

# The Mayaguez Decision

## Three Days of Crisis for President Ford

By Jules Witcover

Washington Post Staff Writer

It was 33 minutes past midnight on Thursday morning and President Ford, weary but gratified at the outcome of what one White House aide called "the biggest decision he's ever had to make in his life," came out of the Oval Office and headed for bed.

"Boy," he said, turning to the aide and smiling, "this is where I could really use a swimming pool."

But because the new White House swimming pool won't be finished before July 1, Mr. Ford trudged over to the residential quarters. There, he signed letters explaining to Congress his decision to take military action to recover the American merchant ship Mayaguez and its crew of 40, turned in

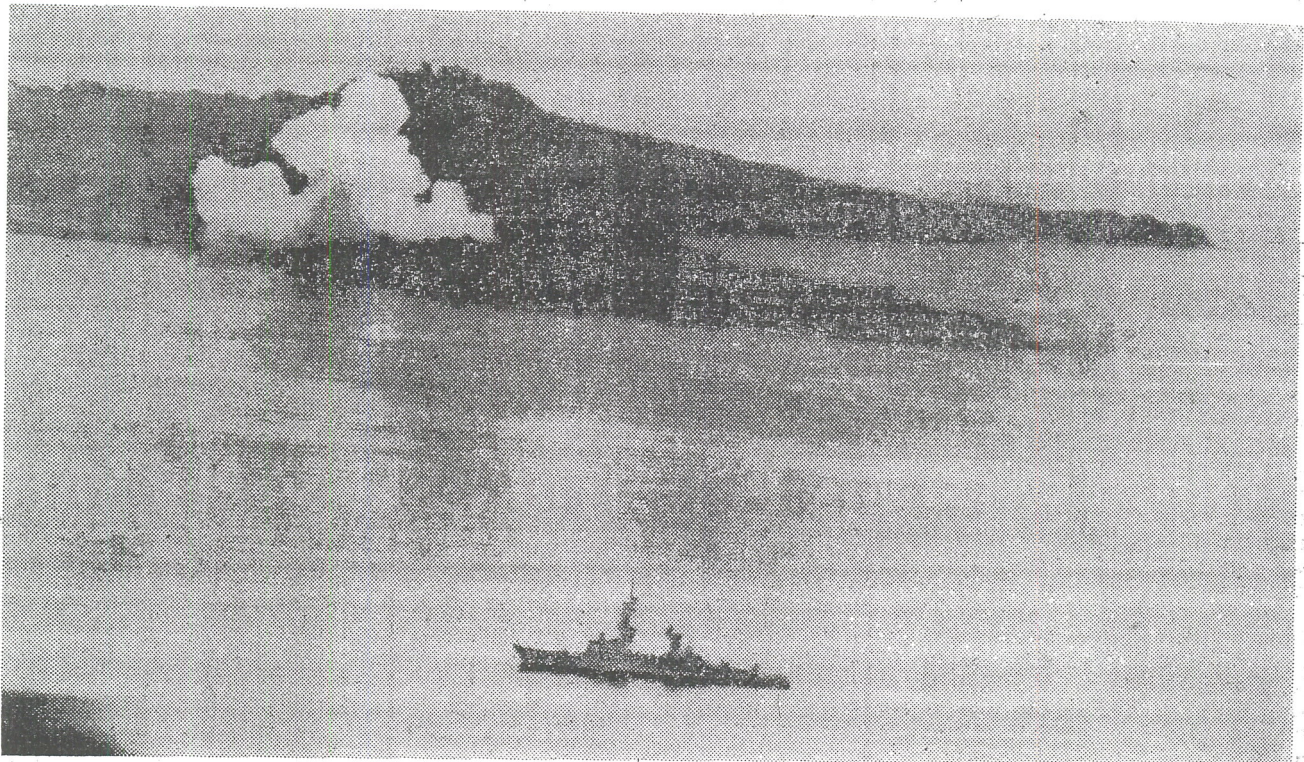
—and proceeded to oversleep that morning.

The specific decision on what to do and when, the first made in an atmosphere of genuine crisis in the 9 month-old Ford administration, came at 4:45 p.m. on Wednesday, about halfway through a one-hour-and-50-minute meeting of the National Security Council in the Cabinet Room.

The acting chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force Gen. David C. Jones, standing at the far end of the long conference table with pointer in hand, laid out to the NSC and key White House staff aides a series of military options, describing each on maps and charts.

