

# Retrieving the Mayaguez: 'It Was Pure Ford'

High Pentagon officials, backed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued strongly during President Ford's secret deliberations with the National Security Council (NSC) for rock-bottom minimum use of U.S. military power—less than the President finally ordered—in the rescue of the pirated Mayaguez.

Mr. Ford rejected their argument for strict application of the "rule of proportionality"—meeting an enemy's force with no more than the minimum required counterforce. The President opted instead for "a higher degree" of American counterforce, or what some military analysts call "equivalence plus."

This shows that often-maligned Pentagon hawks, operating within new congressional restrictions on the use of military force, are now more conscious of political backlash than their counterparts in the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

This was no bare-knuckle, backroom brawl. Nor did it convert the austere cabinet room of the White House, where the NSC held its deliberations, into a debating society.

Rather, the threads of the pro-and-con discussion over what kind of military action the United States should take lead to no villains, no heroes. Those threads do reveal that the President ruled in favor of "equivalence

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plus"—but also overruled at least one State Department suggestion for American bombing of the civilian-military Cambodian airfield outside Phnom Penh.

That bombing proposal—opposed by the Pentagon—stemmed from a diplomatic effort to milk maximum psychological advantage from a case of piracy on the high seas. It was cloaked, of course, in conventional military argument—that the Cambodians might use the airfield against the American force in the Gulf of Siam. But it would have been a clear case of overkill.

Whether Secretary of State Henry Kissinger favored it is not known. But the President vetoed it as provocative.

Thus, Mr. Ford asserted his own will in a crisis that, with only a little mismanagement or a bit of bad luck, could have escalated to extremely dangerous proportions. As one administration insider told us: "Don't think this was a Kissinger or (Defense Secretary

James) Schlesinger extravaganza. It was pure Ford."

Among all the considerations behind the President's rejection of a strict "rule of proportionality" was the looming problem of South Korea. He chose to employ slightly more military force than required in order to signal the Communist government of North Korea that any military probe across the demilitarized line into South Korea would not only be turned back; it would assure punishment of North Korea.

The thesis: No distinct, unprovoked act of aggression should be given a free ride. Simply righting the wrong would not discourage similar acts in the future. The needed increment: punishment, to make the aggression more costly to the aggressor than to the victim.

The backdrop of Mr. Ford's planning was a virtual blackout of accurate intelligence, a factor that made the decision to intervene far more risky than

it actually turned out to be, which was risky enough.

At the time Mr. Ford decided definitively that he would use force to recover the Mayaguez and its crew, the vessel was reported by U.S. intelligence to be somewhere in the sprawling harbor of one of Cambodia's most populated cities: Kampong Som (formerly Sihanoukville). The truth was far different. The vessel actually had been towed to Koh Tang Island, a fact not known to the Pentagon until late Monday.

Yet, Mr. Ford's decision to seize the boat wherever it was had already been taken on the logical grounds that to wait supinely for deliverance at the hands of the bizarrely revolutionary Cambodian government would make intervention progressively harder. In the background was Mr. Ford's refusal to let the Mayaguez become another Pueblo, whose crew languished in a North Korean prison for 11 months in 1968.

Any repetition of the humiliating Pueblo affair was ruled by the President as utterly unacceptable. Steering his thin line between State Department hawks, aiming for maximum political effect, and Pentagon doves, fearful of another outburst of anti-military animus from Congress, he followed his own convictions and wrote a bold new chapter of history.