

Redeeming the Ship of State: The *Mayaguez* Incident of 1975

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Introduction

It's hard to escape a sinkhole. In mid-May 1975, two weeks after the fall of Saigon, members of the Khmer Rouge navy fired upon and detained a shipping freighter called the SS *Mayaguez* as it traversed the Gulf of Thailand. Cambodian sailors boarded the ship and made its forty American crewmembers their prisoners. So began the *Mayaguez* incident. Over the ensuing three days, the Ford administration orchestrated and oversaw a chaotic military rescue operation. This paper examines the Ford administration's handling of the crisis and the motives that underlay its violent response.

Historians explain American decision-making during the *Mayaguez* crisis in disparate ways. Naturally, they focus on the incident's correlation with the Vietnam War—in time, space, and perception. Cécile Menétrey-Monchau argues that President Gerald R. Ford misperceived the seizure of the ship as a deliberate provocation by a monolithic communist adversary; he responded with force to rewrite the history of the shameful American retreat from Vietnam.¹ Andrew J. Gawthorpe frames the crisis as part of the Ford administration's effort to mount a “holding action” in the Asia-Pacific with more limited resources than had been available during the Vietnam War.² Experts in other disciplines apply their own methodologies. Political scientist Chris Lamb uses the “belief systems” model to analyze American decision-making. He concludes that American policymakers' belief in the domino theory led them to favor a swift retaliation.³ Communications scholars Denise Bostdorff and Roderick Hart examine Ford's use

¹ Cécile Menétrey-Monchau, “The *Mayaguez* Incident as an Epilogue to the Vietnam War and its Reflection of the Post-Vietnam Political Equilibrium in Southeast Asia,” *Cold War History* 5, no. 3 (August 2005): 337-367.

² Andrew J. Gawthorpe, “The Ford Administration and Security Policy in the Asia-Pacific After the Fall of Saigon,” *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 3 (2009): 697-716.

³ Chris Lamb, *Belief Systems and Decision-Making in the Mayaguez Crisis* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989).

of language and rhetoric.⁴ They show that Ford carefully tailored his words to highlight his decisiveness and capacity for leadership.

This paper builds on previous thinking on *Mayaguez* incident, but it proposes an alternative understanding. Above all else, “credibility” motivated American decision-making during the *Mayaguez* crisis—but credibility of different kinds. Henry Kissinger, who served as both secretary of state and national security adviser, thought in terms of traditional geopolitical credibility. Far from being a mere abstraction, he held that a nation’s credibility had tangible international effects. Enemies who doubted American strength or resolve were more likely to challenge the United States, and allies were more likely to desert it. Kissinger’s strategic calculus necessitated a holistic appraisal of international relations. The United States had suffered a terrible defeat in Vietnam, and the rest of the world’s perception of American strength had suffered. By taking a self-consciously strong stand in the *Mayaguez* incident, the United States would acquire leverage in other arenas of international competition. It would reassure allies and intimidate adversaries by demonstrating its enduring commitment to international engagement. The American military umbrella covered some of the most combustible theaters of the Cold War, like Korea and Berlin, and a show of force in Cambodia would demonstrate the enduring moxie to unfold it elsewhere.

Ford appreciated the importance of geopolitical credibility, but his unique position forced him to consider personal credibility as well. In addition to global perceptions, he was concerned with domestic politics. Ford had never won a national election, and he had ascended to the presidency on the wings of Watergate. He lacked a mandate or a strong sense of legitimacy. His September 1974 decision to pardon former President Richard Nixon had diminished his approval

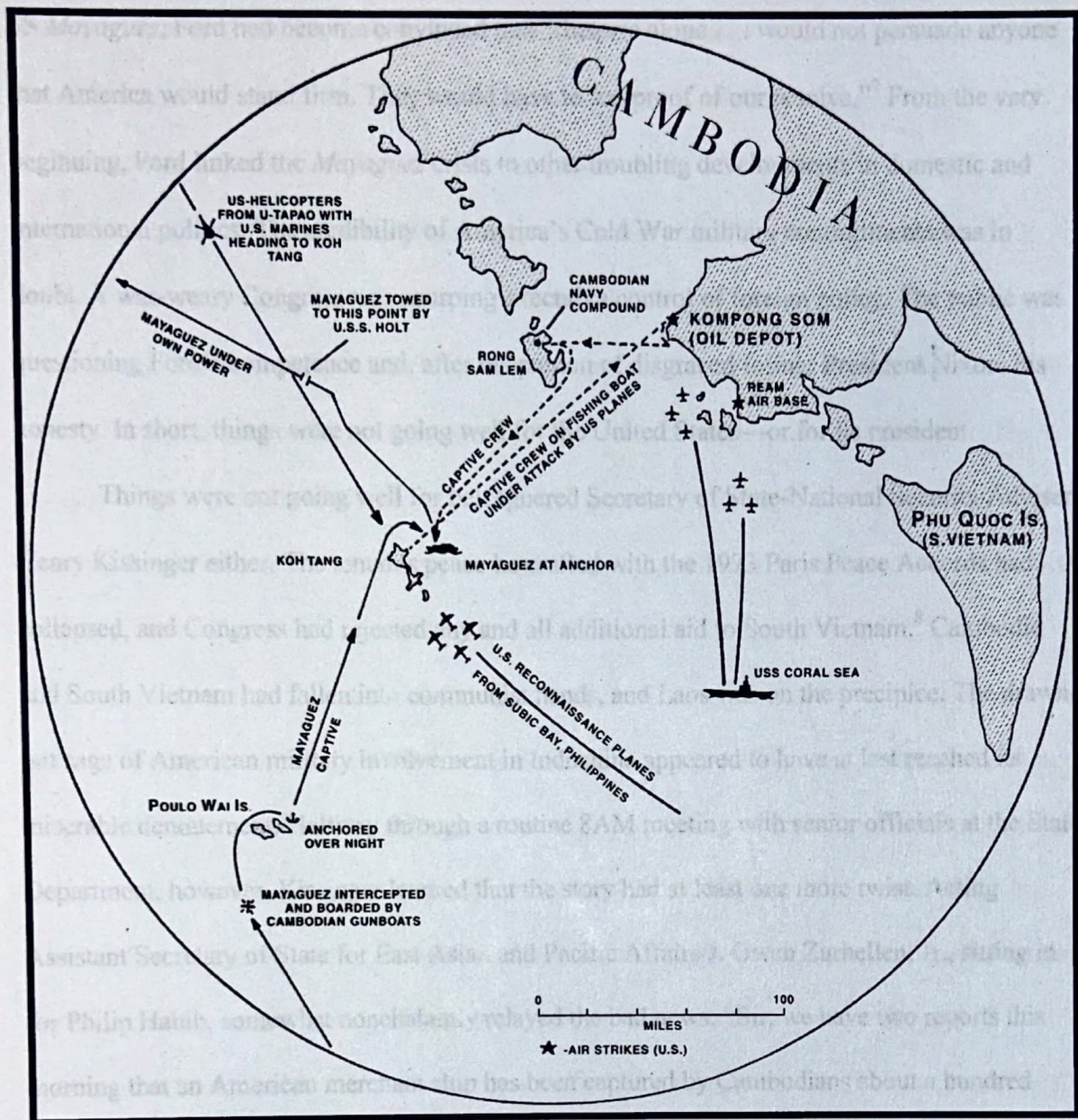
⁴ Denise M. Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crises* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994); Roderick P. Hart, *The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Communication in the Modern Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

ratings, which remained low in the spring of 1975. Ford had to regain political ground before seeking election as president in his own right in 1976, and the *Mayaguez* crisis provided him with an ideal opportunity to cultivate an image as strong-willed and decisive. Ford wanted to prove his mettle as a leader and let the American people know that he was not a weak-kneed replacement who would buckle in the face of communist provocation. As White House Press Secretary Ron Nessen later recalled, "throughout the crisis, Ford was acutely aware that supporters and critics at home and friends and enemies abroad were watching his performance closely to measure his determination and wisdom in dealing with this first international provocation of his presidency."⁵

Kissinger and Ford, the two most dominant figures in American foreign policy, played leading roles as the National Security Council (NSC) formulated the American response to the crisis. Both men's conceptions of credibility led them to resist Congressional encroachment on foreign policy, which had increased markedly as a consequence of the Vietnam debacle. As far as geopolitical credibility was concerned, allies and enemies needed to know that the president had the ability to act unimpeded by Congressional restrictions; this imperative required forceful resistance to Congressional encroachment on foreign relations. As for personal credibility, Ford had inherited the unenviable task of restoring cordial relations between the executive and legislative branches of government, and he needed to continue his project of healing. Ford sought to resist the expansion of Congress's power over foreign policy while at the same time showing deference to and avoiding unnecessary conflict with the institution as a whole. This led him to abide by some of the provisions of the 1973 War Powers Act and sometimes ran at cross purposes with Kissinger's desire to beat back Congress altogether.

⁵ Ron Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1978), 117.

Part I: Rescuing the Ship



"In the wake of our humiliating retreat from Cambodia and South Vietnam in the spring of 1975," President Gerald Ford recalled in his memoirs, "allies around the world began to

question our resolve." By the morning of Monday, May 12, 1975, when Deputy National Security Adviser and Air Force Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft informed him that

⁶ Ralph Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle: The Mayaguez Incident and the End of the Vietnam War* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2001), xiii.

Cambodians had fired upon and captured an American-owned and operated merchant ship, the SS *Mayaguez*, Ford had become convinced that “rhetoric alone . . . would not persuade anyone that America would stand firm. They would have to see proof of our resolve.”⁷ From the very beginning, Ford linked the *Mayaguez* crisis to other troubling developments in domestic and international politics. The credibility of America’s Cold War military commitments was in doubt. A war-weary Congress was usurping executive control of foreign policy. The public was questioning Ford’s competence and, after his pardon of disgraced former President Nixon, his honesty. In short, things were not going well for the United States—or for its president.

Things were not going well for beleaguered Secretary of State-National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger either. The tenuous peace he crafted with the 1973 Paris Peace Accords had collapsed, and Congress had rejected any and all additional aid to South Vietnam.⁸ Cambodia and South Vietnam had fallen into communist hands, and Laos was on the precipice. The drawn-out saga of American military involvement in Indochina appeared to have at last reached its miserable denouement. Halfway through a routine 8AM meeting with senior officials at the State Department, however, Kissinger learned that the story had at least one more twist. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs J. Owen Zurhellen, Jr., sitting in for Philip Habib, somewhat nonchalantly relayed the bad news: “Sir, we have two reports this morning that an American merchant ship has been captured by Cambodians about a hundred miles off the coast and is proceeding into Sihanoukville [a port city also called Kompong Som] under Cambodian troop guard.”⁹ It was cruel irony. Two short weeks after the hasty American

⁷ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 275.

⁸ Christopher T. Jespersen, “Kissinger, Ford, and Congress: The Very Bitter End in Vietnam,” *Pacific Historical Review* 71, no. 3 (August 2002): 439-445.

⁹ Minutes of the Secretary of State’s Regionals Staff Meeting, in US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976. Volume X: Vietnam, January 1973-July 1975* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010) (hereafter cited as *FRUS*), 974.

exit from Vietnam, Kissinger and the twenty-two other diplomats at the meeting could not have anticipated that they would be focusing their attentions on an American ship under attack by communists in Southeast Asian waters. In at least one regard, little had changed since the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August of 1964: it was time to stand firm.

Having learned of the seizure only minutes before the meeting began, Zurchellen could not provide Kissinger with any additional details. The secretary's questions evinced frustration and vitriol. "How can that be?" he asked. For him, the capture of the ship symbolized the American feelings of helplessness and impotence wrought by Vietnam—feelings he was determined to expunge. "Now, goddam it! We are not going to sit here and let an American merchant ship be captured at sea and let it go into the harbor without doing a bloody thing about it. We are going to protest."¹⁰

Moving seamlessly between his dual roles as secretary of state and national security adviser, Kissinger raced to the White House to offer counsel to the president. Before discussing what they would later describe as a grave threat to national security, however, Ford, Kissinger, and Scowcroft ruminated on the more important issue of the upcoming 1976 presidential election. The president's support among conservative Republicans had waned, and he was facing the embarrassing prospect of a primary challenge from the charismatic ex-governor of California, Ronald Reagan. Furthermore, despite Ted Kennedy's "firm, final, and unconditional" September 1974 announcement that he would not seek his party's nomination for the presidency, Ford and Kissinger worried that the Massachusetts senator would hearken back to Camelot, seize the mantle of his slain older brothers, and make his own run for the nation's highest office.¹¹ Ford asked his associates to "look at the alternatives [to his winning the election]. Reagan would

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ R. W. Apple, Jr., "Kennedy Rules Out '76 Presidential Race," *New York Times*, September 24, 1974.

be a disaster. . . . Any Democrat from Kennedy on down would be a disaster.”¹² The electoral competition was heating up, and the president wanted to stay a step ahead of his political opponents.

The stains of Watergate and Vietnam had imbued the nation, especially its reporters, with a zealous skepticism about political behavior of all stripes. Corruption, it seemed, was everywhere. Not even Ford—with his nearly universal reputation for honesty and decency—was immune to the relentless pursuit of wickedness in Washington. In 1973, a bribery scandal unrelated to Watergate forced Nixon’s first vice president, Spiro Agnew, to resign. Ford was not Nixon’s first choice to replace Agnew, but the president knew the well liked and respected Michigan Republican was the only party loyalist likely to win confirmation from an increasingly disgruntled and suspicious Congress. Even so, Ford was subject to one of the most thorough background investigations ever conducted. The FBI’s final report contained more than 1,700 pages. Agents went as far as to interview a football player whom Ford played against in high school and tackled after a whistle had signaled the stoppage of play. Presumably, the investigators wanted to determine if the man who could very well be the next commander-in-chief was the upstanding character he portrayed himself to be.¹³ (The late hit turned out to be the only blemish on an otherwise squeaky-clean record, and the meticulous report actually bolstered Ford’s political credentials.)

Back in the Oval Office on the morning of May 12, campaign preparations were underway. Despite the inevitable scrutiny it would incur, Ford was setting up an informal campaign advisory team inside the White House. Politics never stops at the water’s edge, and the

¹² Memorandum of Conversation, May 12, 1975. National Security Adviser’s Memoranda of Conversation Collection, Gerald R. Ford Digital Library.

<http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/memcons/1553073.pdf> (accessed October 30, 2010).

¹³ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 109-110.

president wanted Kissinger—a consummate politician in his own right—on board to help “keep foreign policy meshed with the political thing.”¹⁴ Kissinger had acted as Ford’s tutor on international matters since the administration’s pell-mell beginnings. The German-born intellectual-cum-statesman helped assure continuity in foreign policy during the hurried White House transition from the international magnate Nixon to the more domestically inclined Ford. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Joseph Sisco, a State Department carryover from the Nixon administration, remembered that “Ford was not inclined toward perceiving a lot of the complexities of foreign policy issues,” so he “relied heavily on Henry” when dealing with global affairs.¹⁵ As he had so many times in the past, Kissinger agreed to do what he could, telling the president, “I think your election is essential.”¹⁶

With their political banter out of the way, Ford and his tandem of national security advisers moved on to national security and the matter of the captured ship. The three men wrestled with the barriers presented by the War Powers Act and the Indochina force prohibition. Congress had enacted the War Powers Act over President Nixon’s veto in 1973. As House Minority Leader at the time, Ford voted first to reject the act and then to sustain Nixon’s veto—losing on both occasions. He believed that the law “severely limited [the president’s] ability to enforce the peace agreement” and virtually assured that “North Vietnam could violate the [1973 peace] accords with impunity.”¹⁷ It was part of a dangerous trend in which the legislative branch questioned the executive’s authority over the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. If a squeamish Congress dominated by pusillanimous liberals could nullify any international

¹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, May 12, 1975.

¹⁵ Joseph J. Sisco, “Ford, Kissinger and the Nixon-Ford Foreign Policy,” in Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., *The Ford Presidency: Twenty-Two Intimate Perspectives of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 327.

¹⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, May 12, 1975.

