistical sanctuaries in Cambodia. He began to shift his military forces to

strengthen the III Corps Tactical Zone (III CTZ) that encompassed Saigon. He had begun this effort in 1968 when he ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division to relocate from I CTZ along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to III CTZ. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division occupied the northern portion of III CTZ which included War Zones C and D (Appendix 1, Map 1, Distribution of Forces). The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division conducted screening operations along the Cambodian border for most of 1969 to disrupt NVA infiltration into South Vietnam.<sup>14</sup>

In response to increased NVA and Viet Cong operations in southern South Vietnam, General Abrams deployed additional US Army units into III CTZ. These included the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) and several other brigade-sized formations. These units continued Operation Toan Thang II, which had been going on since 1968. These operations included route clearance, static defense and reconnaissance operations meant to deny the NVA freedom of maneuver in III CTZ.<sup>15</sup>

During 1969, MACV continued to work alongside the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). In I CTZ, the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Division worked with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and with elements of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. These particular units conducted operations in and around the DMZ. Most of the ARVN units paired with US forces continued to support pacification programs and tried to prevent the NVA from conducting successful cross border attacks from North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (Appendix 1, Map 1, Distribution of Forces). In III CTZ, the ARVN Airborne Division conducted operations with the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division. They too operated throughout War Zones C and D. The ARVN 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division conducted operations with the US 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. As 1969 ended, the RVNAF and US forces continued to operate effectively throughout South Vietnam.<sup>16</sup>

## PRELUDE TO INCURSION-INTERNAL CAMBODIAN UNREST

The year 1970 began much the same way that 1969 had ended in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese policy continued to be prolonged war with an emphasis on operational patience. They would continue small-scale guerilla operations and try to limit their casualties. The Nixon Administration policy remained the same as well, continuing towards Vietnamization, Pacification, troop withdrawals, and negotiations.<sup>17</sup> American military strategy changed in 1970 from an emphasis on search and destroy and "body counts" to a focus on Vietnamization, reduction of casualties, US force withdrawals and combat operations. The US forces positioned along the border with Cambodia trained their counterpart ARVN units. This training included patrolling and combined arms operations.<sup>18</sup>

Growing political unrest defined the early months of 1970 for Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk tried to separate himself from the US and align his foreign policy decisions closer to China, and thus with North Vietnam. He showed tacit support for the North Vietnamese on the surface, but as the NVA expanded their operations deeper into Cambodia, the people began to turn against him. While Sihanouk was out of the country for liver treatments, Prime Minister Lon Nol seized the initiative and with the Cambodian National Assembly, voted Sihanouk from power. Lon Nol immediately struck against the North Vietnamese Communists in Cambodia, but did so in haste, and soon found his under strength army overwhelmed. By April 1970, it was clear that the US must intervene to prevent the collapse of Cambodia, but more importantly to secure their positions militarily in South Vietnam as troop withdrawals continued.<sup>19</sup>

General Abrams and his South Vietnam counterpart, General Cao Van Vien began to discuss cross border operations in mid-April. General Vien took these discussions to President Nguyen Van Thieu but they kept them secret from their Corps Commanders. By the end of

April, President Thieu ordered the Joint General Staff (JGS) to begin preparations for cross border operations (Appendix 2, ARVN Operational Guidance for Cambodian Incursion).<sup>20</sup>

Lt. General Michael S. Davidson, US II Field Force commander, and Lt. General Do Cao Tri, ARVN III Corps commander, met in April 1970 to determine both US and ARVN areas of operations. The US would operate between the II CTZ and III CTZ boundary (eastern boundary) and a point halfway down the Tay Ninh province (western boundary). The ARVN III Corps would operate from Tay Ninh province to Nghon Praoung province (Appendix 3, Map 2, III Corps Tactical Zone). The Deputy Chief of Staff for III Corps (ARVN), COL Minh, led the RVNAF planning effort. Initial objectives for the ARVN included base areas 706 and 367. MACV and the ARVN referred to this area as the Angel's Wing. III Corps (ARVN) task organized its forces into combined arms task forces that consisted of infantry, armor, airborne and ranger units.<sup>21</sup>

#### INCURSION-THE PLAN

The US 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division would operate with the ARVN airborne brigade. Elements of the ARVN airborne battalions would conduct an air assault (movement by helicopters into selected landing zones) into Cambodia and establish blocking positions north and west of planned US objectives to cut off the retreat of any NVA forces. Elements of the 11th ACR would attack across the border to link up with ARVN airborne battalions at landing zones (LZs) East and Center. The remaining ARVN airborne battalions and a battalion from the US 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division would link up vicinity the rubber plantation. A remaining ARVN armor battalion would push across the border and move cross-country to link up with the airborne

battalions as well. For this initial push, the US would employ around 6,000 soldiers and the ARVN close to 3,000. The attacks would be coordinated and sequential vice simultaneous.<sup>22</sup>

ARVN forces conducted three distinct operations during the combined incursion and named them based on the geographic areas where they took place. ARVN III Corps and US II Field Force conducted operations TOAN THANG (Total Victory). ARVN IV Corps conducted operation CUU LONG (Mekong). ARVN II Corps and US I Field Force conducted operations BINH TAY (Tame the West).<sup>23</sup> For tactical actions and successes, the paper will focus on ARVN and US actions during TOAN THANG.

ARVN forces positioned along the Cambodian border on 28 April included three task forces prepared to operate along the Angel's Wing portion of the border. Each Task Force (TF) consisted of three infantry battalions and one armor battalion. TF 225, TF 333 and TF 318 occupied these border positions prepared to assault towards the west (Appendix 4, Map 3, Initial Positions of ARVN Forces at the Angel's Wing). The objectives of these task forces were securing Route 1, neutralizing NVA base areas in Svay Ring province, clearing enemy forces and assisting Khmer (friendly Cambodian military) forces in the area. ARVN commanders positioned logistical elements forward to support cross-border operations.<sup>24</sup>

The ARVN task forces attacked across the Cambodian border on 29 April 1970, approximately 24 hours prior to US forces entering the country. ARVN TFs 225, 333 and 318 moved towards their objectives along the Angel's Wing. US aerial bombardments and surface artillery fires preceded their attacks. All three TFs maintained contact with enemy forces throughout the first few days as they drove towards their objectives. The ARVN units captured numerous enemy personnel and either sent them back to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), or guarded them until they could take them to the rear. When they encountered large caches of war

materiel, they either guarded them for future movement back to the RVN or destroyed them in place. Enemy resistance was tough for the first two to three days. The ARVN forces suffered high casualties after the initial surprise wore off and because they then had to attack and reduce heavily fortified defensive positions.

