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**LOOKING FEROCIOUS:
THE FORD ADMINISTRATION'S MANAGEMENT OF THE MAYAGUEZ
AFFAIR**

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COURSE 5603: NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY PROCESS**

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“Let’s look ferocious!”

- Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, May 15, 1995, advising President Ford to continue with air strikes on the Cambodian mainland although the *Mayaguez* and its crew were already free¹

President Ford considered the May 12-15, 1975 *Mayaguez* affair his most significant foreign policy decision and one of the highlights of his presidency. He asserted in his memoirs that the administration’s decisive and responsible management of the incident had achieved all its objectives: three days after the seizure of the U.S.-registered commercial container ship by a Khmer Rouge gunboat some 60 miles off the Cambodian coast, the vessel and all 40 crewmembers were steaming safely towards their next port. More importantly, Ford was convinced, the administration’s swift and aggressive military response to the seizure had both bolstered the international prestige of the United States and had given the sagging self-confidence of the American people a needed boost. Though Ford didn’t mention it himself, others noted that his standing as president improved in the immediate aftermath of the rescue, as a 12-point surge in his approval rating underscored public approbation of the President’s handling of the affair.”

But was the *Mayaguez* affair really an example of the national security process working in top form? Were all reasonable options scrutinized? Did the response the administration chose suit the provocation? Were the national objectives identified by the policy-makers reasonable? Or, as some observers have suggested, did Ford and his leading advisors bring to the table a particular mindset -- a way of interpreting the

specific incident itself in the context of global and regional developments -- that funneled them willy-nilly towards a military response and impeded consideration of alternative actions? The record does indeed suggest that the Ford national security team, its collective sensitivities raw following several foreign policy disasters, interpreted what under other circumstances would have been a medium-level bilateral tussle as a “crisis” in international confidence in the U S. The Ford administration then attempted to resolve the “crisis” by application of brute force, unfortunately with heavy casualties for the United States. In retrospect, the *Mayaguez* affair is less an example of good decision-making under pressure than a testament to the missteps that can result when fundamental assumptions about the nature of the problem are not critically vetted.

Problem and Response

The President and his advisors acted quickly when word reached the White House early on May 12, 1975, that a Khmer Rouge gunboat had seized the freighter *Mayaguez* in coastal waters claimed by the Cambodian government. The NSC team swiftly agreed that U S objectives were (1) to free the ship and crew, and (2) to prove to a doubting world that America’s resolve to keep its commitments and resist adversaries remained intact. In the absence of diplomatic relations with the new Khmer Rouge government, which had just captured Phnom Penh a few weeks before, the United States attempted to send a diplomatic protest through the PRC. The President also ordered the preparation of an imposing military rescue effort. Reconnaissance planes were sent to track the *Mayaguez*’s movements, U S naval ships were sent to the Gulf of Thailand, and 1,100

Marines were dispatched to U S installations in Thailand to prepare to take back the ship and crew by force

Although the ship itself was located fairly early on, planning for the rescue of the crew was impeded by uncertainty regarding their whereabouts Intelligence sources and air surveillance on May 12-14 were unable to confirm whether the crew was still on the ship (The Cambodians had in fact removed the 40 crewmembers early on May 13 and had transferred them to a series of shipboard and land holding sites) Worried that the crew would be irretrievable should the Cambodians move them onto the mainland, the President ordered U S aircraft to forcibly interdict the movement of Cambodian patrol boats between the *Mayaguez* (then anchored off Koh Tang, an island 34 miles off the Cambodian coast) and the mainland Three patrol boats were duly sunk and four were immobilized on May 14

On the afternoon of May 14, the President ordered the execution of the plan prepared by the JCS to recover the ship and its crew Within hours, 131 Marines landed on Koh Tang (May 15 local time) but came under unexpectedly heavy groundfire Concurrently, the Navy inserted Marines on board the *Mayaguez* (which turned out to be deserted), and air strikes were initiated against an oil depot and other military installations around Kompong Som harbor on the Cambodian mainland Meanwhile, unbeknown to the U S but before the Marines landed on Koh Tang, the Khmer Rouge released the crew and put them all on a Thai fishing boat By mid-morning on May 15, all forty were safely transferred to a U S naval vessel The extraction of Marines from Koh Tang, however,

proved to be extremely dangerous. Casualties were serious. More troops had to be sent in to cover the withdrawal, and not until the early evening on May 15 (local time) were all surviving U.S. combatants off the island.ⁱⁱⁱ