¹⁷ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 252.

commitment, how could America's allies take the president at his word? A few years after leaving the White House, Ford would proclaim the War Powers Act to be one of the reasons why he believed the United States had "not an imperial presidency but an imperiled presidency."¹⁸ Despite his doubts about the act's wisdom and constitutionality, and in keeping with his desire to reduce tensions between the White House and Capitol Hill, Ford "tried to live up to both the letter and the spirit of the law" during his tenure in the Oval Office.¹⁹ This meant that, whenever possible, he had to consult with Congress before introducing American forces into hostile situations. He also had to submit a report to Congress within forty-eight hours of said forces becoming involved in hostilities. Without the legislative branch's seal of approval, the troops could remain in place for a maximum of sixty days. The Cooper-Church Amendment of 1970 and the Case-Church Amendment of 1973 further constrained President Ford's freedom of action in Southeast Asia by using the Congressional power of the purse to prohibit funding for military operations in Laos and Cambodia, and then in Vietnam. Although the *Mayaguez* incident was a challenge, it was also an opportunity to reassert the supremacy of the executive branch in the vital realm of foreign affairs—while still avoiding unnecessary conflict with Congress.

Defining the Problem

The National Security Council convened at the White House shortly after 12PM to discuss the brewing crisis for the first time. Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) William Colby explained that the *Mayaguez* was captured about eight miles off the coast of a tiny rock island called Poulo Wei, which itself lies about sixty miles from mainland Indochina and was believed to harbor substantial oil deposits. Cambodia and South Vietnam both claimed sovereignty over the island, and this was not the first ship that had been attacked in its vicinity in recent weeks.

¹⁸ Gerald R. Ford and Richard M. Nixon, "Two Ex-Presidents Assess the Job," *Time*, November 10, 1980, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,949031,00.html> (accessed December 13, 2010).

¹⁹ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 252.

Five days earlier, the Cambodian navy detained a Panamanian vessel for thirty-six hours. The Khmer Rouge also seized and subsequently released several Thai fishing boats. A South Korean ship was attacked but managed to evade capture. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger explained that, in light of the flurry of seizures and other activity in the area, the capture of the *Mayaguez* "could be a bureaucratic misjudgment or a by-product of an action against South Vietnam."²⁰ All things considered, none of the men in the NSC believed it to be a deliberate communist provocation.

Colby erroneously reported that the *Mayaguez* was proceeding under its own power to Kompong Som and would arrive there momentarily. (In reality, the ship was still dead in the water exactly where it had been attacked.)²¹ If the Khmer Rouge moved the American crew to the mainland, a military rescue operation would become significantly more difficult—if not impossible. Recent history offered pertinent lessons, and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller thought the capture of the *Mayaguez* was eerily similar to an incident that confronted President Lyndon B. Johnson at the height of the Vietnam War. "I remember the *Pueblo* case," he said.²²

In 1968 an American military surveillance ship called the USS *Pueblo* had been performing normal reconnaissance off the coast of North Korea. The ship, more than twelve nautical miles offshore, was not within North Korea's internationally recognized territorial waters. It was, however, well within the fifty-mile limit the country claimed a right to control and police. The *Pueblo* was approached, fired upon, and chased by the North Korean navy until, outgunned and outmatched, it agreed to stand down and follow its captors to the coast. The American military, though immediately aware of the *Pueblo*'s predicament thanks to radio contact with the besieged boat, made no attempt to support the ship as it tried to evade North

²⁰ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 978.

²¹ Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle*, 35.

²² Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 981.

Korean forces, no attempt to interdict the ship as it moved to the coast, and no attempt to rescue the crew once it reached Wonsan Harbor. Once ashore, the North Koreans quickly transferred the American crewmembers to a bus and moved them inland, where the communist government summarily convicted them of espionage and held them captive for eleven months in deplorable conditions. Apart from calling up 14,000 reservists, the US military did nothing. Curtis F. Jones, who was stationed at the Naval War College, later recalled that "my classmates felt that we were 'chicken' in the way we handled the PUEBLO incident."²³ With more than 500,000 American troops already bogged down in Vietnam, LBJ was unwilling to risk opening a second front in the war against communism in Asia. He secured the crew's release only after signing and issuing an apology that the North Koreans had drafted and that the US later retracted. American inaction facilitated the debacle.²⁴ "Every decision-maker views events through the prism of his own experience," Kissinger remembered in his memoirs. "From the outset, Ford was determined not to permit a repetition of such a sequence of events."²⁵ Ford would act quickly, and the United States would not endure the disgrace of having to kowtow to an impudent communist upstart.

The members of the NSC defined the *Mayaguez* crisis in broad terms. It was not just that Cambodians had captured an American ship, but all the circumstances that surrounded and enabled the seizure that bothered them. Kissinger, who conceptualized international politics in terms of credibility and prestige, did not consider the incident an isolated event. "As I see it, Mr. President," he said, "we have two problems: The first problem is how to get the ship back. The

²³ Interview with Curtis F. Jones, in *Frontline Diplomacy: The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mfdip.2004jon02> (accessed February 26, 2011).

²⁴ Michael J. Hamm, "The Pueblo and Mayaguez Incidents: A Study of Flexible Response and Decision-Making," *Asian Survey* 17, no. 6 (June 1977): 547.

²⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 551.

second problem is how the U.S. appears at this time." The problems were separate but interconnected—different symptoms of the same affliction:

Actions that we would take to deal with one of these problems may not help to deal with the other. For example, I think that if they can get us into a negotiation, even if we get the ship back, it is not to our advantage. I think we should make a strong statement and give a note to the Cambodians, via the Chinese, so that we can get some credits if the boat is released. I also suggest some show of force.²⁶

Kissinger sought to persuade his peers that the crisis was invited by a perception of American weakness and global decline. In order to cure itself of this troublesome pestilence, an early manifestation of the so-called Vietnam Syndrome, the United States would have to undertake a therapeutic retaliation.

The Khmer Rouge was unpredictable. After capturing Phnom Penh in mid-April, it quickly imposed its authority over what was left of Cambodia. It expelled urban populations and executed officials of the former Lon Nol government, sometimes massacring their families, including women and children, along with them.²⁷ Grotesque stories were circulating that, as a result of the forced evacuations of the cities, surgeons were being forced to abandon patients mid-operation. Other convalescents were being deprived of the life support technology upon which their survival depended.²⁸ Delay on the part of the National Security Council was more time for the degenerate regime in Phnom Penh to exact symbolic revenge on the United States by slaughtering the crew of the *Mayaguez* as a scapegoat.

At the first NSC meeting on the crisis, President Ford and his cohorts mulled over their options. Defense Secretary Schlesinger began the brainstorming by laying out a range of possibilities: "We could do such things as seizing Cambodian assets. We can assemble forces. We could seize a small island as a hostage. We might also consider a blockade." Believing the

²⁶ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 979.

²⁷ Jack Anderson and Les Whitten, "Reports Hint 'Blood Debt' Being Paid," *Washington Post*, May 12, 1975.

²⁸ William Safire, "Get Out of Town," *New York Times*, May 12, 1975.

ship was already in the harbor, Schlesinger focused on pressure tactics that he hoped would compel the Cambodians to release the crew. Because his primary concern was the fate of the American crewmembers, however, he avoided endorsing any plans that might arouse the Khmer Rouge's well known propensity for violence. Kissinger, on the other hand, was preoccupied with the bigger picture. He was hell-bent on sending a message by flexing America's military muscle. As he wrote in his memoirs, "the United States needed to demonstrate that there were limits to what it would tolerate. Allies in the region . . . would scrutinize our conduct to determine whether the fall of Saigon marked an aberration or America's permanent retreat from international responsibility."²⁹ So, too, would enemies: the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea would be eying the situation especially closely. For Kissinger, the capture of the *Mayaguez* provided the pretext necessary to substantiate his claims that the country would continue to stand up for its allies and interests—the US would not relapse into isolationism.

The nation's top brass made only one decision at the first NSC meeting on the *Mayaguez*: to send a message, they initiated an ominous concentration of military forces. After the ignominious withdrawal from Vietnam, however, America's forces in the area were surprisingly sparse. The president ordered two destroyers and two aircraft carriers to make for the Gulf of Thailand. He ordered more than a thousand soldiers from different bases in the region to converge on the American base at Utapao, Thailand. The soldiers and vessels would take at least a day and a half to move into place, which meant any military action, including a rescue operation, would take that much longer.³⁰

The US had no contacts, official or otherwise, with the new Cambodian government. Talking to the Khmer Rouge was easier said than done, but it was not impossible. Conspicuously

²⁹ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 551.

³⁰ US Government Accountability Office, "The Seizure of the *Mayaguez*—A Case Study of Crisis Management" (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), 87.

absent from these initial deliberations, apart from a brief mention of using China as a diplomatic intermediary, was any mention of a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Schlesinger summed it up succinctly: "We have got to do something that embarrasses them."³¹ Already, the use of force was a foregone conclusion.

The Spin Begins

As much as possible, Ford wanted to craft the media's narrative of the crisis. The very first time the members of the National Security Council met to discuss the seizure of the *Mayaguez*, they connected the crisis to the Ford administration's sagging public image and the legislative branch's encroachment on presidential prerogatives. Public relations were integral to crisis management, and the NSC debated how to frame the outbreak of the crisis in a public statement. Ford wanted to point out that the seizure was an act of piracy.³² White House Chief of Staff Donald Rumsfeld clashed with Kissinger and Schlesinger over the statement's phrasing. The latter two wanted to "demand" the release of the ship, but Rumsfeld preferred to say, "we expect the release" because demanding would "activate the Congress . . . [and] seems weaker."³³

After the morning's NSC meeting, Ford handed Nessen a statement to read to the press. Unfortunately, the Press Office had already announced to the White House Press Corps that it did not expect any news for another two hours. Nessen and his underlings were thus reduced to phoning nearby journalistic purlieus and politely instructing them to send the reporters on their way.³⁴ The correspondents knew the White House would not call them back from lunch unless the news was important. Most returned within forty-five minutes, just in time to hear Nessen's terse announcement: "We have been informed that a Cambodian naval vessel has seized an

³¹ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 983.

³² It was not. The legal definition of piracy makes it clear that it is the exclusive domain of non-state actors.

³³ *Ibid.*, 984.

³⁴ Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different*, 119.

American merchant ship on the high seas and forced it to the port of Kompong Som. The president has met with the NSC. He considers the seizure an act of piracy. He has informed the State Department to demand the immediate release of the ship." Nessen ended on an ominous note: "Failure to do so would have the most serious consequences."³⁵ Implicit in the statement was the threat of force. Kissinger explained in his memoirs that, "in diplomatese, assigning responsibility for the consequences means that military action is likely; it is the nearest thing to an ultimatum."³⁶

Ford had always understood the value of political symbolism. Upon ascending to the presidency, he deployed symbols to cultivate an image as a genial leader who represented a clean break with the dishonest, combative, and aloof administration of his predecessor. He stayed in his suburban Virginia home to allow the Nixon family enough time to vacate the executive "mansion," which he began calling the executive "residence" instead. On his first day as president, Ford invited a fawning media to come watch him toast his own English muffins for breakfast. At first, Americans loved that their president was so extraordinarily ordinary.³⁷ Whereas President Nixon—enamored of the spectacle and display of power—had wanted his White House guards to wear Prussian military uniforms, President Ford ordered "Hail to the Chief" replaced with the more unpretentious University of Michigan fight song.³⁸ These changes corresponded with the new president's plainer style, but they were not thoughtless. Ford's first press secretary, Jerald terHorst, wanted to emphasize the sense of openness and candor the new president brought to the White House. At press conferences he had Ford stand at a slim podium

³⁵ News Conference at the White House with Press Secretary Ron Nessen #210, May 12, 1975, Box 9, Folder: May 12, 1975 (No. 210) (No. 211) (No. 212), Ronald H. Nessen Files, Gerald R. Ford Library (hereafter GRFL).

³⁶ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 555.

³⁷ Saul Pett, "Ford's Daily Routine Doesn't Vary in First Day of New Presidency," *Washington Post*, August 11, 1974.

³⁸ Mark Rozell, *The Press and the Ford Presidency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 38; Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974-1980* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 7.

in front of an open hallway, which contrasted with the bulky, bulletproof podium positioned in front of a dark blue curtain background that marked the previous two administrations' interactions with the White House Press Corps.³⁹ During the four-day *Mayaguez* affair, Ford put his mastery of symbols to the test.

Unlike most recent news, the outbreak of the *Mayaguez* crisis gave the public a reason to rally behind a government and administration that had, as of late, been on the wrong side of public opinion. The most recent Gallup Poll suggested that only thirty-nine percent of Americans approved of the way Ford was handling his job, remarkably low for a president still in his first year in office.⁴⁰ The print media, too, had grown increasingly unfriendly to the president. A May 5 *Newsweek* article pondered whether economic, international, and energy woes might cause Ford to decide against seeking reelection in 1976. It felt free to do so even though the president had repeatedly affirmed his intention to run.⁴¹ Historian Mark Rozell, in his study of the Ford administration's interaction with the press, deemed the period between the fall of Saigon and the onset of the *Mayaguez* incident a "low point."⁴² The national spotlight shone bright on the White House as it dealt with the seizure of the *Mayaguez*. It brought unusually intense visibility and a chance for the administration to recover some public esteem.

With the wounds of Vietnam still fresh, the news media was quick to seize upon the capture of the *Mayaguez* as part of the seemingly unending slew of problems that confronted the US in Southeast Asia. The *Mayaguez* crisis led the NBC, ABC, and CBS evening news broadcasts on Monday—something it continued to do through the end of the week.⁴³ As part of

³⁹ Jerald F. terHorst, "President Ford and the Media," in Thompson, *The Ford Presidency*, 212. The press conference layout that Ford pioneered remains standard practice to this day.

⁴⁰ *The Gallup Opinion Index: Political, Social, and Economic Trends*, no. 119 (May 1975): 11.

⁴¹ "The President Faces 1976," *Newsweek*, May 5, 1975, 48-49.

⁴² Mark Rozell, *The Press and the Ford Presidency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 97.

⁴³ May 12, 1975, in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/tvn-month-search.pl> (accessed February 4, 2011).

its effort to sculpt the public narrative of the crisis, the government worked rigorously to clamp down on leaks. According to Ford's counsel, speechwriter, and longtime political aide Robert Hartmann (who was present every time the NSC met to discuss *Mayaguez* incident), "virtually nothing was given out by Nessen to the press. [Ford] tried to muzzle the State and Defense departments, too—a virtual impossibility—though Kissinger did better at it than Schlesinger."⁴⁴ The administration refused to discuss publicly any unfolding diplomatic steps or military plans. At press conferences, Nessen would not add to or clarify any of the government's often deliberately ambiguous pronouncements. The absence of other reliable sources and the dearth of information made public by the government left the news media to essentially parrot the White House line. On May 12, none of the big three news networks questioned the Cambodians' motives or the president's characterization of the seizure as an "act of piracy." All hinted at the likelihood of military action. Like the policymakers they wrote about, reporters probed for similarities between *Mayaguez* and the *Pueblo* incidents. When the press learned that the *Mayaguez* was carrying some military cargo, it was able to elicit a rare piece of additional information from the White House: Nessen assured reporters that the dilapidated, WWII-era commercial ship was not on a contrived government mission to spy on Cambodia.⁴⁵

By the time Nessen had finished reading the ultimatum to the press, Kissinger was on a plane to Missouri. His day-long trip was part of a post-Vietnam effort to shore up public support for American foreign policy and a position of active global leadership. As it happened, it was also an opportunity for the president to demonstrate his independence from the increasingly controversial adviser. The media's long infatuation with "Super K" over, reporters had begun

⁴⁴ Hartmann, *Palace Politics*, 326.

