

Congress Backs

Rescue Effort

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Washington

President Ford received strong support last night from most of the top congressional leaders who heard him outline plans for landing forces on the island of Koh Tang to retrieve a captured ship and its crew, according to several members who were present at the briefing session.

Referring to Cambodia's seizure of the ship, House GOP Leader John J. Rhodes (Rep-Ariz.) said "I said from the start it was an act of piracy, we should try to handle it through diplomacy, but if needed, we could use force . . . I have no objections to what happened."

Senate GOP Whip Robert P. Griffin (Rep-Mich.) said response of congressional leaders to the plan was "generally favorable" and he supported the administration actions "under the circumstances."

Senate Democratic Whip Robert C. Byrd (D-W. Va.), who had strongly urged quick action in the last few days, said, "I support the effort to interdict the (Cambodian) patrol boats, I support the effort to land Marines on the boat and island in an effort to recapture the ship and save the crew."

Other members present

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said there were some demurs to the President's plan, at least in several aspects. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (Dem-Mont.), long a foe of military action, emphasized particularly his strong concerns about plans for possible elective bombing of targets in Kompong Son on the mainland, and Senators John McClellan (Dem-Ark.) and Byrd also reportedly expressed concern on the proposed mainland bombing plan.

Rhodes, Griffin and Byrd all said there weren't any indications that Cambodia had been given a specific time ultimatum — to return the ship by a set deadline or face attack — but Rhodes said a note warning Cambodian that it "must be prepared to accept the consequences" if it didn't give up the ship and crew was given to the Chinese liaison office here and it appeared that the Chinese forwarded it to Cambodia.

Earlier yesterday, before the landing on Koh Tang was announced, there was widespread support in Congress for some forceful solution, despite suggestions from some members that

military action be delayed to press for a diplomatic solution.

Representative Wayne Hays (Dem-Ohio), expressing a widely held view, said after the U.S. sank three Cambodian vessels that he was "only sorry they didn't sink 17 rather than three."

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, after a three-hour briefing with administration officials, unanimously approved a resolution condemning Cambodian seizure of the Mayaguez and supporting the President's right to use force under the Constitution to retrieve it, albeit within the limits imposed by the War Powers Act.

That act declares that if the President, in some emergency, must use force without first coming to Congress for a declaration of war or similar advance authorization, he must report his action to Congress and must cease the military operation within 60 days unless Congress specifically votes

to continue it.

While a few senators (including George McGovern (Dem-S.D.) and Edward M. Kennedy (Dem-Mass.) and House members were urging caution, declaring that there may have been too much haste to use force, the broad mood was different.

There seemed to be an almost pervasive sense that, the U.S. having been humiliated in Vietnam, it must now strike out with force to show that it wouldn't tolerate what many saw as an arrogant act of international lawbreaking by a tiny nation.

President Ford informed members of Congress of his plans to use U.S. forces, but the incident may have reopened some old wounds involving congressional charges that the White House acts without consulting Congress sufficiently in

international affairs.

Tuesday afternoon, after he had decided on the bombing of the Cambodian ships, President Ford instructed his congressional liaison men, Ma Friedersdorf, Bill Kendall and Pat O'Donnell, to speak to congressional leaders and let them know of the plans to use some form of force.

At about 5:30 p.m. EDT Tuesday, Representative John J. Rhodes (Rep-Ariz.), the House GOP leader, was called, and after that, a long succession of House and Senate leaders including Majority Leader Mansfield, Whip Byrd (Dem-W. Va.), Republican leader and Whip Hugh Scott (Rep-Pa.) and Robert P. Griffin (Rep-Mich.) and several others.

Several of the senators who were informed simply thanked Kendall and O'Donnell for the information. Others,

like Armed Services Chairman John Stennis (Dem-Miss.) specifically endorsed it.

On the basis of these contacts, White House press page secretary Ron Nessen issued a statement yesterday that leaders had been given "consultation" and that it had produced "a strong consensus of support and no objections."

Late last night, most of the same leaders were called to the White House and were told of further plans to send U.S. forces directly in to take control of the Mayaguez. The President reportedly also said he would comply with the requirement of notification to Congress under the War Powers Act.

Senator John Sparkman (Dem-Ala.), Foreign Relations Committee chairman, told reporters after the

meeting that he had been called by phone twice on Tuesday and briefed last night. "I call that a pretty good degree of consultation."

Mansfield, however, had an entirely different view. He issued a denial that there had been meaningful consultation.

Early yesterday he said, "I was not briefed either yesterday morning or this afternoon, nor was I consulted before the fact. I was notified after the fact about what the administration had already decided to do. I did not give my proposal or disapproval."

Last night, after the White House meeting, he repeated his views. "We were informed; not consulted -- I repeat, informed, not consulted."

The difference between Mansfield's view and Nessen's lies in how you interpret the word "consult." To Mansfield and many others, "consult" means to get prior advice of Congress, ask its opinions and pay it some real attention in formulating a decision. To others, it simply means to let Congress know.

President Ford did go much further than several of his recent predecessors in letting Congress know what he intended to do. But it also seems clear that the basic decisions for action had been taken before the congressional leaders were contacted, and probably only would have been reversed had there been total and unremitting opposition from all the congressional leaders.

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