On 1 May, the ARVN resupplied TF 225 and TF 333 in preparation for future operations. TF 318 continued its push towards Svay Rieng along Route 1. This route became a main supply route for the duration of operations in Cambodia. Operation TOAN THANG 42 would continue for five more phases throughout the Cambodian incursion.<sup>25</sup>

US forces began their operations into the Fish Hook and Parrot's Beak on 1 May 1970. Elements from the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, in conjunction with an ARVN airborne brigade, conducted an envelopment of the Fish Hook (Appendix 5, Map 4, Operations vicinity Fish Hook-1 May 1970). As the helicopter-mobile forces executed the envelopment, other US armor, cavalry and infantry units moved west and south to crush the enemy forces against the anvil of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division.<sup>26</sup>

As the ARVN airborne units conducted air assaults into the Cambodian jungle, scout helicopters from the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry flew through the smoke and debris to pound the surprised NVA units beyond the border. As an ARVN airborne battalion secured LZ Center, US helicopters from the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division supported the attack with helicopter close air support (H-CAS), destroying an NVA battalion in the process. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division and their attached and supporting ARVN airborne battalions executed airmobile helicopter warfare extremely well. Once again, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division showed how excellent planning and audacious maneuvering could quickly catch the enemy off guard and destroy his ability to fight.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, elements of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (Light) attacked north and west with elements of the first and second brigades. Their mission was to destroy Communist base areas 354 and 707, and generally disrupt NVA lines of communication. The mission statement for the division read as follows, "031820ZMay-Mission: 25<sup>th</sup> Division prepares for attack to destroy/disrupt enemy command and control elements and logistical bases in Base Area 354 and 707."<sup>28</sup>

### TACTICAL AND OPERATIONAL SUCCESS

The Cambodian incursion was the most successful US/ARVN operation to date, and quantifiably the most successful ever conducted over such a long period. It is important for the reader to understand how the success of the US/ARVN actions shaped the thoughts of US leaders.

Although it is hard to quantify tactical victories, numbers of enemy killed or captured present a good idea of the overall success. LTG Tri led his III Corps (ARVN) Task Forces into Cambodia. They killed (claimed) 375 enemy to 30 ARVN killed. This equates to a 12.5 to one ratio, of which US air power accounted for 300 of the deaths or 80%. As of 3 May, US forces claimed 467 enemies killed to eight US killed, a ratio of 58 to one. In a particular contact, elements of the 11th ACR killed 52 North Vietnamese soldiers to two US killed. Another 11<sup>th</sup> ACR engagement killed 138 enemy soldiers to only 37 US soldiers wounded. Both the US and ARVN forces claimed success. Operation TOAN THANG (42, 43, 44, 45, and 46) claimed 8,686 NVA killed. These numbers are important in that they prove how reliant the ARVN was on US air support for their success.<sup>29</sup>

Although the concept of air assault operations was not new, the US and ARVN units executed the air assaults into Cambodia with near perfection. The ARVN airborne troopers embarked upon the US UH-1s at numerous pickup zones (PZs) across Vietnam. The young US pilots then assembled while in the air and moved to their designated LZs with ease. The ARVN units loaded from different PZs so they would not show their cards that such a massive air assault was underway.<sup>30</sup> Again, the ARVN were successful in their air assaults, but not capable of conducting such complex operations without US support.

Elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division's Company C, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry were the first US units to set foot in Cambodia. In honor of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division's exploits in the Ia Drang Valley in 1967, they named their target LZ in Cambodia LZ XRAY. Company B followed on the heels of Company C and transformed the LZ into a fire support base.<sup>31</sup>

After initial entry into Cambodia, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division began to expand its operations. Although convinced early on that he was conducting a raid that would last a week, Brigadier General Shoemaker, the Assistant Division Commander, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, quickly learned that the scope had changed.<sup>32</sup> On 1 May, President Nixon traveled to the Pentagon to receive an update from the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>33</sup> He noticed that the map, portraying the current US and ARVN tactical situation, highlighted six enemy sanctuaries inside Cambodia. President Nixon asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Could we take out all the sanctuaries?" The Joint Chiefs of Staff told the President that they did not want to cause a larger reaction from the press and the public, hence the decision to attack only two sanctuaries. Nixon recounted his response in his book *No More Vietnams*.

Let me be the judge as far as the political reactions are concerned. The fact is that we have already taken the political heat for this particular operation. If we can substantially reduce the threat to our forces by wiping out the rest of the sanctuaries, now is the time to do it.<sup>34</sup>

President Nixon then made the decision to destroy all the known sanctuaries. This decision would continue the tactical operations for nearly two months.<sup>35</sup>

The Cambodian incursion was a success at the operational level of war. The US Army and ARVN planners successfully tied the strategic goals of the incursion to the tactical operations necessary to produce a victory. Two of the main goals of the operation were to deny the North Vietnamese sanctuary in Cambodia and to buy time for further US withdrawals. By reducing the offensive capabilities of the NVA, the US could now focus on Vietnamization.<sup>36</sup> The incursion reduced the offensive capability of the NVA, but the perceived successes of the ARVN would ultimately hurt the Vietnamization process, as this paper will detail below.

In order for Vietnamization to have a chance, US and ARVN forces had to contain the NVA/Viet Cong offensive capability. US and ARVN forces had to prevent them from attacking into southern South Vietnam. The US had tried in vain to stop the NVA from infiltrating troops, weapons and materiel into South Vietnam. The NVA's most preferred infiltration routes were the Ho Chi Minh Trail and from the Port of Sihanoukville through Cambodia. Until the incursion, the only way US forces could slow down this infiltration was by air interdiction.<sup>37</sup> It was impossible to seal off the porous border between Cambodia and South Vietnam. In 1970, MACV's only option was to attack the NVA sanctuaries in Cambodia. By doing this, they crippled the NVA and Viet Cong for least one year and possibly longer!<sup>38</sup>

The US and ARVN forces crippled the NVA and Viet Cong offensive capability by the sheer amount of war materiel they either captured or destroyed. US forces named two of the largest caches discovered "The City" (because of its extensive size) and "Rock Island East" (after a famous Army Depot). "The City" contained nearly 1,300 individual weapons and over 700 crew served weapons. It also had 1.5 million rounds of 7.62 mm (AK-47) ammunition.