⁴⁵ Philip Shabecoff, "White House Says Cambodia Seized a U.S. Cargo Ship," *New York Times*, May 13, 1975; News Conference at the White House with Press Secretary Ron Nessen #215, May 13, 1975, Box 9, Folder: May 13, 1975 (No. 213) (No. 214) (No. 215) (No. 216), Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

clamoring about Kissinger's "unprecedented authority."⁴⁶ Many longtime Ford advisers—worried about the president's personal credibility in light of his reliance on Kissinger—had made known their distaste for Kissinger's habit of "putting the President of the United States in a pupil's role."⁴⁷

Diplomacy and the Thai Connection

Kissinger left Deputy Secretary of State Robert Ingersoll in charge of diplomacy. His delegation of the task to a subordinate reflected the relative unimportance he attached to it. Kissinger instructed Ingersoll to make entreaties to the Chinese in the hopes that they would pressure the Khmer Rouge to release the ship. The State Department attempted to pass messages demanding the release of the *Mayaguez* to the Chinese Liaison Office in Washington (the de facto embassy, since the United States and China had not yet established formal diplomatic relations) and the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Beijing. Both outfits rejected the messages, but an American Foreign Service official left a copy in the latter's mailroom.⁴⁸

While Washington slept, Bangkok whirled. Thailand became yet another arena for the demonstration of American credibility—another audience at which the United States aimed its performance during the *Mayaguez* episode. Thai Prime Minister Khukrit Pramoj was concerned about reports emanating from the United States that threatened the use of force to rescue the *Mayaguez*. He summoned Edward Masters, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the American Embassy in Bangkok, to a meeting and exhorted the United States not to involve his country in the conflict over the captured ship. Khukrit stressed that this included the use of American

⁴⁶ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Marketing the G.O.P." *Washington Post*, November 24, 1974.

⁴⁷ Robert T. Hartmann, *Palace Politics: An Inside Account of the Ford Years* (San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 329.

⁴⁸ Telegram from the Department of State to the Liaison Office in China, May 13, 1975, Box 29, Folder: Department of State, Telegrams and Cables (1), National Security Adviser, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, 1973-1976, GRFL.

aircraft based in Thailand. Masters, unaware that American reconnaissance planes had already taken off from Utapao to locate the *Mayaguez*, reassured him that the US would inform the Thai government before it took any action. The agreement was codified in writing.⁴⁹ In the wake of communist victories in Cambodia and Vietnam, Khukrit recognized that his moderate pro-Western government was in an unstable position. Though only recently elected, the scholar, journalist, and politician had long been familiar with the international dimensions of the Cold War. Not all his experience came from direct involvement in politics. In the 1963 Hollywood film *The Ugly American*, which to a large extent presaged the tragedy of American involvement in Vietnam, he played Kwen Sai, the leader of the fictional Southeast Asian state of Sarkhan. In the film, Kwen's fealty to his American benefactors galvanizes a nationalist uprising that transforms his country into an epicenter of superpower competition. In the real world—one in which most of Thailand's neighbors were shifting towards the communist bloc—Khukrit would not fight the tide. Striking a defiant tone, he told the Thai press exactly why he had called in the American diplomat.⁵⁰

Since the American bases in Thailand were the only suitable ones from which the military could launch a rescue operation, Khukrit's very public opposition to the use of Thai soil as a staging ground presented an obstacle. Before the crisis, the Thai government had bowed to domestic pressure and asked the US to vacate its bases in the country within twelve months.⁵¹ If the United States ignored Thai wishes and used the bases to stage a military operation against Cambodia, pressure would mount to shut them down even more quickly. Furthermore, an

⁴⁹ Interview with Edward E. Masters, in *Frontline Diplomacy: The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mfdip.2004mas05> (accessed February 22, 2011).

⁵⁰ Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State in *FRUS*, 988.

⁵¹ "U.S. Agrees to Big Cut In Its Forces in Thailand," *New York Times*, May 2, 1975.

accelerated American withdrawal from Thailand would cement the perception of a hasty retreat from all of Asia.

Ford and Kissinger were willing to alienate the Thais in order to establish geopolitical credibility with a wider global audience, but they did not believe that would be necessary. American officials thought that Thailand's military leaders would privately appreciate the show of American toughness (and thus find the United States more credible) even though they could not express their feelings publicly. Scowcroft suggested that ignoring Thai warnings might jeopardize American access to the bases, but Schlesinger hinted at an alternative scenario: "If they see us acting, they may change their attitude. Publicly, they may protest, but privately, they may agree. They have done this before."⁵² Thailand's left-wing electorate kept the country's political figures in check, but its conservative military elite was firmly entrenched in power. Richard M. Gibson, a State Department official who worked on Burma and Thailand, recalled that "the Thai establishment . . . [was] trying to walk the middle line. They had such a close relationship with us and had worked with us so closely over so many years that they didn't really want to cut us off and put us too far afield, but they did want to make their peace with the Chinese and with the other countries in Indochina."⁵³ The NSC decided to ignore Thai sovereignty and use the base at Utapao as the center of operations for the military side of the recovery effort. Kissinger recalled being convinced that "whatever later Thai protests or reactions, the Thai leadership—and especially the military leadership—would welcome a strong

⁵² Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 998.

⁵³ Interview with Richard M. Gibson, in *Frontline Diplomacy: The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mfdip.2007gib01> (accessed February 22, 2011).

American stand.”⁵⁴ Ford wrote in his memoirs that he “didn’t give a damn about offending [the Thai’s] sensibilities.”⁵⁵

As attitudes in the White House moved inexorably towards confrontation, they sent ripples through the diplomatic scene. On May 13, Deputy Secretary of State Ingersoll sent a telegram to Deputy Ambassador Masters in Thailand explaining American policy with regard to Thailand. “You should understand that we will be required to utilize U-Tapao as may be necessary in order to secure promptly the release of the vessel and Americans,” his telegram announced. “You should not . . . give any advance indication to the Thais. We realize that there may be costs with the Thais but the balance of interests requires that we be willing to take whatever risks may be involved in our relations with Thais.”⁵⁶ The National Security Council gambled that a show of force against Cambodia would reassure Thai power brokers of the United States’ long-term intent to honor its foreign commitments and contain the spread of communism. Even if it did not, Thailand’s sovereignty paled in importance next to Ford’s needs to reaffirm his country’s resolve, demonstrate his own competence, and rescue his endangered citizens.

A New Day Brings New Problems

By the morning of Tuesday, May 13 in Washington—the second day of the crisis—the *Mayaguez* incident had claimed its first victims. Twelve American helicopters laden with eighty Air Police took off from Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base and made for Utapao. One of the choppers and twenty-three Americans did not make it to their destination. The CH-53’s rotor system failed less than forty miles east of Nakhon Phanom, causing the aircraft and all its occupants to plummet to a fiery grave. The other helicopters, delayed by a futile search for nonexistent survivors, arrived late. The next day, the Department of Defense (DOD) used

⁵⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 561.

⁵⁵ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 276.

⁵⁶ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Thailand in *FRUS*, 1001.

bureaucratic subterfuge to make the military operations surrounding the seizure of the *Mayaguez* appear more successful. Because the dead troops had not yet been formally committed to the rescue operation, the Pentagon initially did not include their sacrifice on public casualty reports.⁵⁷

Ford convened another NSC meeting on Tuesday morning. Overnight, American reconnaissance planes had discovered the *Mayaguez* anchored off Koh Tang, an island situated between Poulo Wei and the mainland. The same aircraft saw people being moved from the *Mayaguez* to the island's dense jungle interior. An intercepted Khmer Rouge message, which stated that forty-two American and nine Vietnamese prisoners would be taken to Koh Tang, lent credence to the sighting. Since the captured ship was not yet in the harbor at Kompong Som, averting a repetition of the *Pueblo* ordeal was once again of paramount importance. Broadly speaking, the NSC assumed the crew's arrival in Cambodia proper to portend either its use as a tool of anti-American propaganda or its certain demise. DCI Colby declared that "we should realize that the Cambodians are tough fellows. We know that they took a Vietnamese ship and killed seven people without thinking any more about it." To prevent the ship from reaching the port haven, Ford ordered the military to use air power to quarantine Koh Tang and ensure no vessels moved between it and the mainland. If the *Mayaguez* made any attempt to cross the imaginary line in the sea under its own power, American pilots were to attempt to disable the ship without sinking it. In addition, the NSC began considering an assault on Koh Tang to rescue the crew.⁵⁸

Attitudes in the National Security Council ranged from cautious to pugnacious. Schlesinger held that too quick a resort to violence "might precipitate the sinking of the freighter

⁵⁷ Roy Rowan, *The Four Days of Mayaguez* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 90.

⁵⁸ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 992-996; Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 277.

and jeopardize getting the Americans out." He expected the Cambodians to act rationally.

Although the Khmer Rouge had no scruples about devastating its own population, he reckoned it knew better than to pick a fight with the United States. Rockefeller's estimate of the communist psyche was considerably less generous. To him, the Khmer Rouge would understand nothing save the universal language of force. The vice president's profound insight came as a result of his thoughtful and incisive exegesis of the writings of Mao Tse-tung: "I remember the story by Mao Tse Tung about sticking a blade in until you hit steel and then you pull out your sword. If you do not meet steel, you go in further." With Kissinger still away, Rockefeller was the principal advocate for speedy retaliation to forestall more annoyances and mend America's apparently tattered reputation. He declared that "the big question is whether or not we look silly," and proposed bombing Cambodia until it relented and released the crew. To buttress his case for quick, decisive action, he offered a prediction that proved heartbreakingly prescient: "If [after waiting long enough for the Cambodians to move the crew to the mainland] you go ashore, we may lose more Marines trying to land than the Americans who were on the boat originally."⁵⁹

The government's intelligence and ability to interpret intelligence were often faulty. An inundation of contradictory reports about the whereabouts of the *Mayaguez* had interrupted the president's previous night's sleep, and he wanted his team to be more frank about the quality of the information they gave him. Ford recognized that the government's intelligence agencies—in their haste to get up-to-the-minute information to the decision-makers at White House—were not properly digesting, vetting, and analyzing the data they collected. This did not bode well when the men in the Situation Room micromanaged the entire American recovery effort. Nor did it bode well when the same men had their hands full just trying to keep time straight. The eleven-

⁵⁹ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 997.

hour time difference between Washington, D.C. and Cambodia frequently confused the NSC's military preparations.⁶⁰

Once Ford adjourned the NSC meeting, Schlesinger promulgated and implemented the commander-in-chief's quarantine strategy. From the Situation Room, he sent a telegram to Hawaii-based Commander-in-Chief of US Pacific Command (CINCPAC) Admiral Noel Gayler. American aircraft were to turn back any ships that attempted to approach or depart Koh Tang by firing across their bows or deploying tear gas. They were not, however, permitted to directly engage the targets. The president himself had to okay the use of lethal force.⁶¹

On Tuesday afternoon, the Department of Defense prepared a cost-benefit analysis of possible means to recover the *Mayaguez* and her crew. Ford could order the military to assault either the ship or Koh Tang using the limited forces it had at its immediate disposal. Or he could wait another twenty-four hours and launch coordinated assaults against both targets. The argument for delay was that the crew might be in both places. Holding off until the US had overwhelming forces in the area would ensure American troops could reach all of the hostages, "enhance the prospects of quick success," "minimize the loss of life," and ensure the rescue also served as "an impressive show of force." The argument for haste, on the other hand, was that the crew did not have time on its side. The DOD did not want to give the Khmer Rouge "ample time to put forward preconditions for the return of the ship and/or crew, or publicly rationalize the seizure and attempt to justify their stance."⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid., 993-995.

⁶¹ Telegram from the Situation Room to CINCPAC Honolulu, May 13, 1975, Box 28, Folder: Department of Defense - General, National Security Adviser, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

⁶² Possible Scenarios for Recovery of Ship and Crew, Box 28, Folder: Department of Defense - General, National Security Adviser, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

The Defense Department's list of options indicated that, in addition to or in place of the conventional assaults, Ford could exploit the US's preponderance of air power. The president could issue an ultimatum and threaten to bomb targets in mainland Cambodia unless the *Mayaguez* was promptly released. If the ultimatum went unheeded, bombing might convince the Khmer Rouge of American resolve and compel it to acquiesce in American demands. It would also "serve as a potent warning to other would-be aggressors." Regrettably, the report explained, reducing chunks of Cambodia to rubble "could be perceived as an over-reaction," "would probably generate strong public hostility in the US," and "is of questionable legality." Moreover, the lessons of Vietnam were still fresh: "It is unlikely that bombing would have a significant impact because the Khmer leadership are used to an intense level of bombing. In addition there is every indication that bombing has minimum impact on an agrarian society which is under extensive political control."⁶³

From 1969 to 1973, the United States had showered Cambodia with bombs. President Nixon and his top national security aide Henry Kissinger rained destruction on the small country in an effort to stop communists from using it as a sanctuary and transit point for weapons making their way into South Vietnam. The undeclared and illegal air war engendered endless terror and dislocation, and it drove much of the Cambodian population into the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. After the initial wave of bombings in 1969 and 1970, in which 3,875 secret B-52 sorties dropped 108,823 tons of ordnance, the US pounded Cambodia like a drum to the fluctuating tempo of the war in neighboring Vietnam. It seemed not to notice that the song had ended. American planes continued to ravage Cambodia's most populous areas until a Congressional ban took effect in August 1973—eight months after the Paris Peace Accords formally and officially ended

⁶³ Ibid.

America's involvement in the Vietnam War.⁶⁴ As House Minority Leader, Ford was one of the handful of members of Congress whom Nixon briefed on the United States' secret Cambodian campaigns.⁶⁵ In addition, many of the young Ford administration's White House, Foreign Service, and military appointees were holdovers from the Nixon administration. For them, bombing Cambodia was nothing new.

Credibility and Congress

After ordering American planes to quarantine Koh Tang, Ford waited restlessly for news from the front line. He called Kissinger in Missouri, and the two men discussed but eventually decided against setting a deadline for the Cambodian government to release the *Mayaguez*. For the rest of the workday, in the absence of any pressing military developments, Ford kept to his usual schedule. He met with a delegation from nearly bankrupt New York City that had come to request a federal bailout, hosted a collection of Congressional visitors, honored a group of Holocaust survivors, and attended to normal business with members of his staff.⁶⁶ White House Counsel Hartmann recalled that "as the days passed, Ford kept to his regular schedule. He was anxious that Washington not be gripped with a crisis atmosphere, which it dearly loves."⁶⁷ According to Press Secretary Ron Nessen, "Throughout the *Mayaguez* episode, Ford appeared cool, precise, and very low-key. . . . [He] tried to avoid generating a crisis mood."⁶⁸ With the eyes of the world upon him, Ford wanted to appear firmly in control of the situation—a strong

⁶⁴ William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 172.

⁶⁵ Kenton Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia, 1969-2000: A troubled relationship* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 176 n37.

⁶⁶ The Daily Diary of President Gerald R. Ford, May 13, 1975, President Gerald R. Ford's Daily Diary for 1975, Gerald R. Ford Digital Library. <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/diary/pdd750513.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2011).

⁶⁷ Hartmann, *Palace Politics*, 326.

⁶⁸ Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different*, 119.

leader not made ineffectual by his inexperience. To his country, he wanted to project a sense of calm—a steady leader capable of guiding the nation through difficult times.

Ordinarily, Ford made frequent speeches and media appearances.⁶⁹ During the *Mayaguez* incident, however, the president eschewed his usual tendency for frequent public speaking. Other members of his administration made brief statements to give information to the media, but the president did not make a peep until he was sure the crew was safe. As a public relations strategy, his silence spoke volumes. It denied the cynical media an opportunity to question his dubious motives for military retaliation and allowed him to appear deeply involved in efforts to rescue the crew. Whereas other modern presidents fostered a rally 'round the flag effect by being extremely vocal during international crises, communications scholar Denise Bostdorff has shown that "Ford delegated rhetorical tasks to other members of his administration who, in turn, portrayed the president as busily involved in behind-the-scenes efforts at crisis resolution. . . . His surrogate speakers depicted him as an active, competent commander-in-chief who had the crisis under control."⁷⁰ No, the president could not answer questions, he was too busy being president. Thus, he appeared presidential. In the privacy of the Situation Room, Ford never challenged the NSC's attribution of symbolic importance to the *Mayaguez* crisis. By not delivering any public statements and minimizing the amount of information that was released to the public, however, he downplayed the significance of the episode—at least until its successful resolution. In this way, Ford minimized the risks attendant to failure.

In Kansas City—the second leg of his Missouri junket—Kissinger gave another major foreign policy address. His speech the previous day concentrated on international politics, and

⁶⁹ Hart, *The Sound of Leadership*, 59-60; Ron Nessen, "The Ford Presidency and the Press," in *The Ford Presidency*, 184; Robert Orben, "Speeches, Humor and the Public," in *The Ford Presidency*, 238. Ford spoke more frequently than any president from Truman to Reagan, giving 1,231 speeches in his 896 days in office.