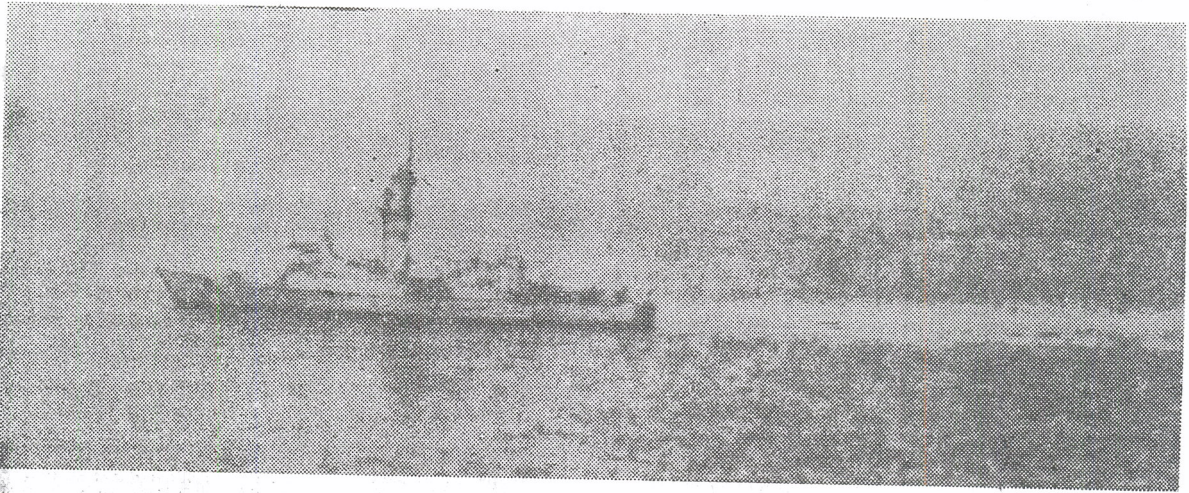
The options dealt with three areas:

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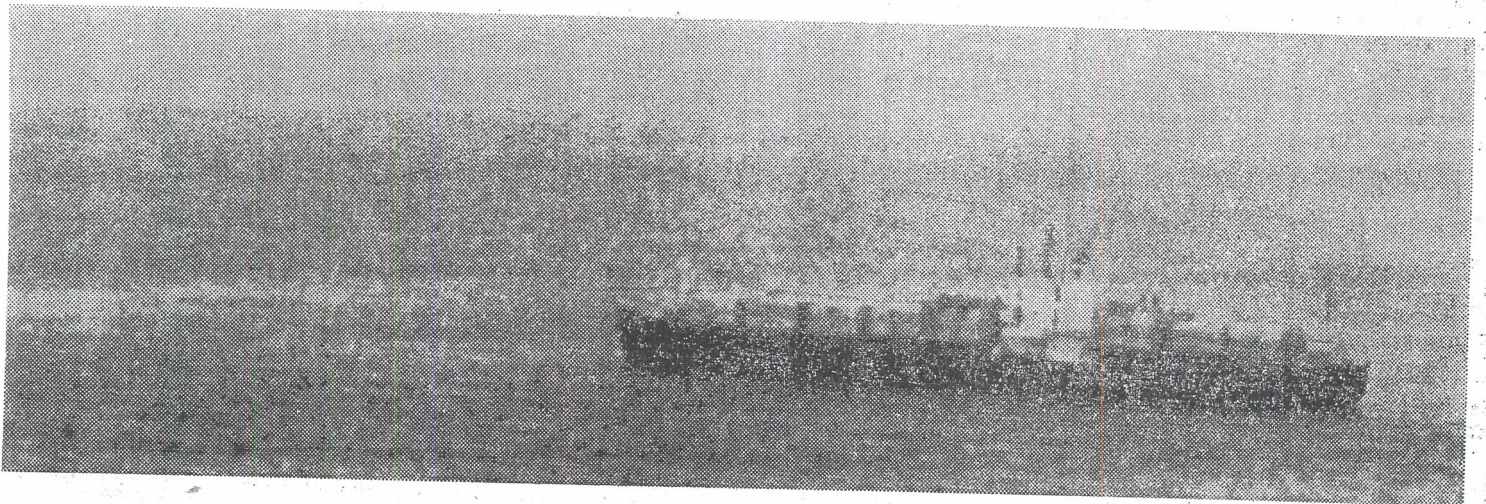


Smoke billows from Tang Island Thursday during the U.S. naval shelling.

Associated Press



The Navy destroyer USS Holt tows the American merchant ship Mayaguez away from Tang Island Thursday.



Associated Press

The Mayaguez, which had been seized by Cambodian gunboats in the Gulf of Siam, was freed after an attack by U.S. forces.

