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WXPost *The Mayaguez Affair*

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THE NEW CAMBODIAN government's seizure of the American merchant ship *Mayaguez* poses an unwanted and difficult challenge to the Ford administration. Obviously, the United States must protect its citizens and their property from arbitrary acts by foreign states. Particularly at this moment of post-Vietnam uncertainty, the government is bound to be worrying about whether its will is still being taken seriously in the world. And yet the facts of this incident are still very few and dim. Certainly the basic prerequisites for the use of force—that the facts be known, that the Congress and the public be informed of the choices and risks, and that diplomatic alternatives be exhausted—have not yet been met.

What we do know is that an unarmed merchant ship under charter to the U.S. military, carrying supplies but apparently not weapons to U.S. military bases in Thailand, was intercepted in what Cambodia claims are its territorial waters eight miles from an island sitting 60 miles off the Cambodian coast in the Gulf of Siam. Whether this was an act of "piracy," as the administration at once claimed, is not clear to lawyers. In the absence of any explanation from the new, uncommunicative and intensely nationalistic government of Cambodia, one can only speculate on what its purposes were. To be tough and anti-American? To assert a territorial claim to an island also claimed by the Vietnamese? To take a chip for bargaining against the return of Cambodian property taken abroad by members of the former government? To protest the delivery of military supplies to American military installations on the territory of a neighboring state, Thailand, with which Cambodia has

poor relations?

The United States has approached Peking for help in obtaining the release of the ship and its crew of 39. But there are no visible results as yet, and it is far from certain that China could do very much, even if it wanted to. Some approach to the United Nations Secretary General might also be appropriate. What would certainly not be appropriate, however, would be the policy recommended by Sen. James L. Buckley (Con.-R.-N.Y.): "immediate punitive air and naval attacks." That he could toy so cavalierly with the lives of the 39 hostages, without having any way of knowing what actually had happened, and without considering what the targets or costs or risks of renewed bombing might be, suggests a truly astonishing inability to learn anything from Vietnam. The appeal by Sen. John Sparkman (D-Ala.) to retrieve the ship "any way we can" was only slightly less ill-considered.

The administration itself has threatened Cambodia with "the most serious consequences." It would have done much better first to build its case. As it was the administration last night found itself in the awkward if not untenable position of making plans to fly marines into American bases in Thailand, despite the Thai government's publicly stated refusal to permit use of those bases for military action against Cambodia. In fact, the administration should not be raising the specter of force until it can supply the American people with convincing evidence of the rightness of its case as well as an explanation of why there is no effective alternative. American honor is being tested. But so, after Vietnam, is American common sense.