“Rock Island East” held over 329 tons of munitions (Appendix 6, Captured Equipment). Major General Roberts, Commander, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division put the success of the Cambodian incursion into perspective for his troopers. He informed them that the total amount of war materiel seized or destroyed would have outfitted two NVA divisions and that the ammunition found was more than the enemy had expended in their area of operations the previous year.<sup>39</sup>

The Cambodian incursion dealt a severe blow to the NVA and Viet Cong offensive capability in South Vietnam, particularly in the Mekong Delta region. Weekly US casualty rates fell by almost 50%, down 41 per week in the six months after the incursion.<sup>40</sup> One of the Nixon administration's publicly unspoken goals for the incursion was the destruction of COSVN. Although not destroyed, the Cambodian incursion limited COSVN's ability to command and control NVA and Vietcong operations in Cambodia and South Vietnam. The headquarters element had to remain extremely mobile to avoid capture. They therefore lacked the ability to communicate. Although the Cambodian incursion failed to destroy COSVN, the Nixon administration considered its disruption an extremely successful outcome of the operation.<sup>41</sup>

#### UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: VIETNAMIZATION

This paper will now analyze how the ARVN success during the Cambodian incursion led to the ultimate failure of Vietnamization. Not often does success lead to failure, but the successful actions of the ARVN during the Cambodian incursion did just that. Vietnamization as a policy was strictly to benefit one nation and one nation only- the United States.

Vietnamization evolved from its early birth in 1968 to the cornerstone of the US exit strategy from Vietnam. In 1969, the Nixon administration issued General Abrams a revised mission statement that discussed the conduct of the war. The administration told General Abrams to

make Vietnamization his top priority, followed by pacification and interdiction of NVA supply lines.<sup>42</sup>

The Nixon administration viewed the Cambodian incursion as an opportunity to advance the Vietnamization process, but it actually damaged it. The paper will now discuss why the perceived ARVN success achieved during the incursion hurt the Vietnamization process.

Immediately following the incursion, General Abrams remarked that the incursion had positively effected the morale of the South Vietnamese troops that participated, even going so far as to say that they would now be less dependent on US support.<sup>43</sup> He later told visiting Korean generals "...the performance of the South Vietnamese forces has really been quite extraordinary."<sup>44</sup>

General Abrams and his Deputy Commander, General Rosson continued to praise the ARVN leaders at the Corps level. The leadership problems evidently, resided in Saigon, not with the troops on the border with Cambodia.<sup>45</sup>

If tactical level leadership did not fail during the Cambodian incursion, what was the problem? This paper has already discussed the tactical and operational successes of the ARVN, but the way the Army leadership perceived these results caused damage to Vietnamization with respect to the ARVN leadership. The ARVN actions lead to an overall false sense of accomplishment and depicted great leaders at the tactical and operational level. The success did not portray and accurate picture of leaders at the Division and above level. General Tri, the III Corps (ARVN) Commander, specifically chose to use regimental and battalion level units as his maneuver forces vice the ARVN Divisional formations that were the base of the RVNAF. This decision meant that he would not have to deal with the inept but "politically correct" generals that President Thieu had chosen.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, General Tri chose to utilize the best ARVN units at his disposal. These included the ARVN airborne, ranger, and armor battalions. The

MACV and ARVN had spent additional time training and equipping these formations and their performance throughout the war was better than that of the conventional ARVN infantry battalions.<sup>47</sup>

The ARVN achieved some success during the Cambodian incursion outright, but the majority of the success was possible because of the massive amount of fire support the US forces provided. The US Air Force flew 6,017 tactical combat missions (close air support to ground formations) during the incursion. This averaged out to 210 missions per day! Results from tactical air strikes were 520 enemy KIA, 567 secondary explosions (ammunition storage sites hit), 4,571 destroyed or damaged enemy installations, 32 destroyed vehicles, 30 destroyed buildings, and the destruction of 268 tons of rice. Aerial gun ships (fixed wing transport aircraft fitted with Gatling guns and airborne artillery pieces) expended more than 1.5 million rounds of ammunition and the US provided three of these platforms each night for continuous coverage. B-52s (long range strategic bombers) flew 186 support missions with impressive results that included 239 enemy KIA, 329 secondary explosions, 2,259 installations destroyed or damaged and 39 anti aircraft weapons destroyed.<sup>48</sup>

Combined US and ARVN artillery expenditures were 847,558 rounds. The ARVN expended 261,039 rounds. The ARVN could come closer to supporting themselves with artillery than they could with fixed wing close air support, but still relied heavily on their US Advisors to employ and coordinate this fire during combat operations.<sup>49</sup> The ARVN would not have achieved the success they did without the US air and artillery support, which would be limited in 1972 and nonexistent in 1975. This US support masked the fact that the ARVN were not capable of autonomous offensive operations and some US observers believed that the ARVN could not have even attempted the Cambodian incursion without US tactical air strikes.<sup>50</sup>

Logistical failures hindered ARVN operations as well. The ARVN was not capable of conducting the massive refueling operations required for such a high tempo, long-range operation involving numerous mechanized and wheeled assets. Maintenance issues slowed their advance as well, particularly the inadequate amount of repair parts on hand. More often than not, functioning armored personnel carriers and tanks towed nonfunctioning ones, reducing the formers ability to provide fire support or maneuver.<sup>51</sup>

The US and ARVN forces faced limited enemy resistance after the first two to three days. The allied forces captured a typewritten enemy directive dated 17 March 1970. It specifically stated, "When facing enemy forces [Communist forces in Cambodia] should attempt to break contact and avoid shooting back. Our purpose is to conserve forces as much as possible."<sup>52</sup> US and ARVN forces spent most of their time uncovering caches and destroying their contents or preparing the materiel for transport to South Vietnam vice engaging enemy forces in direct combat operations.

The ARVN success during the Cambodian incursion directly effected the Vietnamization process long term. Although General Tri successfully maneuvered his three task forces, which included upwards of 30,000 South Vietnamese soldiers, long-term success never materialized. Senior MACV commanders' over inflated after action reports did not accurately portray true ARVN capabilities. The ARVN lacked audacious leaders and aggressive units. Vietnamization would continue at a frantic pace that would not allow commanders or advisors the time to address the concerns identified because of the Cambodian incursion. MACV desired to push high tech, complex units into the ARVN when the ARVN struggled with basic infantry battalion operations.<sup>53</sup>

Shelby Stanton, in The Rise and Fall of an American Army, summed up the effect of the Cambodian incursion on Vietnamization and the ARVN. He said, "This crash program [Vietnamization] to mold the South Vietnamese military overnight into an image of the self-sufficient, highly technical U.S. armed forces was doomed to failure." The ARVN would indeed suffer the consequences of their over inflated success in 1971 during their invasion of Laos, their greatest failure being their inability to apply lessons learned from mistakes made in Cambodia a year earlier.<sup>54</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Cambodian incursion produced some of the results that the Nixon administration hoped it would. The US and ARVN forces successfully conducted cross-border operations into a known NVA sanctuary and within 60 days, withdraw back to South Vietnam (some ARVN forces remained longer). The military operation was successful tactically and operationally. The forces met limited enemy resistance and were able to achieve all of their initial objectives with a minimal amount of casualties. The US and ARVN forces captured or destroyed enough NVA war materiel to set their offensive capability back any where from six months to a year.