⁷⁰ Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crises*, 124, 131.

this one segued into economics.⁷¹ At a news conference afterwards, reporters, naturally loath to cover ponderous financial proposals, asked Kissinger about the *Mayaguez* forthwith. The secretary of state pounded the podium, declaring, "the United States will not accept harassment of its ships in international sealanes [*sic*]."⁷² Later, during a private question-and-answer session, *Time* correspondent Strobe Talbott asked Kissinger how long he anticipated the *Mayaguez* crisis would last. Kissinger's response was confident and coy: "I know your magazine's deadline. I think we can meet it."⁷³ The ship and the crisis surrounding it bestowed his internationalist vision with immediate legitimacy.

At 5:30PM on Tuesday, White House aides began phoning Congressional leaders to inform them that the president would, if necessary, use force to rescue the *Mayaguez* and her crew. They told the legislators that diplomatic efforts were ongoing but did not alert them to the ongoing military planning. Although the senior members of Congress did not engage in any meaningful consultation with the low-level aides who called them and sometimes only reached them at home, their brief comments were taken down and passed along to the president.⁷⁴

By ordering American planes equipped for combat to enter the air space of a foreign state, Ford unquestionably triggered the timer embedded in the War Powers Act. The law's consultation clause required him to, within forty-eight hours, give a full report to Congress detailing the Constitutional or legislative authority under which he committed the troops, the estimated scope and duration of the hostilities, and any other information he deemed pertinent.

⁷¹ Address by Henry Kissinger, "Strengthening the World Economic Structure," in *Department of State Bulletin* 72, no. 1875 (June 2, 1975): 713.

⁷² News Conference at Kansas City, May 13, in *Department of State Bulletin* 72, no. 1875 (June 2, 1975): 729.

⁷³ Rowan, *Four Days of Mayaguez*, 92; Roy Rowan, e-mail message to author, January 7, 2011. Rowan worked as *Time*'s Hong Kong bureau chief during the period in question. He was on one of the last American helicopters out of Saigon in April 1975 and published his first book, an instant history called *The Four Days of Mayaguez*, shortly after his return to the United States. The anecdote about Kissinger's answer to Strobe Talbott's question does not exist in the public record, but was relayed to Rowan by his old *Time* colleague.

⁷⁴ Congressional Contacts of May 13, 1975, Box 122, Folder: Mayaguez Seizure - 5/14/75 (2), John Marsh Files, 1974-1977, GRFL.

Administration papers reveal a policy geared towards ignoring and undermining Congressional influence over foreign policy. The president sought to act in accordance with, but not pursuant to, the dictates of the War Powers Act. Ford would abide by all of the law's provisions, but he would do so of his own volition—not because of what he viewed as an illegitimate Congressional mandate.⁷⁵ The legal sleight of hand had a purpose. By claiming it was acting only out of its responsible desire to run an open and collaborative government and not out of its duty to comply with the law, the Ford administration denied the applicability of the War Powers Act in situations that resembled the *Mayaguez* incident. It preserved for the future the dubious presidential authority to engage in unilateral “police actions” without Congressional oversight.

Even as Ford cast symbolic doubt on the War Powers Act's legitimacy, rejected the law in principle, and questioned its applicability, administration lawyers maneuvered within it. In case it faced judicial setbacks and was forced to abide by the statute, the Ford White House wanted to set a loose precedent for the Congressional power it acknowledged. In a Press Office briefing paper, the administration announced only its future desire to keep the legislative branch “informed” and claimed that relaying brief Congressional commentary served as a sufficient exchange of views as to satisfy the War Powers Act's requirement for consultation.⁷⁶

Another briefing paper made it clear that, in addition to the War Powers Act, Ford would be unimpeded by the Cooper-Church Amendment:

The President, under the Constitution, has the [right] duty to defend American life and property from acts of aggression. [The] Cooper-Church amendment was not designed to limit [the] protection of American life or property. It was aimed at stopping American participation in hostilities which were not principally a threat to American life. (FYI: Seizure of an American ship and the crew on the high seas is considered an Act of War

⁷⁵ War Powers Act, May 14, 1975, Box 14, Folder: Mayaguez – General, Ronald H. Nessen Papers, 1974-1977, GRFL.

⁷⁶ War Powers Act, May 14, 1975, Box 14, Folder: Mayaguez – General, Ronald H. Nessen Papers, 1974-1977, GRFL.

and there are no legal restrictions on the President's ability to act, commensurate with the situation with which he is faced, according to [Counsel to the President] Rod Hills.)⁷⁷

The 1971 law barred the introduction of American ground troops into Cambodia without Congressional consent. But administration lawyers argued that the spirit of the law did not prevent the president from doing all he deemed necessary to rescue the *Mayaguez* without coming to the legislative branch for prior permission. They sought to chip away at checks on executive authority and puncture the inflated interpretation of the Cooper-Church Amendment that existed outside the context of Congress's effort to end the Vietnam War. In so doing, they laid the legal foundation for Ford's resort to the use of force.

The next day, Congress took issue with the White House's interpretation of the War Powers Act's consultation clause. Hartmann told Ford that, "last night, we gave the leadership information on your actions. They agreed. They said that they were advised, but not consulted. We reported the attacks to them. Again, they supported you. Today, in the House, people are saying that there was no consultation under the War Powers Act." Ford asked Jack Marsh to call the leading members of Congress to the White House for a meeting at 6:30PM on Wednesday evening. He planned to inform the distraught lawmakers of the upcoming military operations and respond to their questions and concerns. If the meeting did not placate the group and the president's plan did not garner support, nothing needed to change. Offering Ford a bit of coaching, Schlesinger recommended that any description of the air strikes be shrouded in a familiar wartime euphemism: "The plans regarding air strikes should be presented to show that the targets will be carefully selected. We should not just talk about 'a few' strikes, but about 'selective' strikes."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ War Powers Act, May 13, 1975, Box 14, Folder: Mayaguez – General, Ronald H. Nessen Papers, 1974-1977, GRFL.

⁷⁸ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 1034-1035.

The One That Got Away

Halfway around the world, just as White House aides were "consulting" with senior members of Congress via telephone, American aircraft engaged a convoy of three boats that departed Koh Tang and made a course for Kompong Som. American pilots used machine guns, explosives, and tear gas to stop the two gunboats that were leading the flotilla, but they could not halt the fishing trawler that was bringing up the rear. Worse, the pilots discovered thirty to forty people—possibly Caucasians—huddled on the fishing boat's bow, and they doubted their ability to disable the craft without sinking it. The military played an elaborate game of telephone to relay the information to the White House, where the president faced an impossible dilemma. He could instruct the pilots to sink the vessel, or he could do nothing and allow the American hostages to reach the mainland. Ford wanted time to deliberate; he preferred making tough decisions through careful personal consultation with his advisers. There was already a National Security Council meeting scheduled for the evening, and Ford told Scowcroft that he would make a decision there. Until then, American planes were to continue trying to stop the trawler using nonlethal force.⁷⁹

The NSC convened at 10:40PM on Tuesday night to discuss the seizure of the *Mayaguez* for the third time in thirty hours. Kissinger had returned from Missouri just in time to apply his expertise and once again plunge headlong into managing the crisis side by side with his colleagues. His first instinct was to prevent the boat from reaching the shore, lest the Cambodians hold the crew "for bargaining." Secretary of Defense Schlesinger, on the other hand, held that "avoiding bargaining chips is less of an objective than not being in a position

⁷⁹ Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Ford and the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) in *Ibid.*, 1002-1003.

where the Cambodians can say that the F-4's killed our own men."⁸⁰ Caught between a rock and a hard place, the members of the NSC leaned towards sinking the handful of other speedboats that remained idle at Koh Tang. They could not cut the Gordian knot of the fishing trawler.

Kissinger identified two distinct yet interrelated problems: "First, the problem of the crew and the ship and of how we win their release. Second, our general posture which goes beyond the crew and the ship." He framed the former problem as an outgrowth of the latter. The seizure of the *Mayaguez* was symptomatic of deeper problems in American credibility. Though they might secure the crew's release, negotiation and diplomacy were also signs of weakness. Kissinger told Ford that "we must understand that we cannot negotiate for [the crewmembers] once they are on the mainland. If you are willing to take that position, then I think we can let them go. We should not let them become bargaining chips."⁸¹ If the United States deigned to negotiate with the Khmer Rouge, it would offer further evidence for the thesis that it was no longer an unchallengeable, untouchable, and indefatigable military power. Furthermore, it would signal that Americans living and working abroad were fair and lucrative game for kidnappers.

Rather than use flexible response to incrementally escalate the pressure, Kissinger advocated coordinated, overwhelming assaults on Kompong Som, Koh Tang, and the *Mayaguez*. At least in part, sweeping geopolitical considerations inspired his specific military proposals. He insisted that "people should have the impression that we are potentially trigger-happy." When Counselor to the President John Marsh expressed doubt about sinking the unused boats at Koh Tang, which, he pointed out, may contain Americans below decks, Kissinger was defiant. "I think the pilot should sink them," he declared. It did not matter if the pilot could see Americans on board—they were apparently expendable in the pursuit of Kissinger's grand objectives: "He

⁸⁰ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *Ibid.*, 1005.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1006.

should destroy the boats and not send situation reports." The secretary of state's callous disregard for American life, to say nothing of his attitude towards harming Cambodians, illustrates the extent to which the safe recovery of the crew was not his foremost concern. Instead, his main objective was to resuscitate the United States' moribund reputation. As usual, President Ford adhered to Kissinger's advice: "Tell them to sink the boats near the island. On the other boat, use riot control agents or other methods, but do not attack it."⁸²

The members of the NSC were unaware that the fishing trawler contained the whole of the American crew. Indeed, the most recent reports from the pilots monitoring the situation suggested that only eight or nine Americans were on board. With no definite idea about the whereabouts of the remaining crewmembers, the NSC continued the unenviable task of plotting their rescue. To facilitate the planning and avoid the familiar problem of mixing up time zones, Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General David Jones had compiled a chart detailing when the hodgepodge of reinforcements was scheduled to arrive. The Marines would be ready by 3AM Washington time on May 14; American warships would begin arriving on the scene twelve hours later.

Ford inquired as to the possibility of immediate military action. It was past noon in Cambodia, and moving in before nightfall would allow the Khmer Rouge minimum time to make ready a resistance to the inevitable American attack. General Jones explained that Marines at Utapao could use helicopters to assault Koh Tang and the *Mayaguez* before dark. The choppers would not, however, have enough daylight to shuttle reinforcements back to the island, and the troops there would have to maintain a beachhead against an enemy of uncertain strength and number overnight. Kissinger preferred waiting for the insurance that the presence of destroyers and aircraft carriers would provide, saying any American operation "should be

⁸² Ibid., 1006-1007.

decisive and it should look powerful.”⁸³ Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements, on the other hand, argued that “in the time frame that you are talking about, there will not be an island worth taking. All the Americans will be gone.”⁸⁴ The quarantine of Koh Tang was imperfect and porous. If the weather took an uncooperative turn, small boats could easily use the combined cover of cloud and night to traverse the waters between the island and the mainland undetected by American planes. The Cambodians could thus transport the remaining members of the crew—the ones who, according to the NSC’s intelligence, were still on Koh Tang—to the more heavily fortified military installations at Kompong Som. Clements advocated a quick strike, waiting no longer than it took for the first destroyer to arrive.

An unimpressive display of military force would signal a lack of political will and would not deter other would-be adversaries. Kissinger told the rest of the NSC that “we should not look as though people can localize an issue.” To project determination rather than frailty, the US had to punish Cambodia. “We have to use the opportunity to prove that others will be worse off if they tackle us, and not that they can return to the status quo. . . . I am thinking not of Cambodia, but of Korea and of the Soviet Union and of others. It will not help you with the Congress if they get the wrong impression of the way we will act under such circumstances.”⁸⁵ Ford agreed. He decided to wait until the sun next rose over Cambodia before launching the rescue operation.

Dr. Strangelove and Mr. Hyde

To complement the conventional assault on Koh Tang and the decidedly unconventional assault on the *Mayaguez*, Ford raised the possibility of using B-52s stationed in Guam to bomb targets in Kompong Som. At first, no one took issue with the president’s suggestion. Kissinger even devised what would become the administration’s public rationale for the bombing: “I think

⁸³ Ibid., 1009.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 1009-1010.

that when we move, we should hit the mainland as well as the island. We should hit targets at Kompong Som and the airfield and say that we are doing it to suppress any supporting action against our operations to regain the ship and seize the island."⁸⁶ Since the Khmer Rouge had troops, munitions, and vehicles in Kompong Som with which they could reinforce their contingent on Koh Tang, Ford could claim that he ordered the mainland attacks to protect American soldiers engaged in the island operation. Administration thinking, however, evolved differently. Vice President Rockefeller first raised the idea of bombing the Cambodian mainland less than twenty minutes into the NSC's first meeting on the *Mayaguez*. The notion grew out of a need to demonstrate American resolve in a post-Vietnam world and a desire to punish Cambodia for its transgressions of acceptable behavior. The administration later claimed that it mounted the air strikes against Kompong Som to prevent the Khmer Rouge from sending more troops to kill Americans on Koh Tang. But it certainly did not cook the strikes up with that in mind.

Schlesinger was wary about using B-52s to raze portions of Kompong Som. Instead, he proposed employing the jets and bombers on the aircraft carriers. The planes could take off while their floating hubs were still a considerable distance away from the targets, so their use would not entail any additional delay. The secretary of defense's logic, however, was not military but political. In the nation's collective consciousness, B-52s were indelibly associated with the profligate use of air power during the Vietnam War. "The B-52's are a red flag on the Hill," he explained. "Moreover, they bomb a very large box and they are not so accurate. They might generate a lot of casualties outside the exact areas that we would want to hit."⁸⁷ Schlesinger managed the crisis with an eye towards public relations, but he believed that a disproportionate response would undermine rather than rebuild the nation's credibility. A surgical operation that

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1011-1012.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1013.

confirmed the US's military supremacy would reassure allies and unnerve adversaries just as effectively as a large bombing campaign. By and large, Schlesinger's objectives were identical to Kissinger's. The two differed only on how to accomplish them. Ford recounted in his memoirs that

this is where Kissinger and I disagreed with Schlesinger. Henry and I felt that we had to do more. . . . We wanted them to know that we meant business, so we opted for air strikes against the mainland as well. Schlesinger agreed that our first priority should be to rescue the ship and her crew, but he was far less eager to use *Mayaguez* as an example for Asia and the world. He was concerned that our bombing plans were too extensive.⁸⁸

The president concluded that more options could only be better. He ordered the B-52s put on alert, but he decided to entrust the decision of whether or not to use them to the know-how of the Joint Chiefs.

In his memoirs, Kissinger claimed Schlesinger dragged his feet implementing Ford's military directives because he did not agree with them. The Pentagon was apparently "above all determined never again to be cast in the role of villain," as it had been during the Vietnam War.⁸⁹

The wrangling between the Departments of State and Defense for control over policy was magnified by the agencies' heads' fractious personal and professional relationship. According to White House Counsel Robert Hartmann, "the Pentagon was eager to portray the military, and the Defense Secretary especially, as advocates of restraint and minimal force while Kissinger was some kind of mad Dr. Strangelove."⁹⁰ Kissinger, the wily bureaucratic power broker, eventually prevailed in his rivalry with Schlesinger, whom Ford fired five months later. Among other factors, the dismissal grew out of the president's disappointment with his secretary of defense's performance during the *Mayaguez* episode.

⁸⁸ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 279.

⁸⁹ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 558.

⁹⁰ Hartmann, *Palace Politics*, 326.

This was the first time White House Counsel Phil Buchen attended an NSC meeting on the *Mayaguez* crisis. An old friend of the president's, Buchen was Ford's fraternity brother at the University of Michigan. After each received a JD, they partnered to form the law firm Ford and Buchen in 1941.⁹¹ The first time he spoke up in the NSC meeting, Buchen did not mince words. Like Kissinger he saw "two problems," but the similarities ended there. He sensed the direction of the conversation and worried that the president was moving towards acting in ways that violated both domestic and international law. "The first [problem] is [the] Cooper-Church Amendment. The second is international law. . . . We have the right of self-defense, but only self-defense. The Cooper-Church Amendment says no actions in Indochina." Ford brushed off the idea that his orders had no legal underpinning, announcing, "we cannot be that concerned in this instance."⁹² He assumed the Cambodians had already killed some of the American crewmembers, which led him to believe that those who remained alive were in immediate danger. Time was of the essence, and Ford refused to have his ability to rescue the crew burdened by the academic exercise of judicial conjecture.

