

Mayaguez Plan Worried Democrats

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

Confidential White House minutes reveal that Democratic leaders had some grave apprehensions over President Ford's daring plan to recapture the merchant ship Mayaguez.

Senate Democratic leader Mike Mansfield questioned the necessity for striking targets on the Cambodian mainland. "I express deep concern, apprehension and uneasiness," he told the President, "at again [hitting] the mainland. You have plenty of force, air and naval, without hitting the mainland."

The Senate's No. 2 Democrat, Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), demanded to know why congressional leaders weren't consulted at the time of the decision, "especially to strike targets on the mainland."

"I fear," he added, "we can be charged with overreacting."

The President said he acted on the advice of the National Security Council and the military authorities, as well as on "my own judgment."

"I decided that if we did too little," he said, "we would jeopardize the Marine movement in the area."

He explained that at least 2,400 Cambodian troops were "in a position on the mainland to attack our Marines."

At least one Democratic leader, Sen. James Eastland (D-Miss.), heartily endorsed the military action.

"Everybody will disagree with me," he growled, "but I believe in blowing the hell out of them!" Senate Republican leader

Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania also gave his solid endorsement. "Mr. President," he said, "as a retired minor naval officer and an unretiring type of senator, I support you entirely."

His approval was echoed by House Republican leader John Rhodes of Arizona, who said the use of force was "necessary absolutely."

Sen. John L. McClellan (D-Ark.) asked why Air Force planes had been ordered to attack Cambodian targets before the American merchant crewmen were rescued. The implication was that they might have been killed.

"Why," demanded McClellan, "don't we try to get them out first?"

The President said it was necessary to protect U.S. forces in the area of Tang Island where the captured ship was moored.

"If we don't move to protect our naval forces," he said, "I would be derelict in my duty."

Mr. Ford acknowledged that he had "no specific information whether Americans are on the island or the ship . . . We'll have to wait and see. We'll be up most of the night."

He confided to the congressional leaders that the Chinese Communist representative in Washington refused to deliver a message to the Cambodians demanding release of the ship.

"[He] did not accept the message," reported the President. But, he added, "we believe they sent one out."

He said the U.S. Liaison Office in Peking finally delivered the message directly to the Cambodian embassy.

Military Morass—A scathing secret Pentagon study accuses the chief of the Army's 730,000 reservists, Maj. Gen. Milnor Roberts, of "intrigue . . . lethargy . . . and indifference" which endanger military security and demoralize the nation's backup troops.

Yet his lackluster performance has not hurt his career. For Roberts will soon step into the prestigious job of running the 98,000-member Reserve Officers' Association, thanks to behind-the-scenes pressure by his Capitol Hill benefactor, Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.).

Thurmond, a powerful member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, is also a reserve major general, an old World War II pal of Roberts and the association's influential past president.

But the easy-going qualities that endear Roberts to politicians got the former Pittsburgh ad man roasted in a suppressed Defense Department task force study headed by Deputy Assistant Army Secretary Eckhard Bennewitz.

Since 1971, when Roberts took over the 230,000 active and 500,000 ready reservists, "moral courage, industry and self-discipline" have been replaced by "lethargy . . . and indifference" in the uppermost echelons, the report states.

"Fate, luck and a certain amount of intrigue" got Roberts into his high reserve job, and he has faced the challenge with "general disinterest" and "inadequate leadership," the report goes on.

As a result, training and morale are breaking down, and the reserve, some of whose units were called up in the Vietnamese conflict, is suffering from disastrous unreadiness.

The report says units particularly in need of "intensive management" include "the three infantry brigades (in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Minnesota), the armor battalion in Tucson, the infantry battalion in Honolulu and the infantry battalion in Philadelphia."

While Congress has poured billions into Roberts' inefficient operation, he has seemed "unwilling to accept the grubby task of delivering the goods day after day," the task force memo says.

Rather, the report says, he prefers "to operate in an unreal environment, a world wherein he is not a general, but a politician engaged in a popularity contest . . . afraid to dissent." Without putting it quite so bluntly, the report recommends he be fired on the spot.

Instead of ousting Roberts, the Pentagon kept him in his job for months and suppressed the report, not even giving him a copy. Its author, Lt. Col. Wilfred Ebel, received a resounding commendation for his work, but then was mysteriously denied a promised promotion.

Footnote: Reached in his office, Roberts told us he thought all copies of the report had been "torn up." But he said he had seen parts of it and questioned its accuracy. Ebel, he said, was unfair and "disgruntled."

* 1975, United Feature Syndicate, Inc.