The perceived success of the ARVN during the Cambodian incursion had a long-term negative impact on Vietnamization. Above the surface, it appeared that the ARVN had been very successful during the incursion. Upon further examination, however, facts prove otherwise. The reason for the ARVN success was that General Tri used regimental, brigade and battalion leaders that he knew were effective vice the "politically correct" division Commanders President Thieu appointed. He also used the best-trained units that the ARVN had to offer and he relied heavily on US air and artillery support. General Tri also faced an enemy force that was more

concerned with preservation than fighting. All these facts combined to portray an ARVN force more capable than actually existed.

Today, the Iraq War displays similar characteristics of the Vietnam War, in particular, the importance of training and equipping an Iraqi Army capable of independent operations. For the first time, ARVN units operated independently and on a grand scale during the Cambodian incursion, but never too far out of reach of US support. The ARVN achieved some success and MACV believed them to be competent enough to execute independently the following year in Laos, but there the ARVN failed. In 2004, five Iraqi army battalions took part in the battle of Fallujah following US offensive actions. They held ground that US forces had taken. In 2005 during Operation Restoring Rights in Tal Afar, eleven Iraqi army battalions took part and controlled their own battle space, a first for the Iraqi army. What the US Military has learned from lessons in Vietnam is that they cannot force the Iraqi army to take the lead unless it is prepared. The US Advisor effort in Iraq is currently the top priority for US Central Command not unlike General Abrams' top priority of Vietnamization in 1969-1970.<sup>55</sup>

The anti-war attitude at home (see Appendix 7) and the perceived success of the ARVN caused the US to speed up its withdrawals and increase the size of the RVNAF beyond its capability. The US could not withdraw (with a good conscience) unless the RVNAF could defend South Vietnam alone. Congress approved the Consolidated RVNAF Improvement & Modernization Program (CRIMP) in June 1970 in the midst of successful ARVN actions in Cambodia. CRIMP called for a dramatic increase in the size and capabilities of the RVNAF with a scheduled completion date of July 1973. The RVNAF grew from 700,000 to 1,100,000 from 1968-1972, far outpacing the infrastructure needed to support it.<sup>56</sup> In Iraq today, the US

and Iraqis are increasing their military, but only as quickly as the required support structure can handle, a lesson possibly learned in Southeast Asia over 30 years ago.

The successful Cambodian incursion led to a misconception of the ARVN's capabilities. This success encouraged MACV and Nixon administration officials to increase the size and tactical responsibility of the ARVN before they were capable of expanding either. Because of these events, the US increased its troop withdrawals and eventually exited South Vietnam before achieving victory. The US cannot afford to pull pitch in Iraq in a similar manner. Much more is at stake today. When South Vietnam fell, communism did not directly threaten US interests. If we fail in Iraq today, instability in the Middle East will directly threaten our national interests.

The United States incursion into Cambodia in 1970 was a tactical and operational success, but these successes led MACV and Nixon administration officials to draw false conclusions in regards to the performance and capabilities of the ARVN. United States and South Vietnamese Forces achieved tactical success during cross border missions. The incursion set the North Vietnamese forces back at least a year by denying them much needed war materiel. MACV and Nixon administration officials equated this success to a competent and capable ARVN, which in the summer of 1969 was not the case. These false conclusions led to the failure of Vietnamization.



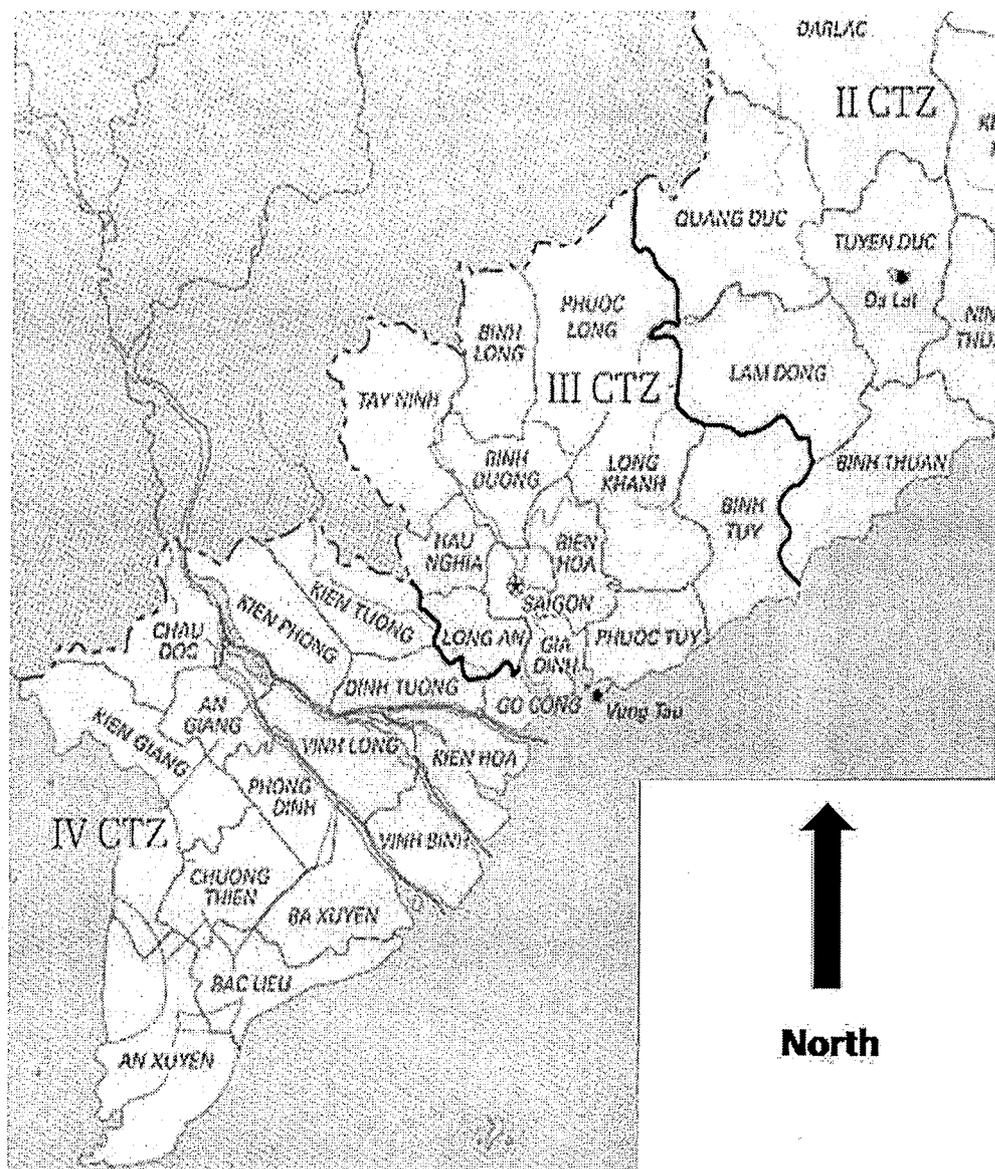
Map Reproduced from The Cambodian Incursion, by Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, page 5.