The secretary of state quickly rebutted Buchen's legalistic lack of enthusiasm for military retaliation. The United States was, for all intents and purposes, immune to the authority of institutions of global governance and international law. American credibility depended on a strong executive's ability to resist isolationist sentiment at home. Kissinger elaborated:

I think the worst stance is to follow Phil [Buchen]'s concern. If we only respond at the same place at which we are challenged, nobody can lose by challenging us. They can only win. This means, I think, that we have to do more. The Koreans and others would like to look us over and to see how we react. Under certain circumstances, in fact, some domestic cost is to our advantage in demonstrating the seriousness with which we view this kind of challenge.⁹³

⁹¹ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 57.

⁹² Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 1014.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

In Kissinger's assessment, the United States ought to respond to the seizure of the *Mayaguez* by giving a forceful and dramatic performance that would corroborate its oft expressed yet now frequently questioned devotion to international engagement. If the performance drew bad reviews from the American Congress and public, it would only be further proof of the administration's unwillingness to tolerate provocation. Hence domestic and international strength were inextricably intertwined.

Up to this point, the NSC had decided only to mount air strikes on the airfield in Kompong Som, where the Khmer Rouge housed at least a dozen planes. CIA Chief Colby proposed expanding the bombing's scope to reach the Ream Naval Base and other justifiable targets in the vicinity. Ford, Kissinger, and Schlesinger immediately agreed. The secretary of state claimed that the attacks would "impress the Koreans and the Chinese." He was invigorated by news that the United States could flex its military muscle in communist China's backyard without upsetting the delicate balance of triangular diplomacy. The standard-bearers of Cold War blocs habitually impinged on the sovereignty of their secondaries without a second thought—in this case, Thailand's independence was meaningless. But slighting a nuclear-armed adversary by recklessly interfering in its sphere of influence could have apocalyptic repercussions. Deputy Premier of the Chinese Communist Party Teng Hsiao-ping was in France for a six-day visit. At a press conference after a meeting with French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, journalists asked the Chinese leader to comment on the American threats surrounding Cambodia's seizure of the *Mayaguez*. Teng dissociated himself and his country from the entire situation. If the United States intervened, he said, "China could do nothing." When the journalists pressed him and asked if China might help the US and Cambodia resolve the dispute diplomatically, he was

¹⁷ FBI: Teng PRC 'Could Do Nothing' if U.S. Intervenes in Cambodia, May 13, 1975, Box 30, Folder: Press Wire Stories, National Security Adviser, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff, Files, (1965) 1975-1978, ORL.
¹⁸ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in FRUS, 10/1-10/18.

equally evasive: "You are reporters, and you have more recent news than I have."⁹⁴ The Chinese had dodged American diplomatic envoys and the appeals they carried regarding the *Mayaguez*. Now, one of their leading government officials had given tacit permission for military retaliation.

White House Counsel and speechwriter Robert Hartmann appreciated the careful attention that was being paid to logistical matters, but he felt that the president was neglecting the pivotal public relations aspect of the crisis: "I think the American public wants to know what you are going to do. This crisis, like the Cuban missile crisis, is the first real test of your leadership. What you decide is not as important as what the public perceives. We should not just think of what is the right thing to do, but of what the public perceives." Kissinger respected Hartmann's political acumen. "It is not inconceivable that the Khmer will cave," he explained. The secretary of state wanted to publicize the American pressure tactics—like sinking the Khmer Rouge gunboats—to ensure that any Cambodian concessions were seen as coming "in response to something that we had done."⁹⁵ Ford agreed, and, forty minutes past midnight, broke off the meeting.

Around the same time, the fishing trawler carrying the crew of the *Mayaguez* entered the harbor at Kompong Som. It did not stay long. Almost as soon as the boat was tied to the dock, Khmer Rouge guards sent it and its passengers from whence they came. In all likelihood, the military leadership at Kompong Som was fully aware of the situation and wanted to prevent their city from becoming the target of an American military assault. The trawler ferried the crew of the *Mayaguez* west for half an hour and anchored at Koh Rong Sam Lem, another island off the coast. As Captain Charles T. Miller led the crew of the *Mayaguez* onto the dock, he encountered

⁹⁴ FBIS: Teng: PRC 'Could Do Nothing' if U.S. Intervenes in Cambodia, May 13, 1975, Box 30, Folder: Press Wire Stories, National Security Adviser, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

⁹⁵ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 1017-1018.

a Cambodian man wearing black pajamas and a red bandana. The Cambodian stuck out his hand, smiled, and said, "Welcome to Cambodia."⁹⁶

Final Decisions

On Wednesday, May 14, the *New York Times* reported that "high-ranking Administration sources familiar with military planning said privately that the seizure of the vessel might provide the test of American determination in Southeast Asia that, they asserted, the United States has viewed as important since the collapse of allied governments in South Vietnam and Cambodia."⁹⁷ That day, the *Mayaguez* crisis reached its crescendo.

Ford, Kissinger, and Scowcroft met in the Oval Office in the morning to follow up on CIA Director Colby's suggestion to expand the scope of the air strikes on Kompong Som. Kissinger supported the scheme for political reasons: "You will take as much heat for a big strike as for a small strike. . . . But I have a sense the McNamara syndrome is so important that they [the raids] will not be so ferocious. It may be the B-52 strike is too much. The *Coral Sea* may be better if they do it with vigor." He pointed out to the president that, in addition to doing a job, the planes had to send a message. "This is your first crisis. You should establish a reputation for being too tough to tackle. . . . If you use force it should be ferociously."⁹⁸ To keep his options open, Ford ordered both sets of aircraft kept on alert.

Just before noon, Press Secretary Nessen notified the press that, after "consulting" with Congress, President Ford had ordered American aircraft to sink a number of Cambodian boats around Koh Tang. The briefing paper he took to the news conference bore instructions not to go beyond the statements, "we are in close diplomatic contact with the Thai government," and "we

⁹⁶ Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle*, 158.

⁹⁷ Philip Shabecoff, "Silence in Washington," *New York Times*, May 14, 1975.

⁹⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, May 14, 1975, in the Digital National Security Archive, http://gateway.proquest.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKA13665 (accessed February 2, 2011).

cannot comment on any diplomatic efforts being undertaken at this time." He was not to answer any military questions, only to refer the interested parties to a Defense Department briefing later in the day.⁹⁹ There was more to the refusal to answer questions than the need to safeguard operational integrity. By minimizing the exposure of specific information, the administration limited the media's opportunities to scrutinize its decisions.

The journalists in the White House Press Corps, after being beaten to the Watergate scoop by two reporters who had never set foot in the White House, were eager to prove their worth. They did their best to put the administration's conduct under a microscope. During a question-and-answer session that followed Nessen's reading of the White House's statement, a reporter asked if consultation entailed any measure of approval beyond notification. Nessen did some rhetorical gymnastics as he attempted to explain the nature of the calls that Ford's legislative liaisons had made to senior lawmakers. "It is difficult to answer that question," he started off. "The President did this because he wants to keep Congress informed. . . . They were informed because the President believes in keeping them informed and because the Congress has expressed a desire to be informed, and this was done consistent with the idea as expressed in the War Powers Act. . . . That was consultation. . . . This was considered to be consultation." The press secretary explained that the White House aides' briefings of senators and representatives, though consistent with the legislative branch's demands that it be more closely involved in the making of belligerent foreign policy, did not occur as a result of the legislation of those demands. Another reporter asked whether Americans might have been on any of the destroyed boats.

⁹⁹ Seizure of the Mayaguez, May 14, 1975, Box 14, Folder: Mayaguez - General, Ron Nessen Papers, 1974-1977, GRFL.

Nessen responded that there were "indications" of that being the case, leading the journalist to ask sarcastically, "So, are we to destroy these men in order to save them?"¹⁰⁰

The NSC met again at 3:52PM. Colby played his usual role and offered the most recent appraisals of the situation. At least some of the crew was in Kompong Som (in actuality, the entire crew was on Koh Rong Sam Lem). In addition to artillery and antiaircraft defenses, American reconnaissance estimated that there were twenty-four armed ships and four utility launching craft in or near the harbor. The city's airfield headquartered three two-person T-28 fighter planes and six transport aircraft. As things stood, the Cambodian military had the capacity to transport 2,400 troops from Kompong Som to Koh Tang in just over four hours. Pochentong Airfield near Phnom Penh—about 140 miles away—housed an additional 100 T-28s. Beyond hitting the targets in Kompong Som, Donald Rumsfeld proposed that American planes bombard the airport in Phnom Penh to preclude the Khmer Rouge's use of the planes based there. General Jones restrained the feisty chief of staff by confirming that the T-28s were "not a real factor." The fighters did not have enough range to fly to Kompong Som and remain airborne for long. Even so, Rumsfeld maintained his desire to pound Cambodia's capital and largest city. "I am thinking of the airport. If they could use it, then we would have a stronger argument to hit the airport."¹⁰¹ He was searching for any pretext to expand the scope of the American retaliation, whether or not it served a military necessity.

Although Thailand's prime minister continued to agitate regarding the United States' use of his country's bases against his wishes, Colby believed the administration could contain the damage. The circumstances appeared worse than was actually the case. "Khukrit undoubtedly feels he will have to make some public gesture that will take him off the hook with the

¹⁰⁰ News Conference at the White House with Press Secretary Ron Nessen #217, May 14, 1975, Box 9, Folder: May 14, 1975 (No. 217) (No. 218) (No. 219), Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

¹⁰¹ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS* 1021-1025.

Cambodian government . . . and his own population," he said. Colby sensed that the Thai government officials denouncing the US were engaging in political posturing. As proof, he reported that "army commander Krit Siwara has said in private that he was 'extremely pleased' that the U.S. was acting in a decisive manner. In public, however, he has taken a line similar to that of the Prime Minister."¹⁰² The nation's top military and political minds believed that, provided the US did not have the Marines return to Thailand after the culmination of the crisis, the Thai politicians' complaints and the popular ire that inspired them would probably peter out.

Ford still had to make final decisions on the shape and scope of the rescue operation. He approved assaults on Koh Tang, the *Mayaguez*, and Kompong Som for that evening—timed to coincide with first light in Cambodia—but the form of the mainland attack remained in question. By the time the NSC meeting convened, American naval vessels were in range of the objective area. Ironically, it took a civilian to convince Ford to use the available carrier aircraft instead of the B-52s. White House Photographer David Kennerly had been taking photographs from the back of the room. In a massive breach of protocol, he spoke up and suggested that the seizure of the *Mayaguez* might have been the act of a rogue local commander and not the central government. Though the president gave him a tongue lashing later, the young Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer persuaded Ford that "massive air strikes would constitute overkill."¹⁰³

The NSC considered using the threat of bombing to issue an ultimatum, even this late in the game. Since some of the crewmembers had made it to the mainland, the military's rescue missions could not reach all the captives. And though the prospect of air strikes might compel the Khmer Rouge to release the crew, the administration had no surefire way of conveying its demands. "I have no objection," Kissinger explained, "but I do not believe that our action should

¹⁰² Ibid., 1024.

¹⁰³ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 280; Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 1025-1027.

be dependent on an ultimatum." Regarding the proposal to bomb targets in Cambodia located outside Kompong Som and its environs, "I could be talked into taking out the 100 aircraft at Phnom Penh, but I do not want to upset people too much. But we should move massively and firmly. . . . We can argue that we are doing this to protect our operations." Protecting the operations, however, was not his foremost concern: "What we have to get across to other countries is that we will not confine ourselves to the areas in which they challenge us."¹⁰⁴

Hartmann saved some of his handwritten notes from the NSC's meetings on the *Mayaguez*. It is impossible to tell exactly when he made the jottings, but they provide an intimate glimpse into the private motivations and concerns of one of the nation's top policymakers as he dealt with an international crisis. They show that politics were as important as the safe recovery of the crew. Hartmann postulated a direct relationship between the outcome of the *Mayaguez* incident and the president's chances for electoral survival. On one small scrap of paper, he wrote, "by Thurs[day] night, we will have lost the 1976 election."¹⁰⁵ The electioneering speechwriter recognized the tragedy and absurdity of the situation. He wrote on a second piece of paper, "this great power is dealing with 2 gunboats and 100 men—what do we do with real force majeure?"¹⁰⁶ On a third, he doodled a skull and crossbones and wrote, "I'm glad we don't have a big war on our hands." His political instincts shone through: "Maybe the critics of the DOD budget have something."¹⁰⁷ Over and over again, and perhaps inevitably, the country's top officials blended decision-making and political gamesmanship. They managed the seizure of the *Mayaguez* with American credibility and administration popularity in mind, which exaggerated

¹⁰⁴ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS* 1029-1034.

¹⁰⁵ Handwritten Note, Box 144, Folder: *Mayaguez*, Robert T. Hartmann Papers, GRFL.

¹⁰⁶ Handwritten Note, Box 144, Folder: *Mayaguez*, Robert T. Hartmann Papers, GRFL.

¹⁰⁷ Handwritten Note, Box 144, Folder: *Mayaguez*, Robert T. Hartmann Papers, GRFL.

the need for a demonstrative response. In that way, too, not much had changed since August of 1964.

The End of Diplomacy

On the morning of May 14, Undersecretary Sisco had prepared a note to be sent to the UN. Beyond grounding the impending American resort to force in international law under Article 51 of the UN Charter, the note asked Secretary General Kurt Waldheim to use his good offices to do whatever he could to contribute to the safe release of the crew.¹⁰⁸ Ford recounted in his memoirs that "I didn't really expect any results from [the message to the UN], so I determined that we would probably have to move militarily."¹⁰⁹ Although Sisco, too, assumed diplomacy was futile, he knew that it was not entirely unnecessary. By searching out help from the United Nations, the United States could say that it exhausted every possible peaceful avenue before resorting to force. It could protect itself from assertions that it acted irrationally and portray the Khmer Rouge as hostile and intransigent. Discussing the note with Kissinger over the phone, Sisco said that "we'll make that public—that looks like a serious attempt."¹¹⁰ The note was designed to effect the recovery of the *Mayaguez* and her crew, but only in the sense that it paved the way for military intervention. No major administration figure put faith in the UN's ability to resolve the incident with diplomacy.

At 6:06PM, a telegram from the Charles S. Whitehouse, the chargé d'affaires at the US embassy in Thailand, arrived at the State Department. Prime Minister Khukrit had summoned the embassy chief to a meeting and asked about the arrival of Marines in his country en masse.

¹⁰⁸ Telegram from Joe Sisco to USUN New York, May 14, 1975, Box 30, Folder: NSC Memoranda, National Security Adviser, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹⁰⁹ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 279.

¹¹⁰ TelCon, Mr. Sisco/Secretary Kissinger, May 14, 1975 in the Digital National Security Archive, http://gateway.proquest.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKA13667 (accessed February 2, 2011).

Whitehouse admitted the presence of over 1,100 soldiers at Utapao, but he told the Thai leader that he was unaware of Washington's intentions. According to the telegram, "Khukrit . . . said that he was sorry to have to replay 'The Ugly American.'" He was calm and cordial, but after the meeting "told the press in a series of strong statements that the U.S. must remove the Marines 'immediately.'"¹¹¹ Whitehouse, who over the previous three years had also been stationed in Vietnam and Laos, recommended that the US evacuate its Marines from Thailand. Yet he was a naïve Foreign Service official who analyzed the situation in terms of regional politics. The globalists in the White House had other designs.

The options for a diplomatic resolution of the crisis closed as the evening wore on. At 6:17PM, US Ambassador to the UN John Scali sent a return telegram to the Department of State. He had delivered the American message to Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, who promised to do all he could to win the release of the *Mayaguez* and her captive crew. Mentioning only "open cables" to Beijing and Phnom Penh, however, he did not seem likely to succeed.¹¹² Three hours later, George Bush, the head of the American Liaison Office in Beijing, reported that he had not found any success working through China. The envelope that one of his underlings had left in the Chinese Foreign Ministry's mailroom had made its way back to the Liaison Office. Marked "return to sender" and stamped with the seal of the Cambodian Embassy, the envelope contained the original American message but no reply.¹¹³ Bush was a little late—by that time, the Khmer Rouge had released the crew and American military operations were well underway.

