

Critical Report On Mayaguez

Washington

The General Accounting Office suggested in a report yesterday that the Ford administration may have acted with undue haste and unnecessary military force in the Mayaguez rescue mission last year.

President Ford has considered the U.S. rescue of the merchant vessel Mayaguez and her 40-member crew from Cambodian captors to be a major achievement, despite the loss of 41 U.S. servicemen in the operation.

Release of the report by Representative Dante B. Fascell (Dem-Fla.), chairman of the House international political and military affairs subcommittee, was obviously timed to coincide with tonight's foreign policy debate between Republican Ford and Democrat Jimmy Carter.

The General Accounting Office noted that there was resistance to the report's release from Mr. Ford's national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, who had urged that it be classified secret.

The agency also noted that State and Defense Department officials had protested the report as being unwarranted second-guessing.

Lawrence S. Eagleburger, a top aide to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, accused the agency, in a letter printed in the report, of "attempts to second-guess the actions of officials acting under the constraints of time."

Such attempts, he added, "bring the entire purpose of the report into question."

In San Francisco, scene of the debate, White House press secretary Ron Nessen said that "we disagree" with the report's negative conclusions and that Mr. Ford considers his actions in the Mayaguez case proper.

The General Accounting Of-

fice, Congress' investigative arm, had some praise in the report for the rescue operation, saying the mission was performed with "valor and prowess."

But in the main the report was critical.

In a minute-by-minute chronology of events, the report said the newly installed communist Cambodian government had decided to release the Mayaguez crew before the onset of bombing raids in Cambodia and the bloody storming of Koh Tang island off the coast.

"While the United States undertook a number of diplomatic initiatives to secure the release of the Mayaguez and its crew," the report said, "little weight appears to have been given to indications that the Cambodians might be working out a political solution ..."

"Also, several possibilities for communication with the new Cambodian government were not attempted; contrary to Administration statements, GAO found no

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evidence that the United States broadcast directly into Cambodia."

The New York Times said it had learned from congressional sources that a senior Chinese diplomat in the Middle East had asked a foreign ministry official of a neutral country to convey a message to the United States.

The message, as given in the GAO report, was that the Chinese government was using its influence with the new Communist government in Cambodia to obtain the prompt release of the Mayaguez and "expected it to be released soon." The Times said the report omitted the names of the countries involved in the diplomatic effort.

The report said although the message was received 14 hours before the U.S. marine assault against the island, no evidence was found that the State Department had attempted to verify it.

The report suggested that more could have been done to locate the Mayaguez crew, the achievement of which would have averted the necessity of the assault on Koh Tang island and the bombing.

It said more use of aerial photography and low-flying observation of fishing vessels in the area might have turned up the fact that the Mayaguez crew was never on Koh Tang but was taken to the Cambodian port of Kompong Som.

In fact, the report said, sightings by fighter pilots of 30 to 40 apparent Caucasians on a fishing boat headed for Kimpong Som were inadequately reported to decision makers in Washington.

The report strongly questioned the urgency of attacking Koh Tang in a battle that caused heavy casualties.

The arrival of five destroyers and an aircraft carrier several hours before the assault "should have permitted the successful cordoning off of the island and thus prevented the further movement of any crew members believed to be held on Koh Tang," the report said.

Postponement of the assault, it went on, would have permitted more time to plan and learn that Cambodian forces on the island had been greatly underestimated.

The report also questioned whether an assault would have been worth the risk even if crew members were on the island.

The report suggested that the bombings of targets in Cambodia was unnecessary and was poorly coordinated with the assault on Koh Tang and the recapture of the Mayaguez.

Challenging Pentagon assertions that the bombings was needed to protect the Koh Tang operation,

the report said there was no "evidence that Cambodia was preparing to retaliate," there were "no targets struck until four hours after the Koh Tang landings" and some targets "were not directly related to Cambodian ability to interfere or retaliate."

The report also was critical of the dropping of a 15,000-pound bomb — the largest non-nuclear weapon in the U.S. arsenal — on Koh Tang while the last contingent of marines was being pulled back.

The report concluded that, "In retrospect, the final marine assault and the bombing of the Cambodian mainland did not influence the Cambodian decision to release the crew. This was not known and probably could not have been known at the time. However, certain U.S. actions — for example, the sinking of gunboats and U.S. air activity in the area — probably did influence that decision."

A U.S. destroyer picked up the Mayaguez crew members on a small Thai fishing boat after they had been released by their captors near Kompong Som and while the island assault and bombing were under way.

Los Angeles Times