#### Appendix 2, ARVN Operational Guidance for Cambodian Incursion

1. The RVNAF area of operation was determined to be a zone, running the length of the RVN-Cambodian border with a depth varying from 40 to 60 km inside Cambodia. This zone was called the tactical area of interest (TAOI). Within this TAOI, ARVN Corps Commanders were authorized to the extent of their capabilities, to conduct offensive operations against NVA bases, installations and storage points or in coordination and cooperation with U.S. forces which might be conducting operations in the zone. ARVN Corps Commanders were also authorized to cooperate and coordinate with Cambodian military region commander for the conduct of unilateral or combined RVN-Khmer operations. For activities beyond their tactical areas of responsibility, ARVN Corps Commanders were required to obtain clearance from the JGS. For operations involving two or more ARVN Corps, the Corps Commanders were to coordinate with one another and submit operations plans to the JGS for approval.
2. During combat operations on Cambodian territory, the RVNAF were authorized to use Cambodian airfields, ports, as well as all waterway and land communication axes for the accomplishment of their mission.
3. The Vietnamese Navy (VNN) was to conduct patrols in the Gulf of Siam and be responsible for coastal defense from South Vietnam's national waters. In addition, it was to conduct activities on the Mekong River in coordination with and support of the Khmer Navy; the VNN was also to provide support for river convoys supplying Phnom Penh, from the border as far north as Neak Luong. Support responsibility from Neak Luong to Phnom Penh rested with the Khmer Navy.
4. The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) was to provide support for combat operations as directed by the JGS, particularly air support for ARVN corps during cross-border operations.
5. The Commander of III Corps and MR-3 was responsible for providing support for road-clearing operations on route QL-1 from Go Dau Ha (RVN border) and for truck convoys as far as Neak Luong. From Neak Loung northward, the FANK (Khmer National Armed Forces/French: Force Armée Nationale Khmère), would take over.
6. Weapons and ammunition captured from NVA forces by operational units would be turned over to the FANK as gifts to equip their own units. Those items of equipment that were too bulky to move back to South Vietnam could be destroyed on the spot but photo records should be kept.
7. While operating in Cambodia, RVNAF units were instructed to be always on guard. Special emphasis was placed on protecting the lives and properties of the Cambodian population, to include pagodas, temples, holy places or worship and historical relics. The use of airstrikes was to be subjected to careful consideration. Aircraft were to be always guided onto targets by forward air controllers. In addition, the JGS would hold ARVN field commander responsible for any act of mischief committed by troops under their control.<sup>57</sup>

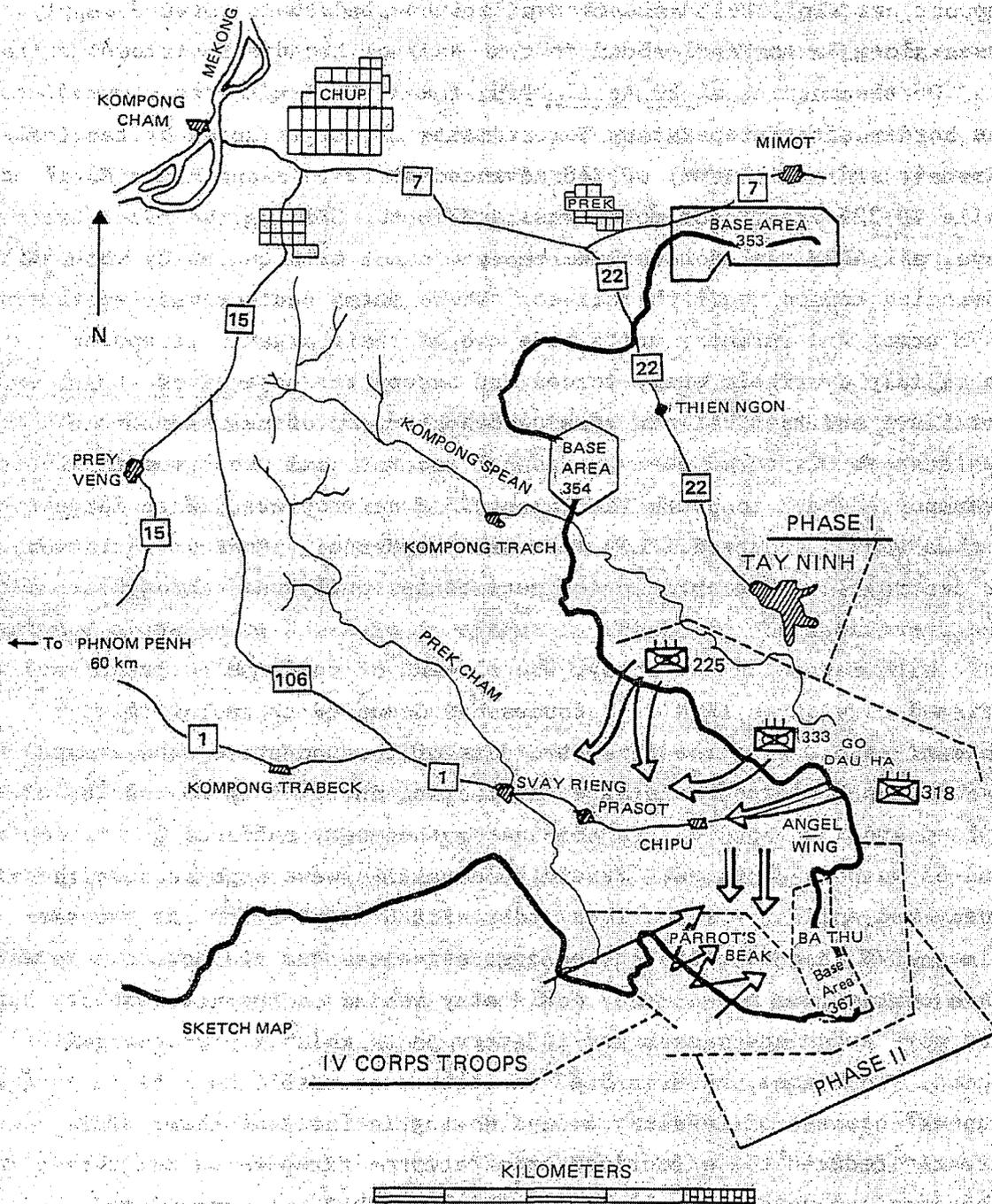
Note: The above comes directly from The Cambodian Incursion. It is important to portray President Thieu's directive concerning operations into Cambodia.