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what to do about the ship itself; what to do about Tang Island, where it was suspected the crew might be held; what to do about Cambodian military installations and forces on the mainland that might take retaliatory action.

More than two days earlier, at NSC's first Mayaguez crisis meeting at noon Monday, the President had taken the first steps necessary to reach the point of selecting among the options.

He ordered that full information be put together on the location of ship and crew, what military units were on or near the scene, and what others were needed and how soon they could be moved to the site in the Gulf of Siam.

On Tuesday morning, at a second NSC meeting starting at 10:30 o'clock, Mr. Ford, acting on concern that the crew might be moved out of the area—an action that would severely complicate the recovery task—issued orders for U.S. forces to interdict any boats coming from or going to Tang Island, off which the seized U.S. freighter was anchored.

Meanwhile, the airlifting of Marines into the area went forward, and on Tuesday night, at a third NSC meeting, the President issued orders putting Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force units on a one-hour alert.

Beginning Tuesday night and continuing into early Wednesday morning (Washington time), after reports that Cambodian boats were attempting to move the crew from the island to the mainland, the attacks on the gunboats were carried out. Three were sunk.

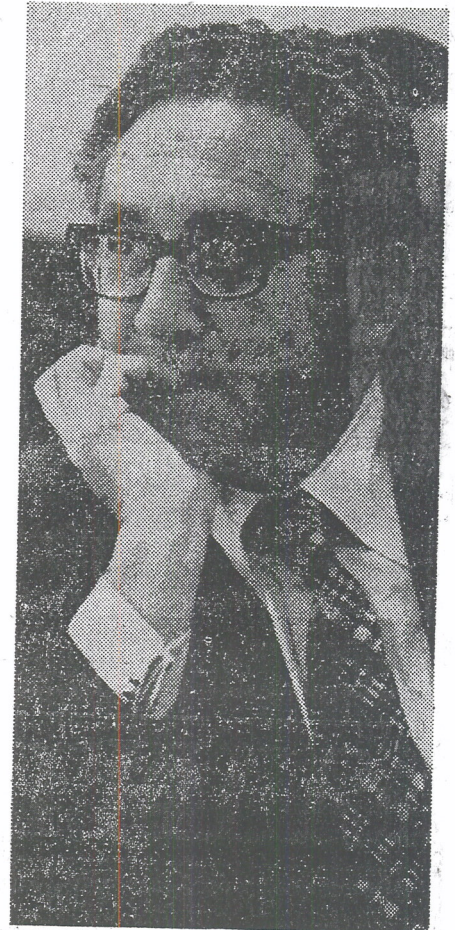
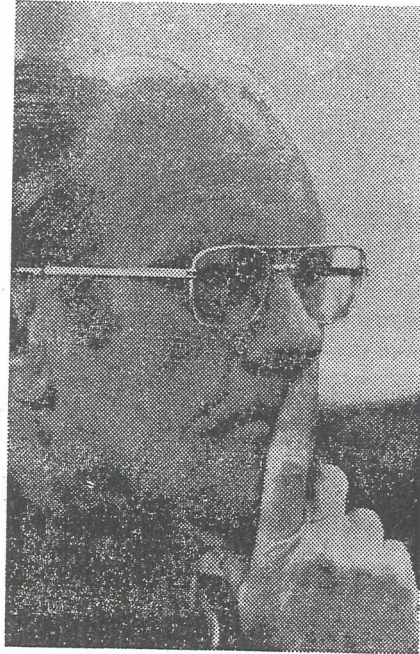
The situation was now at a critical point, and in this climate, with reports flowing in all morning to the Pentagon and the White House, the NSC held its fourth and most significant meeting at mid-afternoon on Wednesday.

As Gen. Jones reviewed the various options at that meeting, according to one who was present, the President repeatedly interrupted to ask questions and to express his desire for caution and determination that the safety of the crew be preserved.