Post- Mortem

After the euphoria and hoopla of the rescue subsided, more details surfaced, inviting scrutiny and raising questions that are still debated. Critics taken aback by the human cost of the operation attacked the assertions of President Ford and his major advisors that the robust military response to the capture had been justified, prudent, and appropriate to the provocation. Early celebrants didn't know, and later administration supporters did not emphasize, that 41 U.S. soldiers died and 50 Marines were injured in the attempt to rescue 40 crewmembers and retrieve the freighter. Operationally, critics observed, the rescue mission hardly deserved the trumpeting the administration gave it.^{iv}

Other critics focused on the administration's determination to plan and proceed with a risky military operation despite what decision-makers knew was faulty, tardy, and insufficient intelligence. Bad information on the capacities of the Cambodian defense forces on Koh Tang was largely responsible for the high death toll among the attacking Marines. Equally dubious intelligence combined with aggressive military action nearly cost the lives of the *Mayaguez* crew, who came under fire from U.S. planes when being ferried about by the Cambodians. It was clear that luck, rather than the competence of

the military rescuers, had a great deal to do with the successful return of the crew and that the whole operation was very nearly a disaster ^v

Others -- and not just U S observers -- were disturbed that Washington had been so quick to go to a High Noon scenario, provoking and staking all on a military confrontation while shortchanging the opportunities for a diplomatic resolution. These critics pointed out that the U S had given up very easily when early efforts to communicate with the Cambodian government through the Chinese had not worked out. The U S had ignored the U N Secretary General's appeal to exhaust diplomatic resolutions before reaching for a military resolution. Washington's ultimatums had also forced a timetable on the Cambodians which that government, new and disorganized, could not meet. ^{vi}

Then there were those uncomfortable with what they saw as the latest demonstration of the U S propensity for high-handed behavior in Southeast Asia. A chief complaint on this score was the Ford administration's violation of Thai sovereignty. Over the explicit and vocal objections of the Thai government, the U S rescue mission was run out of a U S base in Thailand. Although the Thais were (at least officially) mollified by a U S apology immediately after the event, Washington's willingness to run roughshod over the Thai government was interpreted by critics as a blow to U S credibility as an honest partner in Asia ^{vii}

Domestically, Ford's decisions to attack Cambodian naval ships and to bomb the Cambodian mainland were questioned by supporters of the 1973 War Powers Act, who

argued that the President had violated the spirit if not the letter of the act by failing to consult fully with the Congressional leadership before ordering troops into action ^{viii} In fact, Ford or other administration representatives had briefed members of the House and Senate several times during May 13-14 and the President had even met with the bipartisan leadership late on May 14 Sure that the War Powers resolution did not apply to the *Mayaguez* case, however, the President did not ask for Congressional concurrence with any of his decisions, he simply explained them Although he dismissed later complaints from “liberals in the press and Congress” that he had violated the War Powers Act, the President did decide to send a report on the operation to the leaders of the House and Senate immediately at the end of the incident ^{ix}

Having anticipated much of the criticism later leveled at them for their management of the *Mayaguez* challenge, President Ford and his national security team dealt were relatively unperturbed by the post-incident bleats The operational and tactical aspects of the U S response had, after all, been thoroughly discussed during the course of four formal NSC meetings and numerous one-on-one discussions between May 12 and May 15 The President and his inner circle (Secretary of State Kissinger, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, and Deputy National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft) had consulted experts and high-level representatives from the military and other pertinent agencies before refining the details of the military operation All knew very well that the operation was risky the JCS had estimated there would be between 20 and 40 casualties ^x Though unhappy with the lack of intelligence information, and frustrated by the slow flow of news from the action site to Washington (the 11-hour time difference

did not help), the President accepted that making important decisions with incomplete information was part of his executive responsibilities ^x He also did not “give a damn about offending” the sensibilities of the Thais and thought their protests were pro forma ^{xii}