Appendix 3, Map 2, III Corps Tactical Zone



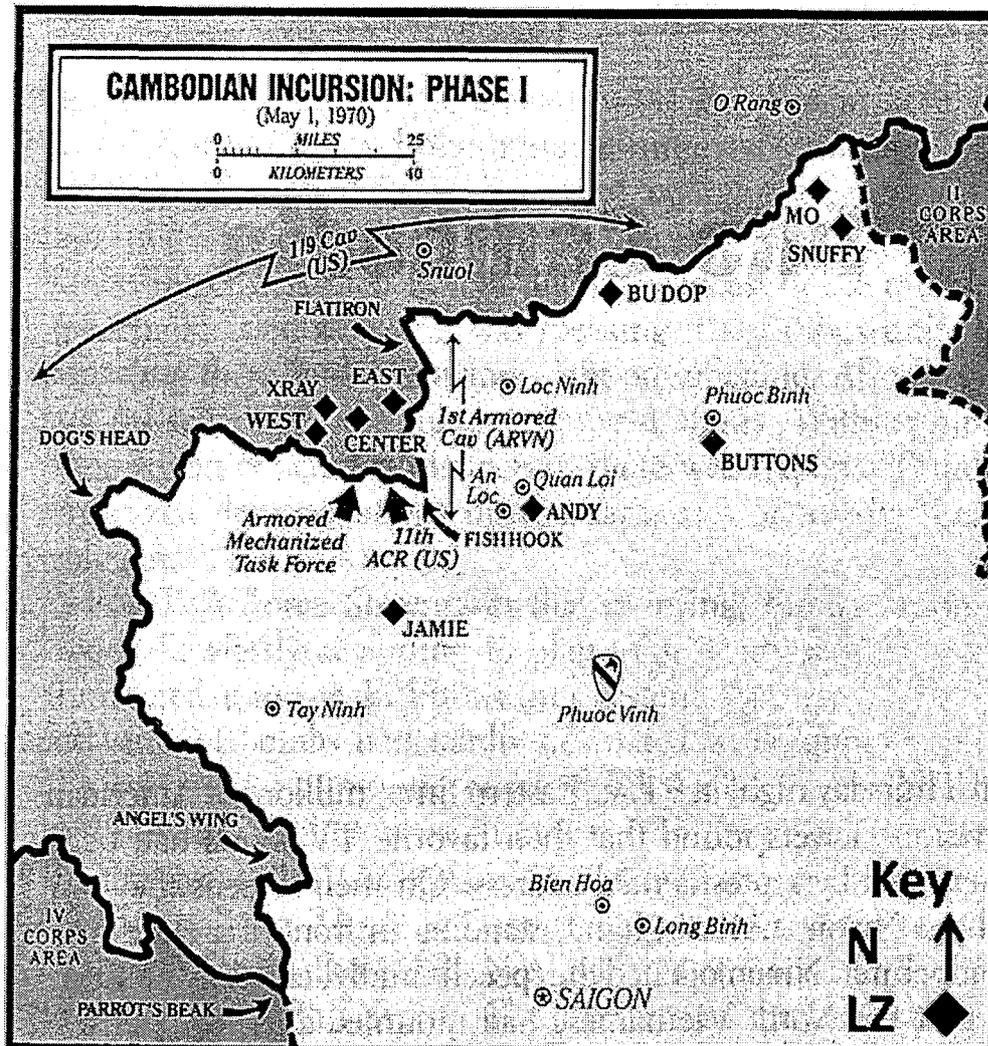
Map Reproduced from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:CamIncl.jpg>. This image is a work of a U.S. Army soldier or employee, taken or made during the course of the person's official duties. As a work of the U.S. federal government, the image is in the public domain.<sup>58</sup>

Appendix 4, Map 3, Initial Positions of ARVN Forces at the Angel's Wing



Map Reproduced from The Cambodian Incursion, by Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, page 55.

Appendix 5, Map 4, Operations vicinity Fish Hook-1 May 1970



Map is by John D. Talbot and reproduced from The IncurSION, by J.D. Coleman, page 233. It shows the initial mechanized thrusts into the Fishhook as well as the initial helicopter landing zones (LZ).<sup>59</sup>

Appendix 6, Captured Equipment

Equipment Captured as of 30 June 1970

Individual weapons: 22,892

Crew-served weapons: 2,509

Small arms ammunition: 16,762,167 rounds

Antiaircraft ammunition: 199,552 rounds

Mortar rounds: 68,593

Rocket rounds, B-40 and B-41: 43,160

Recoilless rifle rounds: 29,185

Hand grenades: 62,022

Explosives: 83,000 pounds

Rockets, 107mm and 122mm: 2,123

Vehicles: 435

Pharmaceutical products: 110,800 pounds

Rice: 14,046,000 pounds

SOURCE: MACV Command History 1970, Volume I, p. C-106 reproduced from Vietnam in Military Statics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991, by Michael Clodfelter, page 178.<sup>60</sup>

## Appendix 7, Unrest at Home

This appendix will analyze one of the unintended outcomes of President Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia on 1 May 1970. Protests on college campuses were nothing new. The events that took place on 4 May 1970 would challenge the idea of peaceful college protests for decades to come. The year 1970 had so far been a calm year on the home front. No one seemed to mind that North Vietnam had violated Cambodia's neutrality for months, but when ARVN forces first entered Cambodia alone on 28 April, the media were outraged. This all occurred before the president's speech on 30 April. Media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal and St. Louis Dispatch could not believe what was happening. Congressional leaders believed any assistance to Cambodia would only escalate US involvement in Vietnam and thus widen the war.<sup>61</sup>

On April 30, 1970, President Nixon addressed the nation. He reiterated his pledge to withdraw 150,000 American troops, but insisted that in order to do so effectively, the military would have to initiate aggressive actions.<sup>62</sup> On 1 May, the president remarked off the record about "bums...blowing up campuses" and then on 4 May, elements of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on protesters at Kent State University killing four students. The administration responded brashly to the four deaths and campuses across the nation exploded in chaos.<sup>63</sup> The tragic events that unfolded at Kent State University were a direct response to the president's decision to enter Cambodia.

