

Editor's report

The Cambodian

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crisis

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SAN SIMEON — It was a real cliffhanger that dominated this week's news. When Cambodian Communists seized an American merchant ship on the high seas, you could almost feel the coast-to-coast shudder that something like Vietnam might be starting all over again.



W. R. Hearst Jr.

Thank God it turned out the way it did. And thank President Ford for his decisive action, and that of our armed forces, in bringing a quick end to the insolent challenge of the Cambodian pirates.

Pirates they were. No other word properly describes the ruthless rats who deliberately violated all maritime law in seizing the unarmed vessel, the *Mayaguez*, as it was steaming toward Thailand in international waters.

What they did was an act of provocative banditry, clearly intended as a test of United States nerve in the wake of our debacle in Indochina. Otherwise it made no sense at all.

President Ford recognized the challenge for what it was — a swaggering, nose-thumbing gesture by the new Khmer Rouge regime. Made reckless by victory, it was flexing its muscles in a calculated attempt to further humiliate the United States before the world.

In a way, seizure of the *Mayaguez* and its crew of 39 was not much different from the maritime banditry waged against our country's merchant ships by the Barbary pirates in the early 19th century.

All manner of shameful treaties and ransoms were imposed upon us by the Arab states in those days before we

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could obtain release of our vessels and men, some held prisoner for as long as 10 years.

The head mogul of Algiers alone demanded and received tribute equal to one-sixth of our national budget at that time. At today's prices, that would mean a payoff of more than \$40 billion.

Then, as now, Congress was a glorified debating society—long on rhetoric but short on action. It condemned the capture of our ships and the enslavement of our sailors but continued to compromise with principle for more than a dozen years.

Finally, in 1815—after a new outburst of outrages by the pirates—President Madison bit the bullet. He ordered Commodore Stephen Decatur to sail with a small fleet of U.S. warships and this intrepid officer broke the grip of the pirates.

In those years, the world was in a less explosive state than it is today. Now, with nuclear weapons, instant communications and planes that fly beyond the speed of sound, an all-out war could be won or lost in a matter of minutes. It is questionable, in the event of the big challenge, whether this country can afford the shackles presently imposed upon the the President by Congress.

Another parallel, in more recent years, was the 1968 seizure by North Korea of our intelligence ship, the *Pueblo*. Instead of reacting with force, the United States undertook 11 months of demeaning negotiations with the pirates to obtain release of the 83-man crew being held and tortured in stinking jails.

To do so, we had to apologize in writing for allegedly violating North Korean territorial waters. As soon as the *Pueblo* crew was freed, the confession was repudiated as false. Meanwhile, the *Pueblo* itself is still in North Korean hands.

All this, of course, was in the President's mind as he considered what to do about last Monday's Communist capture of the *Mayaguez*. In addition to the lives at stake, he had to weigh the fact that our disaster in Indochina had caused us to lose face throughout the world — and that our credibility as a world power was being tested further.

His was a difficult and dangerous decision, but he did not falter. After first attempting to obtain speedy release of the ship and its crew by diplomatic means, he ordered military action — even at the risk of involvement in another prolonged Asian conflict.

The decision paid off — thanks to the remarkable skills and teamwork of our air, sea and land forces. Just imagine the know-how and precision needed to plan and effectively execute such a complicated rescue operation in three days.

As a result, the whole watching world has been given convincing proof that this nation — despite its failure in Vietnam — is not going to tolerate insults or pushing around by anyone.

An international respect for the United States is bound to occur, as is already evinced by news dispatches from various foreign capitals. Even more important, I strongly feel, is that American citizens have gotten a much-needed boost in their own self-respect.

Our people, by and large, are fed up to the gills with the mess in Indochina. At the same time there has been an undercurrent of frustration and shame at our failure in the area.

The Cambodian Reds calculated wrong in thinking they could impose yet another humiliation upon us.

Instead, thanks to President Ford and our armed forces, a revival of spirit and national pride has been spurred.

If there is any valid criticism of the President's decisive action, it can only be that it was perhaps too daring. Yet the only alternative was months and possibly years of diplomatic palaver, and eventually some kind of disgraceful tribute to the Cambodian conquerors.

I knew for sure that Ford's decision was correct when Sen. George McGovern got up on his two left legs and opined that talky-talk with the Red pirates should have been our policy instead of what he called our "precipitous" action.

It was apparent even earlier when similar Communist apologists in Congress, during the height of the crisis, said and did nothing in the obvious hope that Ford would somehow fall on his face.

And it was apparent in the United Nations, that supposed guardian of world peace, where not a single voice was raised in condemnation of the most indefensible violation of all international maritime law.

What Ford did was an act of vigorous leadership to insure our status as an unwavering world power. He did it primarily on his own volition, with only token advance information being given to top party heads in Congress.

Some members of Congress, notably the leftist-liberals, have since complained that Ford exceeded his authority and violated terms of the 1973 act, prohibiting further use of force in Southeast Asia without prior congressional approval.

In my opinion, what the President did shows how foolish and potentially dangerous the 1973 act is. It is more than probably the Khmer Rouge pirates thought they could get away with their crime because they thought the President's hands were tied.

Something should be done to clarify once and for all this conflict in powers — an ambiguity which may or may not have been written deliberately into the Constitution by our Founding Fathers.

That historic document declares that the President of the United States is also commander-in-chief of its armed forces, with presumed authority to order any required action. Yet it also declares that Congress is the only agency empowered to declare war.

In today's world, with its instantaneous eruption of unforeseen menace, the conflict between presidential and congressional authority in a warlike situation is intolerable.

My view is that the restrictive 1973 act by Congress would be ruled improper if it were tested in the Supreme Court.

When you are being slashed by pirates, you don't have time to consult and get approval to defend yourself.

We can all be thankful that President Ford paid only minor attention to the legalities.

Somebody has to be in charge — and he was, fortunately.