The administration argued that diplomatic solutions had not been neglected – they had just not been effective given the perceived necessity for a speedy retrieval of the crew Not only had the U S attempted to send a message demanding the release of the ship to the Cambodians through the PRC the first day of the crisis, the State Department had tried to deliver a similar message through Beijing on the second day On the afternoon of May 14, the U S had also formally requested U N assistance in securing the release of the ship and its crew ^{xiii} Ford pointed out that he had authorized the issuance of a last minute public statement offering to cease military operations on receipt of a firm Cambodian promise to release the crew ^{xiv}

Mindset over Matter

Operational issues aside, the real question to be asked concerning the Ford administration’s handling of the *Mayaguez* affair is how the decision-makers came to interpret the seizure of a rusty freighter as a major threat to overall U S security interests The answer to this question is key to understanding the White House’s immediate, almost gut-instinct decision to go for a Great Power military response, it explains as well the President’s fixation on an offensive military engagement despite its serious problems and

unavoidable risks. What the record indicates is that the reactions of the President and Secretary of State Kissinger in particular were very much determined by a mindset that virtually ruled out any real effort to find a resolution on terms other than a military zero-sum victory. In the *Mayaguez* case, the military tool was chosen less because it suited the immediate task of freeing the ship and crew than because it projected to the world an image of the United States that served what the White House, State Department, and NSC saw as the U.S.'s broader foreign policy goals.^{xv}

It was the special timing of the seizure that determined the shape of the Ford team's response. What at a later or earlier period might have been seen as a pesky problem for the State Department to iron out -- after all, the Cambodian navy had intercepted and temporarily held a number of ships from various countries before the *Mayaguez* was taken -- became a showdown that the President, Kissinger, and apparently much of the inner circle were convinced would have international ramifications of the most serious kind.

Ford's aides also knew that, handled as a demonstration of presidential authority and grit, the *Mayaguez* affair could have positive domestic repercussions for Ford's credibility as Commander-in-Chief. Ford had an image problem. He had been in office only nine months when the *Mayaguez* was seized. As the only non-elected president in U.S. history, he lacked a personal mandate to govern. His capacity to lead the country had been famously questioned by such well-known detractors as Lyndon Johnson. Ford's public image was a likeable but bumbling guy of mediocre intelligence. His advisors

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saw, as one noted, that the *Mayaguez* was his “first acid test” as Commander in Chief ^{xvi} Ford also saw the incident as an opportunity for Americans to “view another side of their President ” ^{xvii} Ford appears to have been predisposed to an aggressive, photo-op response that showed him firmly in charge, diplomatic finesse or other quiet resolution of the problem wouldn’t have had the same effect in changing the President’s image

Even more important in shaping administration thinking, however, was the international context of the capture Less than two weeks before the incident, the last Americans had ignominiously fled Saigon as the city finally fell to the North Vietnamese The scenes of panic and raw *sauf qui peut* despair shot on the roof of the U S embassy in Saigon were beamed around the world This humiliation followed almost directly on the heels of the U S evacuation of Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge seized control of the Cambodian capital April 17 Ford and Kissinger were convinced that the last sorry chapter of the ten-year U S debacle in Southeast Asia had severely damaged U S international prestige and undercut American credibility around the world Kissinger predicted dourly that the surrender had “ushered in a period of American humiliation” across the globe ^{xviii} Ford was concerned that the defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia had led even good friends like the British and Israelis to doubt the “resolve” of the United States to stand by its overseas commitments The President was determined “not to permit our setbacks to become a license for others to fish in troubled waters” and was equally resolved to prove that America would stand firm with more than rhetoric ^{xix}

Both the President and Kissinger agreed that the *Mayaguez* incident provided an opportunity to provide that proof. During the first NSC meeting on May 12, Kissinger had emotionally argued that what was at stake was far more than the seizure of a ship – it was the international perception of U.S. resolve and will. Ford agreed when Kissinger said the U.S. response had to be strong and firm, the U.S. had to draw the line and show that it could not be pushed around. The whole world was watching to see if the withdrawal in Southeast Asia meant the U.S. had lost its resolve to stand up against aggression.^{xx} In the May 13 NSC meeting, Kissinger again took the same line, arguing for a dramatic show of force on the grounds that a sensational move would help restore the tainted U.S. credibility. Worried about North Korean intentions on the peninsula, the Secretary also thought that a forceful U.S. response might deter the North Koreans from launching an offensive against the south.^{xxa}