Ford, Kissinger, and Scowcroft sat down with eleven senators and seven representatives (eight Republicans and eight Democrats) in the White House Cabinet Room at 6:30PM. The lawmakers stood and applauded when the president entered the room. Ford told them about the

¹¹¹ Telegram From the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State in *FRUS*, 1019-1020.

¹¹² Telegram From the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State in *Ibid.*, 1020.

¹¹³ Telegram From the Liaison Office in China to the Department of State in *Ibid.*, 1037.

unsuccessful diplomatic initiatives in Beijing and New York then described the upcoming military operations against Koh Tang, the *Mayaguez*, and the mainland. The NSC staff had predicted many of the legislative branch's grievances, and Ford came prepared with readymade ripostes to the lawmakers' questions. When Senator Mansfield asked about going into the "mainland" of Asia, Ford explained the need to protect American troops engaged in the ship and island operations. When Speaker of the House Carl Albert (D-OK) brought up the War Powers Act, Ford claimed that he had and would continue to comply with the law even though "regardless of the 1973 law, I have the authority as Commander-in-Chief to take this action." When Senator Byrd wondered something the president's advisers had not foreseen—"why were the leaders of Congress . . . not consulted about this at least at the time the decision was still being made?"—Ford simply repeated his assertion that he was in full compliance with the law.¹¹⁴ At issue was the implementation of the War Powers Act and whether or not it permitted Congress any genuine control over foreign policy. Congress was too large, disorganized, and leak-prone to have any say in foreign policy, and the president was determined to shut it out of what went on behind the scenes. Before bidding them farewell, Ford asked the assembled legislators to pray for the crew's safety.

The "Rescue"

Events collided in a tragic case of unfortunate timing. At 7:07PM Washington time, Phnom Penh domestic radio began broadcasting a twenty-minute statement by Hu Nim. The Khmer Rouge minister of propaganda asserted that the US had engaged in daily espionage campaigns in Cambodia's territorial waters, where his sailors seized the *Mayaguez*. His government, however, did not intend any provocation. It would "release this ship" after it

¹¹⁴ Transcript of Bipartisan Congressional Leadership Meeting, May 14, 1975, Box 8, Folder: May 14, 1975 – Bipartisan Leaders (Memcon – Mayaguez incident), National Security Adviser: NSC Press and Congressional Liaison Staff: Files, 1973-1976, GRFL.

ordered the *Mayaguez* to "withdraw from Cambodian territorial waters" and warned it "against further espionage or provocative activities."¹¹⁵ Two minutes after the broadcast commenced, Marines began their assault on Koh Tang. Eleven minutes later, the unharmed crew of the *Mayaguez* and five Thai prisoners boarded a fishing boat off Koh Rong Sam Lem and set out for the *Mayaguez*. At 8:15PM, the White House received a rough translation of the Khmer Rouge statement. Upon first learning of it, Ford ordered Schlesinger to hold up the bombing of the mainland, but he reversed his decision twenty minutes later.¹¹⁶ At 8:25PM, the USS *Holt* pulled up alongside the empty *Mayaguez*. Marines daringly leapt from boat to boat and began a thorough search, finding nothing but bowls of warm rice.

Kissinger dealt with the Khmer Rouge statement's diplomatic ramifications. The best way to get a return message to the Cambodian government, he reasoned, was through the media. The State Department might not have a direct line to the leaders of every country on the globe, but every country on the globe read the Associated Press. Kissinger called Nessen at 9:06PM and asked him to come to his office. The two worked fast. Ten minutes later, Nessen convened a press conference and shouted, "Listen to what I have to say!" to the assembled journalists and camera crews.¹¹⁷ He enunciated clearly so he only had to read the brief message once: "As you know, we have seized the ship. . . . As soon as you issue a public statement that you are prepared to release the crew members you hold unconditionally and immediately, we will promptly cease military operations."¹¹⁸ He took no questions and implored the reporters to file their reports quickly.

¹¹⁵ "Text of Communique Promising Release of the *Mayaguez* and its Crew," in *Historic Documents of 1975* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1976): 316-318.

¹¹⁶ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 282.

¹¹⁷ Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different*, 126.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹⁸ News Conference at the White House with Press Secretary Ron Nessen #219, May 14, 1975, Box 9, Folder: May 14, 1975 (No. 217) (No. 218) (No. 219) (No. 220), Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

Ford had a hectic evening. After his meeting with senior members of Congress, he went to a working dinner with Prime Minister Johannes den Uyl of the Netherlands. The meal was awkward. A pacifist, den Uyl had harshly criticized the Vietnam War and, according to Henry Kissinger, "was not the ideal guest with whom American policymakers involved with monitoring a military operation might have wished to share that evening."¹¹⁹ As the black tie affair progressed, the nation's tuxedo-clad top officials made symbolic appearances as they could but often dashed out to monitor the unfolding assaults. During brief interludes, Ford chatted about the situation with den Uyl and remembered being frustrated with the man's irrational contempt for military action: "Decisive action would reassure our allies and bluntly warn our adversaries that the U.S. was not a helpless giant. This effort, if successful, would benefit not only the United States but the Netherlands as well. Den Uyl's inability to understand that annoyed the hell out of me."¹²⁰ Ford was determined to "reassure" the United States' allies by responding forcefully to the capture of the *Mayaguez* regardless of whether or not they wanted reassurance. He said goodnight to his Dutch counterpart and returned to the Oval Office just before 11PM to await updates from the military.

Just as Ford was saying goodbye, the sailors on the USS *Henry B. Wilson* spotted a small fishing boat carrying about forty people waving white flags. The destroyer's loudspeakers boomed, "are you the crew of the *Mayaguez*?" The men on the boat hollered and waved, and soon they were all safely aboard the *Wilson*.¹²¹ Within a few minutes, the men in the Oval Office had heard the news and were hollering, too.

The first of four waves of American planes flew over Kompong Som an hour after Marines began landing on Koh Tang. Ford's twenty-minute period of vacillation over the

¹¹⁹ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 566.

¹²⁰ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 282.

¹²¹ Rowan, *Four Days of Mayaguez*, 214.

mainland attacks forced the first wave of bombers to jettison their ordnance over the ocean instead of their targets. The planes did not have enough fuel to continue their bombing mission, so they lightened their loads and served as "armed reconnaissance" instead.¹²² The second and third waves battered the Kompong Som oil storage complex, railroad yard, naval base, and airfield.¹²³ The fourth wave was redirected to Koh Tang to provide cover for the Marines who were encountering unexpectedly heavy resistance. After learning that the *Holt* had recovered the crew of the *Mayaguez*, NSC staffer William Lloyd Stearman suggested calling off the remaining air strikes. Kissinger flatly refused. Interviewed for an oral history project, Stearman recalled that

the reason he was doing this had nothing to do with Cambodia. It was aimed at North Korea. At the time, we had a lot of intelligence that North Korea was planning to launch a strike against South Korea because they thought we had been so demoralized by the fall of Indochina . . . So Henry was sending a message to Kim Il Sung by continuing the bombing.¹²⁴

The "rescue" operation's purpose extended far beyond the safe recovery of the crew. The Ford administration justified the continuation of the bombing by claiming a tactical necessity to protect American troops engaged on Koh Tang. Stearman knew better. It was not just that winning the release of the ship and crew would have incidental or corollary salutary effects. Ford and his advisers explicitly tailored the military's actions to suit objectives beyond the safe recovery of the crew: they orchestrated a decisive and demonstrative retaliation to garner public support, punish Cambodia, reassure allies, and intimidate adversaries.

Marines fought an entrenched force on Koh Tang for nearly twenty-four hours. By the battle's end, fifteen Marines were dead, forty-one were wounded, and three were missing in

¹²² Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle*, 192-193.

¹²³ Weekly Intelligence Summary Distribution, June 9, 1975, Box 28, Folder: Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Adviser, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹²⁴ Interview with William Lloyd Stearman, in *Frontline Diplomacy: The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mfdip.2004ste01> (accessed February 22, 2011).

action. The Marines, revered for never leaving a man behind, left Joseph N. Hargrove, Gary Lee Hall, and Danny G. Marshall to fend for themselves on Koh Tang. The three soldiers survived for almost a week but were captured and killed when they tried to steal food from a Khmer Rouge military outpost.¹²⁵ Combined with the twenty-three Americans who died in the helicopter crash on May 13, forty-one Americans died to "save" forty others.

Almost immediately, however, Ford had to defend himself against claims that he had eschewed diplomacy, needlessly overreacted, and circumvented the law. The opposition's casualty count crept upwards, casting doubt on the administration's motives and honesty. In the end, the *Mayaguez* incident's political benefits proved ephemeral. During the 1976 primaries and general election campaigns, Ford was criticized for being soft on communism. He brandished his behavior during the crisis to prove his fitness for office and won a hard fought primary against Ronald Reagan. Unfortunately, in the first presidential election since Watergate, the public

¹²⁵ Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle*, 284-287.

Part II: Spinning the Ship of State

The crew was safe, but Ford's task was far from over. Over the ensuing weeks, months, and—to a lesser extent—years, the Ford administration sought to “spin” the *Mayaguez* crisis to generate political momentum for its personalities and its policies. To appease a public wary of military action and allies wary of military inaction, the administration portrayed itself as simultaneously cautious and determined. It proffered a narrative of the crisis that built Ford's leadership credentials, bolstered public confidence in government after the country's traumatic departure from Indochina, reassured allies and adversaries of the United States' credibility as a global superpower, and demonstrated to Congress the need for sole presidential control over foreign policy. In the short term, it worked. Ford's handling of the crisis drew widespread praise from the public, the media, the Congress, and the free world. His approval ratings spiked eleven points, approaching President John F. Kennedy's thirteen-point surge after the Cuban missile crisis.¹²⁶ Ford recalled in his memoirs that, after the *Mayaguez* incident, “many people's faith in their country was restored” and “all of a sudden, the gloomy national mood began to fade.”¹²⁷

Almost immediately, however, Ford had to defend himself against claims that he had eschewed diplomacy, needlessly overreacted, and circumvented the law. The operation's casualty count crept upwards, casting doubt on the administration's motives and honesty. In the end, the *Mayaguez* incident's political benefits proved ephemeral. During the 1976 primaries and general election campaign, Ford was criticized for being soft on communism. He brandished his behavior during the crisis to prove his fitness for office and won a hard fought primary against Ronald Reagan. Unfortunately, in the first presidential election since Watergate, the public

¹²⁶ *The Gallup Opinion Index: Political, Social, and Economic Trends*, no. 120 (June 1975): 1.

¹²⁷ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 284.

rejected the Republican incumbent in favor a Democrat and a Washington outsider—Governor Jimmy Carter of Georgia.

The Aftermath

The Ford administration's effort to extract political gain out of the *Mayaguez* incident began immediately. The president wanted the public to learn of the triumph directly from the White House and to indelibly associate it with his own cool, capable, and dynamic leadership. Unfortunately, Pentagon spokesperson Joseph Laitin had already scooped news of the success to reporters. First impressions mattered, and Press Secretary Nessen had an idea "how Ford still could get press attention at his moment of success."¹²⁸ Taking advantage of one of the perks of the nation's highest office, the president changed out of his dinner tuxedo into a brown suit to preempt *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* and address the American people on national television. In a two-minute statement, the president explained the operations against the ship, island, and mainland—emphasizing that American forces acted at his direction at every step. He then announced that "the vessel has been recovered intact and the entire crew has been rescued," neglecting to mention that the Cambodians had released the crew voluntarily and that the USS *Wilson* had only "rescued" it from the waves of the Gulf of Thailand.¹²⁹

Before going to bed, Ford signed letters to the heads of the House and Senate. The identical messages that White House aides delivered to Speaker of the House Carl Albert and President pro tem of the Senate James Eastland (D-MS) explained the course of events over the previous three days, the president's decisions, and his public rationale for making those decisions. The administration preemptively denied claims that its actions grew out of a desire for revenge or political gain, and Ford's letters informed the nation's top lawmakers that "our

¹²⁸ Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different*, 128.

¹²⁹ Statement by the President on the SS *Mayaguez*, May 15, 1975, Box 30, Folder: White House Statements, National Security Adviser NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

continued objective in this operation was the rescue of the captured American crew along with the retaking of the ship *Mayaguez*." Ford also wrote that he was submitting the informal reports "in accordance with my desire that the Congress be informed on this matter and taking note of section 4 (a) (1) of the War Powers Resolution"—another subtle indication that the administration was self-consciously meeting the War Powers Act's requirements without officially complying with them.¹³⁰ Ford answered to a higher law: the president's Constitutional power and duty as commander-in-chief to protect American lives and property.

The Ford administration assiduously tracked foreign reactions to the *Mayaguez* incident. The National Security Council spent most of a wrap-up meeting on May 15 going over different audiences' reviews of the United States' theatrical performance. For the most part, allied governments responded favorably. The more heavily these regimes depended on the United States for military support, the more enthusiastic their reactions tended to be. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia praised the American operation. So did West Germany and Israel. British, French, and other Western European reactions were more muted, but also positive. Most communist governments, on the other hand, were predictably outraged. The Khmer Rouge denounced the United States for its imperialism. China, North Korea, and North Vietnam dubbed the American reaction to the seizure an "act of piracy" in itself, and Kim Il-sung's regime added that it was a "premeditated, villainous provocation against the Cambodian people."¹³¹ Reflecting the schism within the Marxist bloc, the Soviet Union's response to the crisis was measured and

¹³⁰ Letter From President Ford to the Speaker of the House, May 15, 1975, Box 14, Folder: *Mayaguez* - General, Ron Nessen Papers, GRFL.

¹³¹ Telegram from Secretary of State Kissinger to Delegate Secretaries, May 19, 1975, Box 3, Folder: Cambodia - Seizing of the *Mayaguez*, May 1975 (4), National Security Adviser Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific: Cambodia, GRFL.

largely factual. TASS, the Soviet news bureau, noted Senator Mansfield's criticism of military action but did not indulge its usual flair for embellishment or invective.¹³²

After the rescue operation's successful conclusion, the US had to the most to lose with Thailand as far as diplomacy was concerned. At the wrap-up NSC meeting, DCI Colby informed President Ford that Thai military leaders had issued private declarations of support for the US's actions, but "the political left [in Thailand] apparently believes that the time is right to create a political crisis for the Khukrit government."¹³³ Leftist politicians held a rally in Bangkok. Ten thousand students mounted a demonstration against the American embassy, barricading the front entrance, burning and urinating on American flags, and pilfering the building's official seal (which went on display in a Thai university). To appease a rowdy public, Prime Minister Khukrit's cabinet voted to expel a senior member of the US mission and to recall the Thai ambassador in Washington for "consultation." Khukrit demanded an official American apology for the use of Thai bases in the *Mayaguez* operation, which Kissinger was dead set against. The friendship between Deputy Ambassador Masters and Khukrit helped their two governments weather the unfolding storm. Masters engineered a compromise and, on May 19, Khukrit accepted a statement that expressed the US's regret "for the misunderstandings that have arisen between Thailand and the United States."¹³⁴ After accepting the note, Khukrit addressed the Thai press and simply said that the US had apologized, prompting the demonstrations to dissolve.¹³⁵ The United States withdrew its military forces from Thailand according to the original schedule, and diplomatic relations between the two countries returned to the status quo.

Casualty Questions

¹³² National Intelligence Bulletin, May 16, 1975, Box 28, Folder: Central Intelligence Agency - General, National Security Adviser NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹³³ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 1040.

¹³⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 574.

¹³⁵ Interview with Edward E. Masters, in *Frontline Diplomacy*.

Initial reports on the number of casualties incurred in the *Mayaguez* rescue operation were hazy and incomplete. The United States had been a master of "body counts" during the Vietnam War. Because the conflict was about the South Vietnamese government's survival in the face of external threats and a committed domestic insurgency, the American military could not measure its progress in the traditional terms of territory won or lost. Instead, it made sophisticated calculations about the numbers of enemy soldiers it had to kill in order to outpace communist recruiting. Over two years, the military's ability to count reliably had apparently diminished.

