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By Anthony Lewis

CHICAGO—The rule laid down by the United States in the Mayagüez affair must go something like this:

When a foreign country seizes an American ship, claiming a violation of its waters, the U.S. will unilaterally judge that legal claim. If we reject it, we shall demand the ship's release, allow a day or two for its return and then launch a military attack. As one distinguished voice put it in commenting on the Mayagüez: "Once established diplomatic procedures had failed to achieve prompt recovery . . . , President Ford had no alternative but to employ direct military means."

Exactly: No alternative but immediate force. So the next time Ecuador seizes an American tuna boat for fishing within a claimed 200-mile limit

ABROAD AT HOME

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that we do not recognize, Washington will give Ecuador a day or two and then bomb. And the next time we seize a Russian vessel for fishing within our claimed limit, all who cheered the Mayagüez action will understand and sympathize when the Soviets serve an ultimatum on us.

Wise decisions by governments, as by judges, require dealing with particular facts in terms of larger principle. That is, the case at hand must be decided with an eye for the consequences in cases as yet unimagined.

By that standard the American action against Cambodia last week was folly. It reflected no general principle of law, diplomacy or morals that we would really be prepared to follow in other cases. For all the bluster and righteous talk of principle, it is impossible to imagine the United States behaving that way toward anyone other than a weak, ruined country of

little yellow people who have frustrated us.

Respect for facts goes along with respect for principle in wise decisions. Do we know the facts of the Mayagüez affair? Does what we know give us confidence in the wisdom and humanity of our government's actions? Consider just three questions.

1. Was there any ground for Cambodian suspicion of the Mayagüez?

A Cambodian communiqué said that American observation planes had flown over the country daily since the Khmer Rouge victory last month. It said that

small boats carrying Thai and Cambodian agents with radio equipment and bombs had been caught in Cambodian waters. It said the Mayagüez had entered those waters and was stopped for questioning.

The United States has made reconnaissance flights and tried to land spies elsewhere in the past. When the Pentagon Papers were published in 1971, we learned that before the Tonkin Gulf incident of 1964 there had been provocative raids against North Vietnam. Are we sure the Cambodians had no reason to be edgy when they saw the Mayagüez? Are we sure the ship was in international waters?

2. How much time was allowed for diplomacy?

At 5:03 A.M. May 12, Eastern daylight time, Washington heard about the seizure of the Mayagüez. At 2:00 P.M. that day the White House announced the news and began diplomatic efforts for release of the ship.

The Cambodian communiqué said U.S. planes began strafing and bombing around the ship and islands about five hours after the White House announcement. The delayed United States report put the first air attack on Cambodian gunboats at 1:00 A.M. May 14, or 35 hours after diplomatic moves began. When were the first attacks? In any event we allowed less than a day and a half for a response from the untried and isolated government of a shattered country.

3. What was the purpose of U.S. military action?

The official reason was to save American lives and property. But the timing suggests there was more to it than that.

At 8:15 P.M. May 14 Washington learned of a Cambodian broadcast offering to return the Mayagüez. At 9:15 the White House demanded the crew be released and promised to cease military action if it was. At 10:53 the United States destroyer Wilson, communicating from the scene, said a small boat was approaching with at least thirty white men aboard. At 10:57, nevertheless, United States planes bombed a Cambodian airport miles away. At 11:14 President Ford was told that all the crew was safe. At 11:50 United States planes bombed an unused oil refinery.

That record speaks volumes. The last attacks, at least, could only have been punitive in purpose. They were designed to punish a "little half-assed nation," in Senator Barry Goldwater's elegant phrase.

Bombing an unused refinery after the ship and crew were recovered: That's really big brave stuff. It was indeed Barry Goldwater's vision of America that prevailed last week: a bully among nations, acting without consultation, without concern for facts or principle.