Apparently alone among the NSC members, Defense Secretary Schlesinger focused on the *Mayaguez* as a specific problem rather than as a symbol of American resolve to wave in front of a skeptical world. (Note: Schlesinger seems to have made his disagreement count later in the rescue, when the Pentagon quietly neglected to carry out all the bombing raids ordered by the President).^{xxai} The rest of the major decision-makers saw the *Mayaguez* principally in terms of a specific Big Picture interpretation of recent events in the region: the capture of the *Mayaguez* was an international crisis for the United States, it was a deliberate challenge that demanded a quick and tough response, and the right response was to flex military muscle. From the first NSC meeting on, an aggressive and forceful response was the only one seriously considered, subsequent decisions

mainly concerned the type, timing, and details of the military response. The conviction that the world was intently watching and judging America's future actions by its behavior in the *Mayaguez* made a swift response imperative -- no time to wait for diplomatic wheels to grind, no waiting for the U N or other friends to be helpful, no hold-ups for intelligence reports to come in -- and a hard, robust military response the only option worth serious consideration. From this point of view, the potential costs of inserting U S military into a dangerously uncertain situation were absolutely justified on national security grounds. This kind of thinking made it possible for the national security team to give serious consideration to massive retaliatory and punitive B-52 strikes against the Cambodian mainland.

A second preconception was crucial in shaping the President's assessment of the challenge and his choice of response. Ford immediately drew an analogy between the seizure of the *Mayaguez* and the 1968 *Pueblo* incident, in which the North Koreans captured a U S naval intelligence ship, killed a sailor, and imprisoned and mistreated the crew for nearly a year.^{xxiii} Ford considered the *Pueblo* incident a "benchmark" for his handling of the *Mayaguez* challenge. His repeated references to the *Pueblo* indicate the degree to which that experience colored his decisions with *Mayaguez*. The *Pueblo* case was raised during the first NSC meeting, and Ford recalls in his memoirs that he discussed the fate of the navy ship and its crew with Schlesinger early on May 13. He told Schlesinger he would not allow history to repeat itself by losing control of the crew. The President's order to the Pentagon to do what it took to ensure that movement

between Koh Tang and the coast was interdicted was issued specifically to prevent the transfer of the *Mayaguez*'s crew to the mainland^{xxiv}

However, the analogy between the *Pueblo* and the *Mayaguez* wasn't all that tight, and comparing the two – and framing options accordingly – did little to help the NSC assess the *Mayaguez* situation on its own merits^{xxv} The *Mayaguez* was a privately owned freighter, not a Navy vessel filled with sensitive gear, its crew did not have classified knowledge of interest to hostile governments In contrast to the men on the intelligence ship, the *Mayaguez*'s crew had limited value as hostages Additionally, the specific role the Cambodian government played in masterminding the capture of the *Mayaguez*, as well as the intentions of those who decided to seize the American vessel, were and remain unclear

In a stunningly telling passage, Ford relates in his memoirs that, during the final NSC meeting on May 14, White House photographer David Hume Kennerly broke into the middle of a discussion on airstrikes against the Cambodian mainland to ask whether anyone had considered that the seizure might simply be an act of piracy by the local commander rather than the execution of orders from Phnom Penh^{xxvi} The answer was no Kennerly had put his finger on the central flaw of the Ford team's management of the *Mayaguez* preconceptions and unquestioned assumptions inhibited thorough analysis of the problem at hand The question of the identity and intentions of the perpetrators of the seizure was one of several issues that should have been raised at the first, not the last, NSC meeting Given the chaos in Cambodia and the lack of

intelligence concerning the new government, Ford should have been less hasty to (1) take it as a given that the Khmer Rouge central command was behind the capture of the Mayaguez, and (2) interpret the seizure as a deliberate kick in the pants to a wounded giant ^{xxvii} Had he been less seized with what he thought were the lessons of the *Pueblo* analogy, Ford might have taken more time to explore diplomatic options – which were in fact looking rather promising by May 15 -- or to wait for better intelligence before directing the Marines at risky and useless targets Had Ford and Kissinger been less blinkered by the humiliation in Vietnam, less consumed by the imperative to send rah-rah signals to all those Doubting Thomas nations, they might have been more open to explore ways to resolve the *Mayaguez* problem by finesse rather than ferocity, and to impress enemies and friends with U S brains rather than brawn

