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Barbarous Piracy

By Anthony Lewis

The diplomacy of violence: That is still, then, to be our trademark. Once again an American Government shows that the only way it knows how to deal with frustration is by force. And the world is presumably meant to be impressed.

The Khmer Rouge were wrong and foolish to seize the American merchant ship *Mayaguez*, if the facts were as stated in Washington. They violated necessary norms of international behavior. We had reason to be concerned, especially about the fate of the crew.

But using a sledgehammer to crack a nut is self-defeating for nations as for individuals. Violent escalation of the conflict could hardly be expected to achieve the immediate aim of the crew's release; to the contrary, it might heighten the danger. More broadly, the military action showed a lack of that perspective expected of a great power—the perspective, in this case, recent history.

Imagine that in 1775 and for years after an enormously powerful state equipped with futuristic weapons had intervened in our Revolutionary War. From bases in Canada it rained destruction on the thirteen colonies. A million Americans, a third of the population, fled their homes; 300,000 were casualties.

When the war was finally over, how might the victorious Americans have felt about that foreign state? If one of its ships had sailed into what were claimed to be American waters, might we have been tempted to board and seize the vessel?

A comparison between America in 1775 and Cambodia in 1975 is not so far-fetched. The peasant society of Cambodia today is hardly more advanced, technologically, than eighteenth-century America. Cambodia was just as defenseless against B-52's as the thirteen colonies would have been.

American planes dropped 250,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia between 1969 and Aug. 15, 1973, when Congress prohibited all U.S. military action in, over or on the waters adjoining Indochina. Between a third and a half of Cambodia's 7.5 million people became refugees. Jon Swain of *The London Sunday Times*, one of the correspondents recently evacuated, described the physical damage he saw as follows:

"The entire countryside has been churned up by American B-52 bomb craters, whole towns and villages

razed. So far, I have not seen one intact pagoda. . . . The war damage here [Kompong Chhnang], as everywhere else we saw, is total. Not a bridge is standing, hardly a house. I am told most villagers spent the war years

living semi-permanently underground in earth bunkers to escape the bombing."

With that background, Americans should be slow to point a finger of moral disapproval at the Khmer Rouge. Nor can we rightly take a lofty position on the need to respect law. Washington has not reacted with force when Ecuador seized U.S. fishing boats more distant from shore than the *Mayaguez* was. And the American bombing of Cambodia was itself of dubious constitutionality.

The United States also bears a heavy responsibility for the political character of Cambodia today. If we had not invaded the country in 1970, and then intervened massively in her civil war, Prince Sihanouk would doubtless have

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returned to power soon with a left-leaning but more traditional regime. The Khmer Rouge movement would not have developed as it has, in all its hardened zeal. Most of the human suffering of the war would have been avoided.

The Khmer Rouge inherited a ruined nation. We are rightly horrified by accounts of the harsh measures taken. But after what has been done to them, are the Cambodians really to be blamed if they are xenophobic?

Those Americans who had a part in the savagery of our policy toward Cambodia over the years should be particularly slow to utter deploring pieties now. Secretary of State Kissinger, a principal author of the policy, has described events in Cambodia as "barbarous," "inhuman," "very tragic" and "an atrocity of major proportions." A man so steeped in the blood of Cambodians should have the shame to remain silent.

And now the insensitivity is in deeds as well as words. Once again we have to show the world how tough we are: The attitude of the teen-ager proving his manhood did not end with Richard Nixon's Presidency. Demonstrative violence is in fact a central element in Henry Kissinger's diplomatic philosophy. But how long must it be our country's?

How disheartening, too, to see the *Mayaguez* affair evoke from Congress the old jingo talk and calls for Presidential action. Senator Clifford Case, co-author of the 1973 ban on military action in Indochina, lived down to his reputation as a pusillanimous liberal by telling President Ford that he could ignore the law. Have we learned nothing from Vietnam about law and the Presidency? Have we forgotten that America had the world's respect when she stood for patience and magnanimity in human affairs?