Joe Laitin made the government's first public comments on the *Mayaguez* operation's casualties at a Defense Department news briefing at 8:20AM on the morning of May 15. He told the press that there was one known American soldier killed in action over the previous twenty-four hours and that information about missing and wounded soldiers was too tentative to offer any estimate.¹³⁶ The president's information was more complete but no more exact. At the wrap-up NSC meeting, General Jones told Ford that the military's first count was one killed, one missing, and thirty wounded. Ford called it a "job well done."¹³⁷

The media agreed, and the mainstream press was exultant. On May 16, the *New York Times* reported the Pentagon's announcement of "light" casualties—two killed and fourteen missing.¹³⁸ In an editorial, the *Wall Street Journal* reveled in the reassertion of American dignity: "President Ford's decision to send in the Marines to retrieve the ship *Mayaguez* and rescue its crew is being deservedly hailed almost everywhere. It not only succeeded in its immediate purpose, but made the exceedingly useful point that U.S. power is still something to be reckoned

¹³⁶ Department of Defense News Briefing, May 15, 1975, Box 14, Folder: *Mayaguez* – General, Ron Nessen Papers, GRFL.

¹³⁷ Minutes of National Security Council Meeting in *FRUS*, 1042-1043.

¹³⁸ John W. Finney, "Copters Evacuate US Marines," *New York Times*, May 16, 1975.

with throughout the world."¹³⁹ The next day's *New York Times* featured an opinion piece by Cyrus Leo Sulzberger entitled "Just What the Doctor Ordered." The columnist observed that, "overnight, by resolute and skillful leadership in the Mayagüez crisis, President Ford has seemingly moved from the doldrums of Hooverdom toward the vigor of Harry Truman. . . . Small as the incident may seem in later history, a polluting stain is being erased from the previous American image of lassitude, uncertainty, and pessimism."¹⁴⁰ The public's response was just as enthusiastic. As of May 16, the White House had received almost 10,000 phone calls and telegrams supporting the president's decision to use force and a mere 500 opposed.¹⁴¹ The Gerald R. Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan houses more than 20,000 pages of public mail supporting Ford's resort to military action.¹⁴² In the context of South Vietnam's final fall to communism, everyone grasped the symbolic implications of the president's decisive and efficacious use of force in Indochina.

As the days went by, the government revised the operation's casualty count upwards. The wave of approbation the public and media bestowed on the president continued almost unabated until May 18, when Secretary of Defense Schlesinger moved the count to five killed, sixteen missing, and seventy-to-eighty wounded. In light of the new casualty estimates, a *New York Times* editorial suggested that there was reason to doubt that the operation was undertaken solely to rescue the crew and that the official version of the event was tailored for political image-making.¹⁴³ The press grew suspicious that Ford was deliberately withholding information about the operation's casualties to make it appear more successful. At a press conference on May 19,

¹³⁹ "A Lesson in Foreign Policy," *Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 1975.

¹⁴⁰ C.L. Sulzberger, "Just What the Doctor Ordered," *New York Times*, May 17, 1975.

¹⁴¹ Updated Reaction to Mayaguez, Box 14, Folder: Mayaguez – Telephone Call and Telegram Tallies, Ron Nessen Papers, GRFL.

¹⁴² WHCF Subject File – ND: National Security – Defense, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum.

¹⁴³ <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/guides/Finding%20Aids/WHCFND.HTM> (accessed December 5, 2010).

¹⁴⁴ "Ford Sends a Signal," *New York Times*, May 18, 1975.

Nessen rejected the notion that there was any intention to keep the bad news secret. He also downplayed the significance of the escalating estimate of soldiers wounded during the rescue: "On the wounded figures, as I understand it from the Pentagon, they were counting things like sprained ankles and twisted knees . . . and also, they were counting people who may have suffered the effects of tear gas and scratches and people who were suffering from fatigue and were checked out in the sick bays just for observation."¹⁴⁴

On May 20, the casualty count rose again. The National Military Command Center (NMCC) concluded that American losses totaled fifteen killed, three missing, and fifty wounded.¹⁴⁵ In the *Washington Post*, Rod MacLeish asked, "how many of the dead, missing and wounded do we assign to the rescuing of the Mayaguez and how many to bolstering the doctrine of American unpredictability?"¹⁴⁶ The next day, the press dug up information about the helicopter crash that killed twenty-three Americans near Nakhon Phanom. Nessen confirmed that the dead airmen would not be included on casualty reports because they technically were not part of the *Mayaguez* operation.¹⁴⁷ The government later honored them by engraving their names on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was completed in 1982. Over the short term, however, politics interfered with the Ford administration's desire to honor the fallen soldiers' sacrifice.

Countering Claims of Overreaction

As claims arose that the Ford administration had been too quick to dismiss diplomacy and that it had mounted a show of force to punish Cambodia and reestablish American credibility, the

¹⁴⁴ News Conference at the White House with Press Secretary Ron Nessen #223, May 19, 1975, Box 9, Folder: May 19, 1975 (No. 222) (No. 223), Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

¹⁴⁵ Memorandum for the Record: Mayaguez Operation Casualty Count, Box 28 Folder: Department of Defense - Joint Chiefs of Staff - General, National Security Adviser NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹⁴⁶ Rod MacLeish, "The Mayaguez Ordeal," *Washington Post*, May 20, 1975.

¹⁴⁷ News Conference at the White House with Press Secretary Ron Nessen #224, May 21, 1975, Box 9, Folder: May 21, 1975 (No. 224) (No. 225), Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

administration mounted a public relations campaign in which it argued that its actions were born only of military necessity. Nessen's Press Office prepared some talking points about why Ford had no choice but military retaliation. After giving diplomacy sixty hours to produce results, the president felt that further delay would have imperiled the crew "and it was necessary to act decisively to save them."¹⁴⁸ Whenever possible, Ford emphasized his own active leadership. The lives of the crewmembers were at risk in the hands of the volatile Khmer Rouge, and the solemn duties of the presidency required him to act.

In the aftermath of the crisis, reporters were understandably hungry for inside looks into the president's behavior. When members of the administration spoke to journalists about the episode, they emphasized Ford's cool-headed and decisive leadership. The day after the crew's recovery, *Time* writer Hugh Sidey called Kissinger and asked for his evaluation of Ford's decision-making. Kissinger told him that "I think [Ford] performed superbly. He was calm, decisive, and didn't do anything to prove anything. He did what was needed—to get the ship and crew back and he did it decisively. Enough so it didn't look like we were blinking."¹⁴⁹ In May and June, Ford granted several interviews to journalists to explain his understanding of the Mayaguez incident in greater detail than in his short official statements. In one interview with the very same Hugh Sidey, he explained his belief during the crisis that the Cambodians were "going to treat us differently than the Koreans and Panamanians, which of course made me very concerned that the longer [the crewmembers] were in the hands of the Cambodians, the more likely they would be mistreated, killed, or used as hostages."¹⁵⁰ The Khmer Rouge's actions

¹⁴⁸ Was Military Action Necessary To Rescue Mayaguez? Box 14, Folder: Mayaguez – General, Ron Nessen Papers, GRFL.

¹⁴⁹ Telcon, Secretary Kissinger/Hugh Sidey, May 15, 1975, in the Digital National Security Archive, http://gateway.proquest.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKA13677 (accessed March 5, 2011).

¹⁵⁰ Interview of President Ford by Hugh Sidey, May 16, 1975, Box 26, Folder: May 16, 1975 Time Magazine – Hugh Sidey, Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

towards its own population evinced its penchant for cruelty, so Ford could not take any chances. In addition, the president played up the crisis's similarities with the *Pueblo* incident—saying it was in the “back of his mind” and implying that, if he had not acted, the crew would have languished under torture in Cambodia while the US endured international humiliation.

Hu Nim's message on Cambodian radio appeared to be damning evidence—the Khmer Rouge had agreed to release the *Mayaguez* before the American military operations began. At a news conference at 3:30AM on May 15, however, Secretary of Defense Schlesinger said that the crew arrived at the *Wilson* “as a result of what is presumed to be the decision of the Cambodians to deliver them up in order to terminate the *combat actions* directed primarily against the mainland [emphasis mine].”¹⁵¹ Similarly, Captain Miller would later attest that his Cambodian captors released the crew with instructions to “tell [the American government] to stop the jets.”¹⁵² In the future, the administration used Miller's statement to claim that the bombing of the mainland had something to do with the release of the crew. These claims were false. The mainland attacks had not occurred when the Cambodians freed the crew. The Khmer Rouge soldier who told Miller to stop the jets likely was referring to the planes that strafed and sank their boats, not the ones that began bombing Kompong Som forty minutes after the crew's release. Ford, too, justified the bombing of the mainland as essential. Even after the crew was on the deck of an American destroyer, “our Marines on the island were still under attack and the Marines deserve, as long as they were carrying out their mission and were being attacked by the enemy that we do anything and everything to protect their lives.”¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Statement by Secretary Schlesinger, May 15, 1975, Box 28, Folder: Department of Defense – General, National Security Adviser NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹⁵² Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle*, 198.

¹⁵³ Interview of President Ford by Hugh Sidey, May 16, 1975, Box 26, Folder: May 16, 1975 Time Magazine – Hugh Sidey, Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

The Ford administration denied that its actions during the *Mayaguez* incident were undertaken for domestic or international political reasons. Deputy Press Secretary Gerald Warren sent a memo to Nessen on ways the president could answer doubts as to his motives in the crisis. Warren suggested Ford say that "we at the White House and, I am sure, Members of the Congress know from mail, telegrams, and phone calls the American people do not believe our actions were taken for domestic political purposes."¹⁵⁴ At press conferences in the week after the incident, Nessen usually made a point to rattle off the most recent statistics about telegrams and phone calls to the White House that overwhelmingly favored the president's actions. The administration managed the remarkable feat of invoking domestic politics in order to deny the relevance of domestic politics.

Countering Claims of Lawbreaking

The *Mayaguez* incident dovetailed with President Ford's effort to rebuild relations between the executive and legislative branches. Whereas Nixon treated Congress with contempt and sought to avoid dealing with legislators as much as possible, Ford addressed a joint session of Congress only three days after he was sworn in as president: "This Congress, unless it has changed, I am confident, will be my working partner as well as my most constructive critic. I am not asking for conformity. I am dedicated to the two-party system, and you know which party I belong to. I do not want a honeymoon with you. I want a good marriage."¹⁵⁵ In the aftermath of the crisis, however, Ford confronted claims that he had skirted the law. Some senators and representatives questioned whether he met the consultation requirement of the War Powers Act. Other commentators wondered why the Case-Church Amendment, which barred Congressional

¹⁵⁴ Memo From Jerry Warren to Ron Nessen, May 17, 1975, Box 26, Folder: May 19, 1975 New York Daily News, Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

¹⁵⁵ Address to a Joint Session of Congress by Gerald Ford, August 2, 1974, in The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4694> (accessed February 22, 2011).

funding for "combat activities by U.S. military forces in or over or from off the shores of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia," did not inhibit the American military retaliation.¹⁵⁶ The administration responded by mounting a public relations campaign in which it questioned the applicability of legal restrictions on its behavior, asserted that its actions were in full compliance with the law, and continued its project of reconciliation between the White House and Capitol Hill.

In his post-crisis media blitz, President Ford cast doubt on the functionality, wisdom, and applicability of the War Powers Act. White House Counsel John Marsh prepared some talking points for the president regarding the *Mayaguez* incident's relationship to the executive-legislative balance of power. He argued that "as both Watergate and Vietnam fades [*sic*] into the past and as we move further into this Session with the Congress having to actually deal with many of the difficult questions we face, I think we may see a reassessment and moderation of the anti-Executive attitude." Regarding the War Powers Act, "we sought to proceed here in such a way as to be within the provisions of the Act, even if it did not apply[,] without admitting that it did." This had to do with practicality, not petty struggles for power. Because of the time difference between Washington and Cambodia, for one thing, Ford had to make bleary-eyed decisions while the nation's lawmakers were sound asleep. What is a president to do if he cannot respond to a threat because he cannot reach Congress for permission? If Ford admitted the law's applicability, he and future presidents would have been overburdened by unreasonable obligations. "Although we reserve the question as to whether the War Powers Act was applicable, nevertheless these recent incidents do indicate that if it were, a question is raised as to whether its observance does not pose problems for effective Executive action in a crisis . . . [in

¹⁵⁶ Anthony Lewis, "The Laws Under Which Mr. Ford Took Action," *New York Times*, May 18, 1975.

which] such action must be done swiftly.”¹⁵⁷ It was fine for Congress to oversee presidential conduct, but it could not impose limits on the president’s Constitutional power to act. The Ford administration was careful to counter any formal claims that would have set a precedent for further legislative encroachment on executive authority. In his interview with *Time*’s Hugh Sidey, Ford played the role of guardian of the Constitution, saying, “the Constitution is very clear as to who is Commander-in-Chief . . . and I don’t want to destroy that co-equal branch relationship.”¹⁵⁸

In order to maximize the *Mayaguez* incident’s political benefits, Ford had to minimize legal controversy over his decisions. Since the argument that the War Powers Act did not apply was not exactly foolproof, the White House legal team also argued that the president abided by the law at every step. Ford consulted with Congress and submitted a report within forty-eight hours of American forces becoming involved in combat. The administration’s position hinged on its interpretation of the word “consult” as entailing giving notification to—but not receiving permission from—the legislative branch. Ford told Hugh Sidey that “our interpretation was that it required full notification, which we did.”¹⁵⁹ He set a precedent of his own during the crisis. Future presidents continued to whittle away at the War Powers Act. None ever again mentioned the reporting clause when they submitted one of the reports that the law required.¹⁶⁰ Ford argued that keeping the executive on a legislative leash was dangerous and unreasonable; his successors followed this logic and exploited the law’s “in every possible instance” provision to argue that they were too busy to consult with Congress at all.

¹⁵⁷ John Marsh Draft, May 26, 1975, Box 20, Folder: Mayaguez Crisis, 5/75 – 8/75, John Marsh Files, GRFL.

¹⁵⁸ Interview of President Ford by Hugh Sidey, May 16, 1975, Box 26, Folder: May 16, 1975 Time Magazine – Hugh Sidey, Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

¹⁵⁹ Interview of President Ford by Hugh Sidey, May 16, 1975, Box 26, Folder: May 16, 1975 Time Magazine – Hugh Sidey, Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

¹⁶⁰ John Hart Ely, “Suppose Congress Wanted a War Powers Act that Worked,” *Columbia Law Review* 1379 (November 1988).

The Ford administration also targeted the legal interpretation of the Indochina force prohibition that existed outside the context of Congress's attempt to end the Vietnam War. At his late night news conference on May 15, Schlesinger noted that the Case-Church Amendment "was originally intended to bring a close to the American combat involvement in support of the regime in Cambodia and South Vietnam. The original purpose of the legislation thus was served but it was not intended to be an incubus on American policy when there was subsequent action totally unrelated to the initial purposes of the legislation."¹⁶¹ He argued that the spirit of the law had nothing to do with combating piracy, so it did not restrict Ford's freedom of action. Phil Buchen's legal logic was similar: "Neither the Cooper-Church Amendment in 1971 . . . nor the prohibitions in later appropriations acts against U.S. combat activities anywhere in Indochina limited my Constitutional authority under the circumstances of this case to protect American lives and vessels from illegal attack and seizure."¹⁶² One of the law's framers agreed. When Ford met with Congressional leaders on May 14, Senator Clifford Case (R-NJ) told the president that, "I do not believe that the Amendment does apply to the purpose of rescuing American citizens. I believe this distinction must be made clear."¹⁶³ To nip criticism in the bud, the administration cited Case's voucher of support early and often. Nessen first drew reporters' attention to it at a news conference on May 15.¹⁶⁴ The ex post facto declarations of a lawmaker about his work's intent, however, carry no real jurisprudential weight or legitimacy. That Senator Case threw his weight behind President Ford was, along with the allusion to the supremacy of executive

¹⁶¹ Statement by Secretary Schlesinger, May 15, 1975, Box 28, Folder: Department of Defense - General, National Security Adviser NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹⁶² Question and Answer on U.S. Law and the Mayaguez Incident, May 17, 1975, Box 14, Folder: Mayaguez - General, Ron Nessen Papers, GRFL.

