

'Twas A Famous Victory'

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, May 15—This town hasn't had anything to cheer about since the Washington Bullets won the Eastern pro football championship, so it is cheering President Ford and the rescue of the Mayagüez and her crew as if this were a famous victory.

The private estimates, even in official quarters, are more modest than the public declarations. The rescue operation was melodramatic and successful, but the cost in Thailand, our last foothold in Southeast Asia, may be rather stiff. Robert Southey's old verse out of the Battle of Blenheim about sums it up:

*"And everybody praised the Duke,
Who this great fight did win."
"But what good came of it at last?"
Quoth little Peterkin.
"Why that I cannot tell," said he;
"But 'twas a famous victory."*

There is general agreement here in the Government, the Congress and the allied embassies that the United States had to act quickly and effectively to recover its men and ship. To have tolerated the Cambodian piracy, after the headlong U.S. retreat from South Vietnam, would have added humiliation to embarrassment. But whether the sudden plunge into Thailand, without the permission of the Thai Government, was necessary is still a question.

The Administration's explanation is that its aircraft carrier was too far away from the Mayagüez, too sparsely manned and underequipped with the right planes and helicopters to perform a surgical operation in time. The fear here was that the crew would have been kidnapped or even killed, and that weeks of haggling over reparations for their return would have been intolerable.

Also, the Thais have a new and weak government in Bangkok, confronted by hostile Communist governments from the north to the Gulf of

Siam, and harassed by an increasingly bold Communist minority at home. If Washington had asked for permission to land its Marines there, it would have invited a flat rejection, and complicated both its diplomatic and military problem.

On this assumption, balancing the military risks against a clear violation of Thailand's sovereign rights, the Administration chose to act first and explain later. It did not go to the United Nations for assistance until after the President had ordered the attack, though some of Mr. Ford's aides urged him to do so, but it did not ignore the U.N. either.

The President acted under Article 51 of the U.N. Charter, which reserves to all members the inherent right of self-defense, and while this displeased Secretary General Waldheim, there was very little criticism either at the U.N. or in the Congress.

In fact, the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, on the eve of his departure for Moscow in preparation for the Kissinger-Gromyko talks at Geneva, spent two hours in the garden of the British Embassy with Sir Peter Ramsbotham discussing the world situation after the Marines had attacked, and never even mentioned the Cambodian incident.

Perhaps the main result of the rescue was political. For weeks, the President has been presiding over a series of reverses in Vietnam, the Middle East, Cyprus, and also on the economic front at home and the political front on Capitol Hill.

He is just starting on a long summer and autumn of diplomatic journeys to Europe, the Soviet Union and China and at the same time organizing a staff for the Presidential election campaign of 1976, so he welcomed the generally favorable reaction to his handling of an awkward diplomatic and political problem.

In fact, the Administration almost seems grateful for the opportunity to demonstrate that the President can act quickly despite the recent efforts by Congress to limit his authority for military action. Officials here have been bridleing over a lot of silly taunts about the American "paper tiger" and hope the Marines have answered the charge.

The main thing that has happened, however, is merely that Uncle Sam went out of Cambodia and slammed the door, and while this has undoubtedly been a popular gesture, the task remains of preventing the Thais from inviting us out of there as well.

There is just a chance that Thailand's weakness, which prevented approval of the landing of the Marines, will now also prevent the Bangkok Government from closing out all the U.S. bases. For its appeals to China for help against its Communist neighbors have been politely ignored, and it may feel that an American military presence there would provide more security than political turmoil.

In fact, there is some reason for believing that the Thai Government was not as surprised by the landing of the Marines as it pretended to be. It complains that it was not asked for permission, but it didn't want to be asked, so there may still be some room yet for diplomatic maneuver.

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