ⁱ Ron Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside* (Chicago: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 129

ⁱⁱ The President's approval rating went up from 59% to 51% Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different*, 129-131, Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 283-84, Walter Isaacson *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 651

ⁱⁱⁱ A detailed account of the movements of the crew and the *Mayaguez* is in Roy Rowan, *The Four Days of Mayaguez* (New York: W W Norton & Co., 1975) For descriptions of the Washington decision-making process, see Ford, *A Time to Heal*, Isaacson, *Kissinger*, Richard G. Head, Frisco W. Short, and Robert C. McFarlane, *Crisis Resolution: Presidential Decision-Making in the Mayaguez and Korean Confrontations* (Boulder, CO: WestView Press, 1978), and Christopher Jon Lamb, *Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis* (Gainesville, Florida: The University of Florida Press, 1989), and Kennedy School of Government, *The Mayaguez Incident* (Mss., Harvard College, 1983)

^{iv} 23 Marines were killed in a helicopter crash in Thailand, 18 Marines were killed in action or missing in ground fighting in Cambodia Lamb, *Belief Systems*, 29-31

^v Several crewmembers were hit by shrapnel Rowan, *Four Days*, 133-137

^{vi} Kennedy School, *Mayaguez*, 19 A GAO study commissioned by the Senate agreed that insufficient time and attention had been given to diplomacy See Head, *Crisis Resolution*, 144

^{vii} See, for instance, Michael Morrow "Ford: Fastest Gun in the East," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 30, 1975, 10-11, William Shawcross, "Making the Most of Mayaguez," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 30, 1975, 11-12, Norman Peagam, "Thailand's Turn to Protest," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 30, 1975, 12-13

^{viii} Senators Harry Byrd and Mike Mansfield were particularly upset, Senator Tom Eagleton demanded a GAO study of the administration's handling of the *Mayaguez* in June Kennedy School, *Mayaguez*, 18

^{ix} Ford, *Time to Heal*, 280-81, Kennedy School, *Mayaguez*, 17-19

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- ^x Oddly, the question about possible casualties was not raised until late in planning, and then was not raised by one of the principals Robert T Hartmann, *Palace Politics An Inside Account of the Ford Years* (New York McGraw-Hill, 1980), 327
- ^{xi} Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different*, 131
- ^{xii} Ford, *Time to Heal*, 276-277
- ^{xiii} Kennedy School, *Mayaguez*, 14
- ^{xiv} Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different*, 125-26
- ^{xv} Secretary of Defense Schlesinger did not share this view, which explains his disinclination for a robust military response Ford, *Time to Heal*, 279
- ^{xvi} Hartmann, *Palace Politics*, 324
- ^{xvii} Ford, *Time to Heal*, 276
- ^{xviii} Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 647
- ^{xix} Ford, *Time to Heal*, 275
- ^{xx} Ford, *Ibid*, 276, Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 649, Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different*, 118
- ^{xxi} Kennedy School, *Mayaguez*, 12, Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 649
- ^{xxii} The JSC was also hesitant to use force, but mainly because they wanted more time to plan a successful operation Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 649-50, Kennedy School, *Mayaguez*, 12
- ^{xxiii} Ford, *Time to Heal*, 277
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid*, 277
- ^{xxv} An excellent discussion of the President's emphasis on the Pueblo as the analogy to the Mayaguez, and the differences between the two, can be found in Richard E Neustadt and Ernest R May, *Thinking in Time The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York The Free Press, 1986), 58-66
- ^{xxvi} Ford, *Time to Heal*, 279-80
- ^{xxvii} It is worth noting, for instance, that *Mayaguez* was not flying identification flags when taken Rowan, *Four Days*, 198