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Lessons of the Mayaguez

Tolstoy's famous insight into the chancy nature of battle finds vindication once again. The rescue of the Mayaguez and its crew abounds in ifs and maybes. The whole operation would have ended tragically, for example, if the master of the Mayaguez had not been an alert figure able to persuade his captors to turn him and his crew loose when American military operations got under way.

So nobody can confidently draw conclusions from the episode. But with the overriding importance of luck acknowledged, certain discreet and tentative lessons seem to emerge.

First is the utility of having a wide range of military options available to a President. When initial word came of the seizure of the Mayaguez, there was a push inside the National Security Council to punish Cambodia by B-52 bombing.

Defense Secretary James Schlesinger and the uniformed military in the Pentagon wanted nothing to do with such indiscriminating punishment. They were against tit-for-tat and other diplomatic games. They drove hard for the more limited and sharply targeted operation that was, in fact, ordered.

They thus gave the lie to the argument that all military forces ought to

be cut because the Pentagon will inevitably use whatever is available. On the contrary, it seems clear that if the limited amphibious operation had not been available, President Ford would have felt obliged to go for the brutal, and probably useless, bombing.

A second lesson is the unreliability of intelligence filtered through the fog of war. There was no advance warning that the Mayaguez was traversing dangerous waters, although other ships had been recently seized by Cambodia in the same area.

While the off-loading of the Mayaguez crew on Kno Tang Island was spotted, the move of the whole crew from Kho Tang to another island was missed. Submarines were sent to Kho Tang in what might well have been a useless mission. Moreover, the estimate of resistance they would meet on Kho Tang was gravely understated. But all that, as anybody who has done wartime intelligence work knows, is par for the course.

The inflated claims of psycho-history were also unsaid by the rescue operation. Pop psychologists, trying to judge from a distance, assumed that President Ford, after a string of setbacks, was driven by the

need to prove his method. In fact, far from acting tough, the President's main role was to go for the limited operation.

I happened to be in the White House during some of the most anxious moments of the crisis. I was struck by the apparent lack of psychological tension in men very close to Mr. Ford. Coming away, I asked the veteran White House correspondent of the Associated Press, Frank Cormier, his impression of the mood. "Calm," he said.

Another more subtle lesson emerges from the behavior of Thailand. Thai political leaders railed against the rescue operation in public and called for withdrawal of the U.S. force. Thai military leaders, privately, insisted that this country had to go in and rescue the ship and its crew—using force, and the sooner the better.

In the past Americans had a wide tolerance for such doubletalk by foreign nations. In the present case, the Thai behavior prompted U.S. demands for a withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Thailand.

The enduring lesson is that the need for candor in this country, plus a feeling that we shouldn't help countries that don't want our help, com-

pires to reduce American tolerance for foreigners who say go away publicly while privately appealing for assistance. In the future, the commitments that are worth most to the United States will be the commitments foreign nations have the guts to acknowledge in public.

Yet another lesson applies to congressional control of foreign affairs. Precisely because ifs and buts bulled so large in the past few days, the Mayaguez affair demonstrates that it is impossible to foresee all contingencies.

A measure of discretion has to be left to the executive authorities. Congressional wisdom lies in not trying to anticipate what cannot be anticipated.

My impression is that the Congress, much as the President, acted in a responsible way during the Mayaguez affair. Which brings us to the final lesson. It is that the government can do some things and do them fairly well. The notion that government is condemned to bungle and fumble everything it touches is exposed as a wild generalization. That applies not only to foreign affairs, where President Ford is an activist, but equally to managing the economy.