

Mr. Ford and the Rule of Law

The gamble taken by President Ford in using armed force against Cambodia, starting with air strikes against Cambodian gunboats Tuesday evening, was based above all on this hard conclusion: The U.S. had to seize the occasion of Cambodian piracy to prove it both could and would react with decision and power to international lawlessness.

There was no split of any kind in the National Security Council (NSC). Indeed, every top official in the administration agreed that whatever the risk, a show of American will and power was absolutely essential following the humiliation of South Vietnam.

In ordering American attacks on the Cambodian gunboats to block an obvious Cambodian effort to remove the American crew of the Mayaguez to the Cambodian mainland, neither the President nor the NSC even attempted to figure out an answer to this potentially explosive question: What if the Cambodians should use the gunboat attack as the pretext for murdering some 40 American crewmen?

"Of course we had contingency plans," one top presidential aide told us. "But we couldn't sit around and try to estimate every possible contingency when we are dealing with a primitive government which has virtually no outside contacts with the world. We had to act." In the climatic triumph of Mr. Ford's policy, that question is mooted. But it shows the President's faith—and determination—in the plan he followed.

The underlying assumption of the President's aides was that the U.S. must deal with such an act of piracy as a Western nation acting in a civilized fashion: Demand immediate re-

turn of the ship and crew and map a contingency plan to seize both by force if the demand was not met within a reasonable time.

Following seizure of the Mayaguez by Cambodia just after midnight, Sunday, the President allowed almost 48 hours to go by without any military response. Next, the basic plan of isolating the little island in the Gulf of Thailand, where the Mayaguez was held, went astray when Cambodian gunboats moved toward the mainland about 15 miles away. The President then gave his order to halt the gunboats.

At that point, the U.S. went the full and necessary distance to prove what Mr. Ford and his Secretaries of State and Defense, Henry Kissinger and James Schlesinger, had been preaching nonstop ever since the catastrophic end of the Vietnam war: Despite that national humiliation, no foreign country should make the mistake that the United States was discarding its role as world leader, or was reluctant to take strong action where demanded.

Indeed, the private remarks of top officials here make it abundantly apparent that the Mayaguez seizure became the ideal case to prove the point.

In the background was the utter failure of all efforts to open some kind of circuitous diplomatic channel to the revolutionary Cambodian government of the Khmer Rouge. The Soviet Union has been kicked out of Phnom Penh for failure to break with the old regime. The People's Republic of China, according to one high official, informed the U.S. it would try to help, and did so, but proved the point that the jingoistic Cambodian regime was simply beyond reach.

On Tuesday evening, Mr. Ford ordered word passed to congressional leaders that "appropriate action" would be taken. Perhaps in retrospect the President should have summoned these leaders to the White House for a face-to-face conversation. Sen. Mike Mansfield of Montana, the Senate Democratic leader, for example, said later that he had not been "consulted," on the theory he was told, not asked.

Other criticism in a Congress now showing dangerous symptoms of taking over American foreign policy from its feuding committee rooms was also heard, raising ominous questions about a vicious partisan debate erupting from the President's bold action.

But on that point Mr. Ford and his top aides, often indecisive and vacillating on lesser matters, showed no concern this time. They assumed that whatever partisan outcry might ensue, the American people as a whole would react with overwhelming approval to the President's powerful response to an unprovoked act of piracy on the high seas.

"Sure they'll try to demagogue it," one senior presidential aide told us. "That's par for the course. But no one considered that as part of the problem."

Thus, in this first, clear show of American power since the Indochinese fiasco, Mr. Ford has demonstrated what he is often criticized for lacking: a talent for leadership and command, in a case void of ambiguity to him and his advisers. Despite political risks, no one around him exhibited second thoughts about the obligation of the U.S. to underwrite the rule of law in the world.