

WASHINGTON, May 14—On the eve of the Republican convention of 1904, a Moroccan bandit named Ahmed Raisuli kidnapped an American citizen. Jon Perdicaris, who had been living near Tangier. American and British warships were rushed to the Moroccan capital, three Marines went ashore to assert our serious intent, and President Theodore Roosevelt demanded that the Sultan force the bandit to release the American.

This demand took the form of a telegram from Secretary of State John Hay which set a standard for succinctness in ultimatata: "We want Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead."

Read aloud at the convention nominating Teddy Roosevelt as candidate—he had moved up from the Vice Presidency but had not yet been elected in his own right—the tough telegram was received with roars of patriotic enthusiasm.

And it worked, not just for Perdicaris, who was ransomed by the Sultan and released, but for Roosevelt, who showed the world and the American voter that he was not a leader to be trifled with.

After the election, it turned out that Mr. Perdicaris might not have been an American citizen after all, and that he had probably been released before the dramatic message was delivered, but the diplomatic point was made: The United States would protect its nationals anywhere in the world.

Three generations later, another unelected President faces a somewhat similar challenge in the Mayagüez affair. A cocky new Communist regime has kidnapped 39 Americans and a ship, possibly for barter or some other reasons, and has triggered a military response. But times have changed, and what is in the national interest may not be in the President's political interest.

America's opinion leaders—especially old hawks, like Senator Jackson, who needs some dovish support—are

ESSAY

By William Safire

likely to turn on the victim rather than on the pirate. They will ask: What was that merchant ship doing over there in the first place? Can we be sure it wasn't a spy ship? Wasn't it under military charter? Did we provoke the incident to get ourselves re-involved in Southeast Asia or to assuage our injured machismo?

Unless our military action is stunningly successful right away, the central theme of the President's critics will be (a) we were not really consulted, and (b) what harm would it have done to wait and ask everybody else to help?

But the responsibility to protect American lives is the President's and cannot be abdicated, and waiting could have caused great harm. We are not dealing with a superpower, where diplomacy is the only route and hot lines are in place; we are dealing with a minipower whose leaders have no concern for human life and are not susceptible to the normal pressures of politics and economics.

America is no longer a world power whose will to use its strength is undoubted. Not long ago, we could afford to overlook provocations like the Pueblo and the "flying Pueblo" because our resolve was not in doubt. Now, however, with foreign affairs

*'Not long ago
we could afford
to overlook
provocations like
the Pueblo.'*

too much in the hands of Congress, the President is forced to assert U.S. strength to dispel the doubt that does exist.

This is not the way it should be. Retreat is dangerous, and the steady retreat of American willpower in the past two years invites the kind of incident we face off the shores of Cambodia now. As a certainly-great power, we could afford to be patient and long-suffering about these incidents before; as a maybe-great power, we have to react lest our inaction invite every nation to strike at our interests everywhere.

"National honor" may be a phrase that invites derision these days, but a reputation for strength has been protecting Americans abroad for some years; hesitation and handwringing in the face of this latest provocation pose the greatest danger. A long delay, presented as caution, is most incautious: It causes other powers to line up pro and con, and could elevate an incident into a searing decision between war and knuckling-under.

President Ford is not thinking of nuking anybody back to Stone Ages, or starting the Southeast Asian involvement all over again. He cannot even threaten Phnom Penh, because nobody is home. Our attack on the Cambodian gunboats is a measured response to piracy; the hostages are in great peril, but if we acquiesce in this technique of international relations, we will encourage the seizure of many other Americans elsewhere in the world.

Decisiveness should not be equated with hot-headedness, nor national honor with jingoism. Perdicaris was released and Raisuli met no harm. This is the first test since an isolationist Congress took charge of America foreign policy, and if the President can hold the country with him in stepping up to it courageously, we can deter others from testing our resolve in much more serious ways.