The students did not simply charge the Ohio National Guard on 4 May. The atmosphere on campus started out peaceful on Friday and ended in chaos on Monday. On Friday, 1 May, students of the World Historians Opposed to Racism and Exploitation (WHORE) led a rally on campus. They buried a copy of the Constitution to symbolize the administration's entry into Cambodia without a declaration of war. Around 500 people attended the peaceful rally. The leaders called for the crowd to reassemble on Monday. The student leaders wanted to discuss why the administration had not addressed prior student demands for the abolition of the ROTC department. Additionally, they wanted to air their views on the Cambodian incursion. Other similar organizations met on Friday as well, all without incident. That evening students and other people gathered downtown Kent to visit bars, listen to bands, and enjoy a warm spring night. As the night wore on and the liquor began to "free them up", the crowd began to demonstrate against the small police presence. The crowd set a bonfire ablaze in the street and proceeded to stop vehicles, trying to ascertain the drivers' thoughts and beliefs on Cambodia. The mayor declared a state of emergency and closed all bars downtown. Eventually, the crowds returned to campus and ultimately disbursed. The inability of the police forces to control the crowds on 1 May probably hastened the call up of the Ohio National Guard.<sup>64</sup>

Saturday continued to see unrest on the Kent State campus. Faculty, staff and student meetings took place at different times throughout the morning and into the afternoon.<sup>65</sup> The situation continued to deteriorate. By 8:10 that evening, a crowd of nearly 2000 was marching towards the ROTC building. The crowd made numerous attempts to burn the building, and by 8:49, the building was ablaze. The student crowds had struck out at the most recognizable symbol on campus of the Vietnam War and the more recent Cambodian invasion. The Ohio National Guard, with the help of local and state police dispersed the crowd. Saturday closed with a few minor casualties and student unrest.<sup>66</sup>

Sunday was calmer than the previous two days. As the National Guard began to fraternize with students, a somewhat serene atmosphere existed. Someone photographed a student, Alison Krause, placing a flower in the end of an M1 Garand.<sup>67</sup> The governor spoke that morning and the press took some of his comments out of context, particularly his reference to Brown Shirts (Hitler's paramilitary organization). Governor Rhodes had said that those causing unrest were worse than the aforementioned. As news of these comments reached the students and the nation, attitudes continued to become inflamed. One student described a Sunday night with a reference to George Orwell's 1984 and the police state that existed on campus and in town.<sup>68</sup>

Classes resumed on Monday, 4 May. A rally occurred at noon focusing more on the National Guard on campus vice the invasion of Cambodia. The Ohio National Guard was now the students' symbol of the Vietnam War and the Cambodia invasion. The National Guard backed the campus police as they tried to disperse the crowds. They began to fire tear gas into the crowd, which was now excited by the police telling them to disperse and the National Guard continuing to form up against them. The National Guard pushed the crowd towards Taylor Hall and away from the Commons (Appendix 8, Map 5- Kent State Campus). Reportedly, students continued to throw rocks at the soldiers. Company G split off from the main National Guard formation and rounded Taylor Hall (Appendix 9, Map 6, G Company Position). As the company got into position, they knelt in line and faced the students. At approximately 12:24, the National Guard opened fire on the students killing four, including Alison Krause and wounding 13.<sup>69</sup>

The storm was starting to reach its full potential. Before the president's speech on 30 April, the resistance to further escalation in Cambodia was evident in the media and in Congress. Most viewed the speech with skepticism and that the administration was flat out lying. The killings at Kent State, coupled with the administrations' insensitive remarks inflamed the antiwar movement across the nation and urged Congress to fight against further involvement in Indochina as a whole.<sup>70</sup> That such a violent event could have occurred in the heartland of America flabbergasted the nation.<sup>71</sup> It was not at just the liberal minded university's and cities that protests and violence were taking place, but across all of America.

As of 6 May, protests had occurred at numerous locations. At Bowdoin College in Maine, students raised a white flag spattered with blood. The governor of Wisconsin called in the National Guard to the University of Wisconsin, where students burnt buildings and heaved concrete blocks. As protests turned violent, the students invariably turned to destroy the nearest military symbol within reach. The Cambodian incursion initially motivated most of the protesters, but the events at Kent State sent them over the edge.<sup>72</sup>

The protests and unrest acted as a bellows to Congress' criticism of the incursion. Senators Frank Church and John Cooper proposed an amendment that would prohibit military assistance or action in Cambodia after 30 June. Other lawmakers tried to end involvement in Indochina by attempting to cut off all funding for the war. Opponents of the war continued to try to force its end. The majority of the opposition began after the Nixon administration's decision to invade Cambodia.<sup>73</sup>

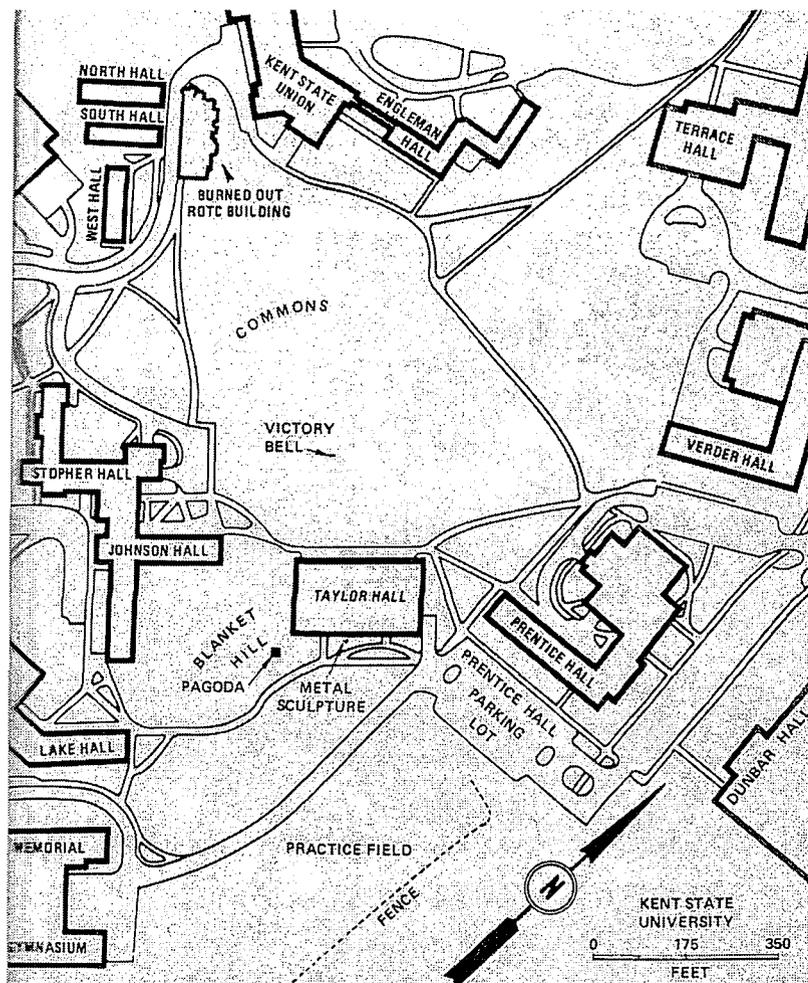
Unrest existed within the administration as well. State Department employees signed a document protesting the administrations' policy. Some employees seized the Peace Corps building and flew a Viet Cong flag from it. Kissinger even moved from his nearby apartment to a room in the basement of the White House just to get some sleep. On 9 May, President Nixon tried to make amends with some student protesters at the Lincoln Memorial, but his secret visit did no good.<sup>74</sup>

