

Mayaguez Post-Mortems

In the two hours before the rescue of the Mayaguez and its crew began, the White House notified 22 congressional leaders that the President had ordered a limited military operation to achieve that end. Not one of the leaders posed a serious question about the nature or scope or necessity of the impending action.

I cite that information, which was originally disclosed by Saul Friedman of the Knight newspapers, as a caution against the spate of post-mortems on the Mayaguez affair. Whether critical or favorable, the inquests have ignored a central feature of the whole operation. As the unwonted silence of the congressmen indicates, it was a fast-moving, highly operational affair intrinsically resistant to second-guessing or kibitzing.

Consider first what seems to be the most plausible of the criticisms. That is the argument that President Ford should have waited before taking military action.

Perhaps so. But a special characteristic of the Mayaguez affair was that the Cambodians did not immediately move the captured ship and its crew to a mainland port. Since the ship was anchored at Koh Tang island, and the crew was presumed to be with it, the opportunity for rescue presented itself.

But there was no reason to think the opportunity would last long. On the contrary, the normal supposition had to be that the ship and crew would soon be taken beyond the reach of American amphibious forces.

So there was intense pressure on President Ford to move with dispatch. The case of the Mayaguez, in other words, fit that rare category governed by the famous words of Macbeth: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly."

The idiosyncratic character of the action is even more cogently illustrated by the charge that the United States has somehow set a new and fearful precedent. According to this charge, President Ford is now wantonly asserting the right to attack any nation which, whether legitimately or not, apprehends an American vessel. It is suggested that, on the basis of the Mayaguez affair, the United States should be attacking Ecuador for the seizure of American fishing boats off its Pacific coast.

But the seizures off the coast of Ecuador have a long and involved history. American boats have been fishing, and perhaps overfishing, those waters for years. The government of Ecuador has repeatedly protested, and repeatedly threatened action, against the fishing boats. Only against that background did the seizures take place.

There was no such history in the Mayaguez affair. The capture came as a bolt from the blue without any warning. No discussion between the two governments was under way. Neither was there any advance claim of a Cambodia right violated by American shipping. Indeed, cheese resembles chalk more than the Cambodian seizure resembled those of Ecuador, and to

make one a precedent for the other smacks to me of deliberate scaremongering.

Far worse than the criticisms, however, are the exaggerated claims made out for the Mayaguez rescue. Particularly suspect is the claim that the United States proved something which ought to make us proud to be Americans. In reality, the Mayaguez is far too special an incident, and Cambodia far too tiny a country, for one to believe that anything was proved.

It is suggested that the most egregious claims are advanced by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and Secretary of State Kissinger. They are the ones who wanted to use B-52 bombers against Cambodia as a punishment. That proposal was no mere "option." In fact, the bombers were ready, with the bombs in place, when the rescue got under way.

If post-mortems have to be made, the truly outrageous proposal to use strategic bombers against Cambodia strikes me as the measuring rod. Perhaps President Ford did act too hastily. Perhaps there was an element of punitive action in his decision, as well as a determination to get back the ship and crew. Still the very nature of the episode should induce caution about second-guessing. The more so since, except for the moderation of the President, the Secretary of Defense and the military chiefs, the outcome could have been far worse.