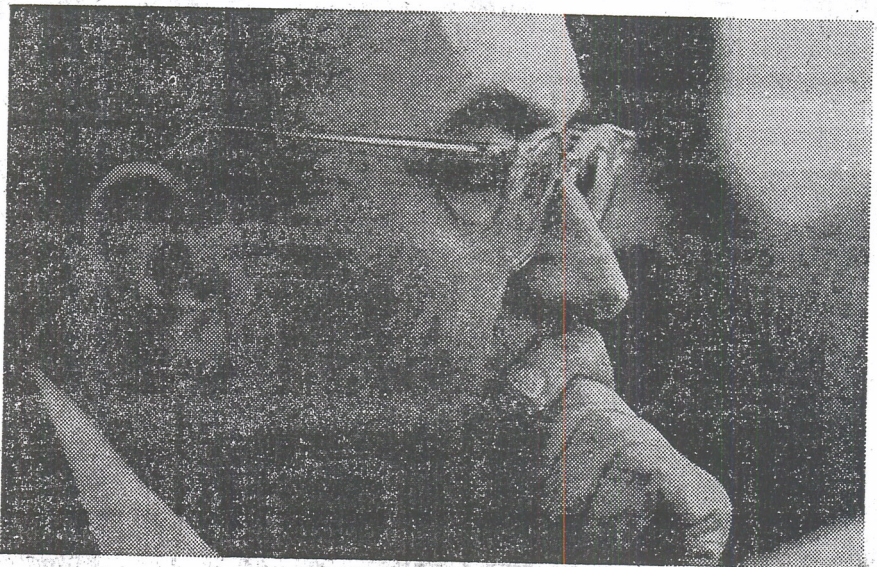
"He was very calm and deliberate," this observer recalled. "For some reason, he gave me the impression of being general himself. The impression I got was of a man who had been in the military, and the members of the NSC were obviously impressed with his knowledge of the military.

"He was the one who pressed all the questions. He wasn't going to be rushed into something that would fall on his head."

In the discussion of the various options, according to another administration source, different approaches were studied, but there was essential agreement about the use of military force once those at the table were convinced



President Ford, above, Henry A. Kissinger, right, and William E. Colby are studies in concentration during Wednesday's meeting of the National Security Council.



diplomatic overtures were getting nowhere.

"We're criticized for examining options and for not examining options," this source said. "Well, they were examined."

When the President had determined the option he favored in each of the three areas—the ship, the island and the mainland—he issued

specific verbal orders to Adm. James L. Holloway III, chief of naval operations, who immediately left the Cabinet Room to implement the President's wishes.

It was a serious, even somber meeting, with the only levity provided—briefly—by Donald H. Rumsfeld, the President's chief White House staff assistant. Rumsfeld, a former Navy pilot,

offered jokingly that the Navy could do a better job than Air Force on the ordered air strikes against the mainland.

"Everybody laughed," one of those present recalled, "and that was about the only laugh in the whole meeting."

Several sources said there was no political talk at the meeting; that is, what the political impact of the action decided upon would be. But one individual said there was some discussion of how the action would be perceived by the public.

The President sat at the center on one side of the long conference table.

To Mr. Ford's immediate left were Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger and Deputy Secretary of Defense William P. Clements Jr. To Mr. Ford's immediate right was Assistant Secretary of State Robert S. Ingersoll.

Across the table sat Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, Vice President Rockefeller and CIA director William Colby.

White House staff aides involved in the consideration of options and implementation of the selected plan included Rumsfeld; Philip W. Buchen, counsel to the President; Robert T. Hartmann and John O. Marsh, counsellors; White House press secretary Ronald Nessen; Max L. Friedersdorf, White House legislative chief; and Maj. Robert C. (Bud) McFarlane, Military Assistant to Kissinger.

After that fourth NSC meeting broke up, the President conferred with Rumsfeld and Kissinger and then attended the bipartisan congressional leadership meeting at which the leaders were informed of the decision—about 90 minutes after the first U.S. assault forces had taken off from their stations, according to the chronology of military operations released by the White House.

As the military operation went forward, the President put on a tuxedo and attended a state dinner for Premier Johannes den Uyl of the Netherlands, stepping out to take status reports from Kissinger and others.

During the dinner, he was told that the ship had been retaken, and at 11 p.m. he returned to the Oval Office where, 18 minutes later, he was told the entire crew had been recovered as well.

According to an observer, he immediately broke into a grin and conveyed the news to Kissinger, Rumsfeld and other aides sitting around his desk.

He changed from his tuxedo into a blue suit and, at 12:30 a.m. Thursday, walked into the White House press room and announced that "the vessel has been recovered intact and that the entire crew has been rescued."

The crisis was over, but ahead were the ramifications, both domestic and foreign. Though the participants said



White House photos by David Hume Kennerly

### Gen. David C. Jones briefs the National Security Council Wednesday.

domestic politics never were a consideration, one knowledgeable Republican politician, Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona, made clear yesterday what he thought the political impact would be. "I'm solidly with him, solidly in his corner, but I am now."

"This one act of Ford could be the act that elects him," Goldwater said. "You know, I haven't always been solidly with him, but I've opposed him as much as I've

backed him, and I have had serious doubts about his leadership, and they were dispelled. It was the kind of decision it takes a strong man to make.

"You know, he likes to talk about Harry Truman, and I guess one of the things that makes Truman maybe the greatest President in this century was that you never had to wake up and say, 'I wonder where the President is.'"