

THE SILENT MAJORITY STANDS IN OPPOSITION TO THE INDOCHINA WAR

The Gallup Poll showing fifty-one percent "approving of the way President Nixon is handling the Cambodian situation" actually indicates opposition and not support. In the face of this report, how can one claim that the "silent majority" opposes the war in Indochina?

Over the years public opinion analysts have identified a phenomenon called "rallying to the cause"; public approval of the President climbs sharply when he takes action (any action, it seems); if the action is a dramatic one, the rise in public approval is sharper yet.

Some examples: After the passage of the Truman Doctrine, public approval of President Truman rose from forty-nine percent to sixty percent; our entry into the Korean War was accompanied by an eleven percent rise in approval of Truman; the Cuban Missile Crisis was followed by a ten percent growth in approval. Even the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion was followed by a rallying to the cause; approval of President Kennedy moved from seventy-two percent before the action to eighty-two percent after it.

The question of approval of President Nixon's handling of the Cambodian situation is thus a test of the "rallying to his cause"; President Nixon flunked that test! In March, on the question of approval of his handling of the situation in Vietnam, fifty-one percent approved. In April, forty-eight percent approved and forty-one percent disapproved; neither of these polls shows a different distribution than the Gallup poll following his action. In other words, the tragically dramatic move into Cambodia has not occasioned a rallying of the American people to Mr. Nixon's cause!

If we look at answers to other questions Gallup asked the public, we can come to understand why this dramatic failure to rally to the President has taken place: In the first place the public is pessimistic about the outcome. Fifty-five percent think a major involvement in Cambodia is unavoidable--they disagree with the President on this score. Rallying to the cause in the past has been accompanied by optimism or at least a hopefulness that "maybe it'll work" -- that optimism is now lacking in the public; less than a third believe that we can avoid a major involvement in Cambodia. Beyond pessimism, the public disapproves of the major facet of the Cambodian escalation. Six Americans in ten disapprove of "sending troops to help Cambodia" and only twenty-eight percent believe we should.

Pessimism was reinforced by the flow of bad news from Vietnam was central in the massive growth in popular dissatisfaction with the Johnson administration. The pessimism over the Cambodian invasion is the prelude to a withdrawal of public support for the Nixon administration. And it should be remembered that Mr. Nixon began with a substantially smaller stock of public support than did President Johnson.

If the public rejects the sending of troops to Cambodia and thinks an undesired major involvement is likely, why do so many people still approve of Nixon's handling of the war? The answer can only be that a

majority doesn't approve of the handling of the war but rather of the President as a symbol. We can come to understand this if we reflect on public opinion during the Johnson administration. At the ebb of public support of President Johnson, when substantial majorities disagreed with the main features of his Vietnam policy, a third of the American people still were willing to say they approved of his handling of the war. For President Johnson this situation contrasts sharply with the situation in 1966 when the public approved not only of his handling of the war but of the details of the policy lines he was following. President Nixon's support seems to be structured more like that of Johnson at the ebb than Johnson in 1966.

The symbol of the Presidency can only carry a President so long and Mr. Nixon's string is running out. The silent majority is not with the President in his Cambodian experiment.