¹⁶³ Transcript of Bipartisan Congressional Leadership Meeting, May 14, 1975, Box 8, Folder: May 14, 1975 - Bipartisan Leaders (Memcon - Mayaguez incident), National Security Adviser, NSC Press and Congressional Liaison Staff: Files, 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹⁶⁴ News Conference at the White House with Press Secretary Ron Nessen #222, May 19, 1975, Box 9, Folder: May 19, 1975 (No. 222) (No. 223), Ronald H. Nessen Files, GRFL.

authority, just another talking point for a public relations campaign—one geared towards protecting presidential prerogatives for the future.

Ford defended the actions he took to recover the *Mayaguez*, but he did so with an eye towards not alienating Congress. The former Congressman whose lifetime political ambition had been to become Speaker of the House emphasized his long tenure in the House to aid his restoration of cordial relations between the executive and legislative branches. He professed that he cherished the separation of governmental powers that the nation's founding fathers had engineered. Phil Buchen's brief on the War Powers Act that recommended the president strike a conciliatory tone when he dismissed allegations that he bypassed Congress in working to free the hostage ship and crew:

As a former Congressman, I fully believe that it is important for the Congress and Executive to act together on major issues. That is the philosophy I that have followed since the beginning of my administration, and that I shall continue to follow. Neither one of us can assume the responsibilities of the other, nor should we try, but it is important that we should work together and understand each other's views.¹⁶⁵

In keeping with his desire to transcend the divisiveness of the era of Watergate and Vietnam, Ford sought to hedge Congressional encroachment on foreign policy as gently as possible.

The government encountered one legal claim relating to the *Mayaguez* incident that it did not foresee. On June 27, nine members of the *Mayaguez* crew filed \$250,000 lawsuits against the US government for negligence resulting in their physical and psychological harm. The claimants argued that, in a dereliction of duty, the government had failed to warn the *Mayaguez* not to enter waters in which it knew other boats had been attacked. The crewmembers were rendered deprived of their liberties and fearful for their lives, whereupon American fighter jets strafed them and gassed them with "noxious chemical substances." The sailors expected to be

¹⁶⁵ Question and Answer on War Powers Act and the Mayaguez Incident, May 17, 1975, Box 14, Folder: Mayaguez - General, Ron Nessen Papers, GRFL.

reimbursed for "physical pain and mental suffering as a proximate result thereof, including a traumatic anxiety neurosis, loss of wages and fringe benefits including pension rights, overtime pay, vacation pay, and other benefits."¹⁶⁶ The suit was thrown out, but the Ford administration wanted to do more than minimize controversy over its actions and defend itself against litigious sailors and Monday-morning quarterbacks. Ford sought to use his success in the *Mayaguez* incident to reassure allies, intimidate enemies, ward off Congressional encroachment on executive prerogatives, bolster his leadership credentials, and retain the political advantage.

Global Spin

To its domestic audience, the Ford administration stressed that it had acted only to free the crew. In front of international audiences, however, it was much more willing to embrace the *Mayaguez* incident's symbolic implications. By establishing itself as a military player on the world stage after Vietnam, the logic went, the United States had demonstrated its viability as an ally and its potency as an enemy.

The spin began immediately. At his late night news conference after the operation, Schlesinger pronounced in grandiose terms that "the successful actions of the U.S. forces, associated with the recovery of the SS MAYAGUEZ and its entire crew, have a significance far greater than that represented by this unwarranted and illegal highjacking episode." Still basking in the glow of victory, the exhausted secretary of defense was probably more forthcoming than he intended to be: "It represents a much needed and timely reaffirmation of the freedom of the seas—and peaceful transit. Moreover, it represents a firm and measured response to the high-handed and crude use of force. To countenance such an act would mean the weakening of

¹⁶⁶ Claim of Darryl V. Kastyl Against the United States of America, June 27, 1975, Box 30, Folder: NSC Memoranda re Report to the President, National Security Adviser, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL; Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crises*, 265 n81.

international order and civilized communication.”¹⁶⁷ Kissinger’s first public statement after the crisis struck a balance between triumphalism and restraint. He explained that the incident’s impact “ought . . . make clear that there are limits beyond which the United States cannot be pushed and that the United States is prepared to defend those interests and that it can get public support and congressional support for those actions. But we are not going around looking for opportunities to prove our manhood.”¹⁶⁸ A major element of Kissinger’s strategic thought was that a country’s military resources meant nothing unless its adversaries knew it had the guts to use them. The entire balance of détente rested on perceptions. If the Soviet Union perceived the United States as weak or indecisive, it might be encouraged to take risks that destabilized the international equilibrium; correspondingly, communist China would not view the US as a worthy negotiating partner unless it perceived the American military’s ability and willingness to, if necessary, stand up to the USSR.

Ford and Kissinger conveyed the subtext of the *Mayaguez* incident to the governments and populations of allied nations through a variety of channels. To the unsavory authoritarian leaders the US propped up in the name of Cold War expediency, Ford could be blunt. On the morning after the crisis, he was preparing to greet Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran, who was on an official visit to Washington. Kissinger instructed Ford to “tell [the Shah] you used more force than necessary.”¹⁶⁹ In their 11AM meeting, the president told his Iranian counterpart that “we perhaps overreacted, to show the Koreans and others our resolve.” Furthermore, “there were legislative restrictions imposed in the 1973 act [the Case-Church Amendment] and the War

¹⁶⁷ Statement by Secretary Schlesinger, May 15, 1975, Box 28, Folder: Department of Defense – General, National Security Adviser NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff: Files, (1969) 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹⁶⁸ “Secretary Kissinger’s News Conference of May 16,” in *Department of State Bulletin* 72, no. 1875 (June 9, 1975): 757.

¹⁶⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, May 15, 1975, in the Digital National Security Archive, http://gateway.proquest.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT01623 (accessed February 22, 2011).

Powers Act, which some said meant the President couldn't act. This showed we could and did and showed the world we weren't hamstrung."¹⁷⁰ Commitments were meaningless if Congress could nullify them willy-nilly, and Ford proved the American military wasn't paralyzed abroad by isolationist sentiment at home. At a May 29 meeting with Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel of Turkey, Ford explained that the "Cambodian boat affair" was helping his effort to get Congress to rescind its ban on military aid to Turkey that followed the country's invasion of Cyprus.¹⁷¹ By demonstrating his domestic strength, the president hoped to shore up his country's international credibility.

A week after the incident, Ford flew to Brussels for a NATO summit. "Understandably," he recalled, "the leaders of the NATO countries wanted to know whether this new mood of isolationism would prevail or whether we would honor our commitments abroad."¹⁷² During a May 23 interview with correspondents from several eminent European news outlets, Ford declared that "both domestically in the United States, as well as worldwide, the handling of the Mayaguez incident should be a firm assurance that the United States is capable and has the will to act in emergencies, in challenges. I think this is a clear, clear indication that we are not only strong but we have the will and the capability of moving."¹⁷³ Ford told the journalists that the crisis had helped stem the tide of isolationism in Congress. He pointed out that, in a decisive 311-95 vote on May 20, the House rejected a proposed 70,000-troop cut in the total number of

¹⁷⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, May 15, 1975. National Security Adviser's Memoranda of Conversation Collection, Gerald R. Ford Digital Library.

<http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/memcons/1553077.pdf> (accessed February 22, 2011).

¹⁷¹ Discussion with Gerald Ford and Suleyman Demirel, May 29, 1975, in the Digital National Security Archive, http://gateway.proquest.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKT01646 (accessed March 5, 2011).

¹⁷² Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 285.

¹⁷³ Interview With European Journalists, in The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4934> (accessed February 22, 2011).

soldiers that the US had deployed overseas.¹⁷⁴ The incident was a reminder that a strong United States needed a strong executive, and Ford expressed his belief that "there are some new indications that indicate that Congress is taking another look [at its restrictions on executive behavior] and perhaps the MAYAGUEZ incident will be helpful in that regard."¹⁷⁵ When a true threat arose, the president proved his ability to generate public and legislative support for military engagement.

Using the Crisis at Home

The *Mayaguez* crisis bestowed the Ford administration with political momentum. To make the most of the success, the administration went beyond defending its decisions and deliberately crafted and promulgated a favorable narrative of the crisis. As soon as the crew was safe, Ford worked to transform the *Mayaguez* into a symbol for America's determination to endure in a post-Vietnam world and for his own dynamic leadership. He publicized the success and worked to convert it into concrete domestic achievements—including, vainly, being elected president in his own right in 1976.

On Capitol Hill, Republicans and Southern Democrats generally supported Ford's crisis management. Most liberal Democrats were ambivalent. Ford knew that Congress was likely to be much more pliable in the incident's immediate aftermath, so he worked to parlay his symbolic triumph into tangible legislative victories. Lawmakers had proposed a series of bills aimed at curtailing presidential authority over foreign policy. One would have required all executive agreements to sit before Congress for sixty days, whereupon it could vote to reject them by concurrent resolution. Another would have required Congressional approval for major overseas base agreements. Ford met with Congressional leaders on May 16 to try to hedge their intrusion

¹⁷⁴ John W. Finney, "House Rejects 70,000 Cut in Troops Abroad, 311-95," *New York Times*, May 21, 1975.

¹⁷⁵ Interview With European Journalists, The American Presidency Project.

on the legitimate functions of the executive branch. His talking points harped on the weakening of the "credibility of the United States abroad" and the deterioration of the president's "authority to act decisively and with flexibility in rapidly changing conditions."¹⁷⁶ In keeping with his desire to improve relations between the two branches, however, he indicated his willingness to improve the consultation process as long as it did not entail unreasonable or inflexible control.

The *Mayaguez* incident faded from the political scene almost as quickly as it burst onto it. As the months wore on, however, the White House publicized the crisis and kept its memory alive. Looking ahead to the 1976 election, Republican activists in the incumbent's camp praised the incident as evidence of Ford's superior leadership abilities. The Young Republican National Federation convened in Indianapolis between July 2 and 5, 1975, and Ford's supporters there passed a resolution declaring that "President Ford's actions against the seizure of the MAYAGUEZ was in the best interest of the United States and of international order." Because of a stalemate between Reagan and Ford supporters, however, the convention did not endorse any candidate and only passed a resolution in support of an "open convention."¹⁷⁷ Later that month, the White House held a ceremony for Captain Miller and some of the soldiers involved in the *Mayaguez* rescue operation. Miller presented Ford with the ship's steering wheel and gave Walter Cronkite occasion to mention the incident in that night's news broadcast.¹⁷⁸ The president kept the trophy where visitors to his office could see it. It represented his strength and success.

¹⁷⁶ Congressional Meeting on Executive Agreements, May 16, 1975, Box 8, Folder: May 16, 1975 – Key Leaders (Executive Agreements), National Security Adviser, NSC Press and Congressional Liaison Staff: Files, 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹⁷⁷ Gordon Englehart, "GOP Youth Applauds Reagan," *New York Times*, July 3, 1975; Memo on the Young Republican Convention, Box 19, Folder: Young Republican Conferences, 1975, Richard Cheney Files, GRFL.

¹⁷⁸ Remarks on Greeting the Captain of the SS *Mayaguez* and Crewmembers of the U.S.S. Greenville, in the American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=5101> (accessed March 5, 2011); CBS Evening News for Thursday, Jul 24, 1975, in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/tvn-displayfullbroadcast.pl?SID=20110306805114746&code=tvn&getmonth=07&getdate=24&getyear=1975&Network=CBS&HeaderLink=241152&source=BroadcastSelect&action=getfullbroadcast> (accessed March 5, 2011).

During the 1976 presidential campaign, several of Ford's television commercials featured a lingering shot of him sitting at his office desk with a phone at his ear, the large steering wheel displayed prominently in the background. As his signature jingle, "I'm Feelin' Good About America," hummed in the background, a stern voice told the viewer that Ford could "keep America secure."¹⁷⁹

The White House's narrative dominated the public discourse surrounding the seizure of the *Mayaguez*. While campaigning for election in 1976, Ford pointed to the crisis to draw attention to his strength and capability as a leader. He called the resort to force one of his "most meaningful decisions."¹⁸⁰ He was especially vocal in an April 1976 speaking tour in Texas. At the Sheraton Inn in Tyler, he claimed that "sometimes people say that President Ford won't face up to an issue, that he won't be decisive." During the *Mayaguez* incident, however, "we took decisive action and the MAYAGUEZ was gotten back. I think that is indicative of the strength and courage and the right action I can take in this office."¹⁸¹ The next day, in Waco, he explained to a crowd that "another criteria by which you can judge the qualification of a President I think is whether he can act decisively and again act successfully." The crisis showed Ford fit the bill: "I decided that the only way we could handle the matter was by affirmative, decisive, direct action, and we got the MAYAGUEZ back, period."¹⁸²

Ford's attempt to use the *Mayaguez* incident as a campaign tool backfired in October 1976, when the partisan General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report roundly criticizing the administration's decisions during the crisis. According to the report, hasty decision-making

¹⁷⁹ Videotape of 1976 Campaign Ad, President Ford Committee Materials, Audiovisual Collection, GRFL.

¹⁸⁰ Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Public Forum in West Bend, Wisconsin, April 2, 1976, in The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=5785> (accessed March 5, 2011).

¹⁸¹ Address of President Gerald R. Ford at the Tyler Sheraton Inn, April 28, 1976, Box H36, Folder: Foreign Relations (2), President Ford Committee Records, 1975-76, GRFL.

¹⁸² Address of President Gerald R. Ford at the Waco Civic Center, April 29, 1976, Box H36, Folder: Foreign Relations (2), President Ford Committee Records, 1975-76, GRFL.

and poor intelligence pervaded the rescue operation. It concluded that the military's final assaults on Koh Tang and the mainland had been unnecessary.¹⁸³ The White House, State Department, and Defense Department took strong exception to the GAO's findings. The Ford administration argued that "the GAO report simplistically assumes that success is measured by some mathematically equation between lives lost and lives saved. A President has to consider how many lives would be risked if America is seen to be lacking in strength or resolve."¹⁸⁴

The GAO report's timing was dubious. The day after it was released, Ford squared off with Jimmy Carter in the presidential campaign's only debate on foreign affairs. Scrambling on the day of the debate, Max Friedersdorf sent a memo to Jack Marsh on ways to cast doubt on the report's legitimacy. He had asked Congressman Larry Wynn (R-KS) to expedite his formal charge of collusion between members of Governor Carter's staff and the House International Relations Committee pertaining to the GAO's investigation of the *Mayaguez* incident. "I told him that it would be most helpful if we could get this out prior to 9:30 tonight [the time of the debate]," his memo read. At the debate, Carter used the GAO report to criticize Ford's secretive crisis management. Ford defended himself with a familiar appeal to Captain Miller's gratitude, one that emphasized both personal and geopolitical credibility:

This morning I got a call from the skipper of the *Mayaguez*. He was furious, because he told me that it was the action of me, President Ford, that saved the lives of the crew of the *Mayaguez*. And I can assure you that if we had not taken the strong and forceful action that we did, we would have been criticized very, very severely for sitting back and not moving.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ US GAO, "The Seizure of the *Mayaguez*," 59-61.

¹⁸⁴ *Mayaguez* Q&A Brief, October 5, 1976, Box 8, Folder: *Mayaguez* - GAO Report, July-Oct. 1976, NSC Press and Congressional Liaison Staff: Files, 1973-1976, GRFL.

¹⁸⁵ Presidential Campaign Debate, October 6, 1976, in The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=6414> (accessed March 5, 2011).

Conclusion

On May 12, 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized and detained an American merchant ship and its crew. Over the next four days, the Ford administration confronted an international crisis. Just two short weeks after the fall of Saigon and ten days after a Gallup Poll suggested that only thirty-nine percent of Americans approved of the way Ford was handling his job, the United States and its government appeared to be in dire straits. Commentators had cast doubt on Ford's capacity for leadership. Allies and enemies had called into question America's strength and the reliability of its military commitments. Under such circumstances, it was only natural that the Ford administration pursued a symbolic victory.

Ford and Kissinger managed and manipulated the *Mayaguez* crisis with an eye towards credibility. During the incident and in the months that followed, Kissinger sought to use the crisis to demonstrate American resolve after Vietnam and Ford to demonstrate his own capacity for leadership. This reflected their primary concerns with, respectively, geopolitical and personal credibility. And though each man was drawn to a different conception of credibility, it was not to the exclusion of the other. Ford recognized that his own political strength depended on America's international strength, and Kissinger recognized that America's international strength depended on Ford's political strength. Personal and geopolitical credibility, domestic and international politics—all were thoroughly interconnected.

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