How could President Nixon have prevented the Cambodian incursion from igniting the antiwar movement into a national issue? How could he have kept Congress on his side? How could he have prevented unrest within his administration? President Nixon took the counsel of his military and civilian advisers. It was no secret that the NVA were using Cambodia as a staging base for offensive operations against South Vietnam. The president insisted in his inaugural address that the United States would pursue negotiation vice confrontation with the Soviet Union. The president, in effect, separated the war in Vietnam from the struggle against communism. In May 1969, President Nixon announced the first stage of troop withdrawals. He introduced Vietnamization to the country. Most Americans believed that if we were withdrawing troops and diving into Vietnamization that the war was going well. Why was the administration not withdrawing ALL our troops?

Some of the antiwar rhetoric died down on 3 November. The president described his withdrawal plan and explained why its timing was of vital national interest. Even the media's initial reaction to the speech was positive. Once the president announced the details of the Cambodian incursion on 30 April, Pandora was out of the proverbial box. President Nixon had warned the Communists and North Vietnamese about seeking sanctuary in Laos and Cambodia. As Christopher Emmet put it, however, he failed to warn America.<sup>75</sup>

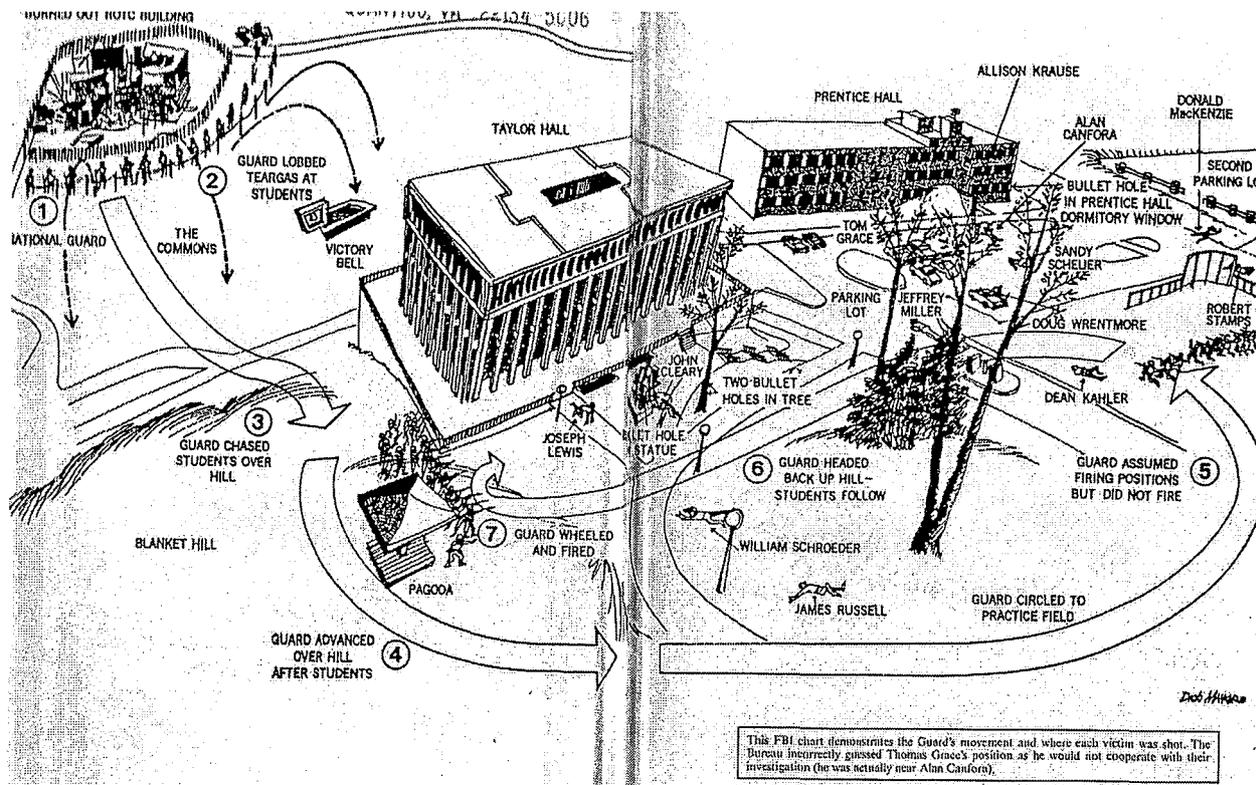
Nixon lost the support and confidence of America, Congress and his own administration because he was not successful in the information operation aspect of the instruments of national power (Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic-DIME). If he had convinced the American public that he was authorizing the attacks on the *Soviet Union backed* NVA troops then he may have possessed a more convincing argument. Had he gone to Congress and actually sold the idea of the Cambodian incursion, when general Abrams first requested bombing missions in 1969, then he could have legitimized the invasion and probably gained congressional approval. The Nixon administration's information failure in the DIME model was directly responsible for the increased antiwar demonstrations on campus, the increased opposition from Congress and the lack of support within his own administration. Christopher Emmet once again said it best when pinpointing why Nixon lost this information war. As to why president Nixon, like President Johnson before failed to explain the Soviet Union's involvement in Vietnam Laos and Cambodia "... or to explain in time [to the American people] why Laos and Cambodia are key to the success of Vietnamization in Vietnam. So the public relations battle [at home] was lost in advance".<sup>76</sup>

Appendix 8, Map 5- Kent State Campus



Map reproduced from The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest, by Arno Press, page 301.<sup>77</sup>

Appendix 9, Map 6, G Company Position



Map reproduced from inside front cover of The Fourth of May, Killings and Cover-ups at Kent State, by William A. Gordon. The Federal Bureau of Investigation drew the chart during their investigation of the events at Kent State. G Company was located at position seven when they fired into the crowd.<sup>78</sup>

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