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One Man and a Crowd

This country is in a sour mood. It is suffering from a depression and inflation and from watching its ambassadors carry furling flags out of Southeast Asia, and it wants to punch somebody in the nose. That's the only explanation for treating the rescue of the Mayaguez as though it were the equivalent of raising the flag over Iwo Jima or crossing the Rhine at Remagen.

Those who ask questions about the incident—and there are a lot of questions to be asked—have been treated to a storm of denunciation. Take, for example, Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.). Asked by a network commentator to comment on the incident, Nelson responded, "I don't think we gave the negotiation process a fair trial."

As a result, his mail is vicious. Here is a sampling, each comment representing a different letter: "Drop dead, you yellow-bellied traitor"; "Get the hell out of the United States. Go live in Cambodia"; "Why don't you commit suicide?"; "President Ford's guts are made of red, white and blue but you don't have any." "You are despicable and disgusting"; "You are contemptuous and revolting"; "We've taken enough . . . from these little yellow bastards. Let's give America back its pride."

Nelson takes his mail in stride, pausing only to reflect that the same public that criticizes politicians for not speaking out hammers them to pieces when they do.

But he was a little surprised to find himself a minority of one in the Senate. Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) also questioned the necessity for the operation, but he praised its success. Otherwise, the forces of reason and restraint, if they existed, were silent.

It was a tribute to senatorial ability at holding fingers to the wind. Not one Democratic presidential hopeful had the courage to emulate Adlai Stevenson and "talk sense to the American people."

But when the depression is over, the inflation has abated, the memory of those ambassadors with the furling flags has receded, it may be possible



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"Nelson was a little surprised to find himself a minority over the Mayaguez."

to discuss some of the questions Nelson raised: "What vital national interest was at stake to justify such a precipitate and violent response? Was it justifiable to land Marines in Thailand without that government's consent? Did we need to sacrifice any of the lives of our soldiers, endanger the ship's crew and bomb a Cambodian airport in order to settle this dispute?"

Nelson asked these questions on the day after the incident. In the light of hindsight, even graver questions may now be asked. Why did the ship not receive the normal warning issued to merchant vessels entering areas where ships are being stopped and searched? Why was the air strike on the mainland carried out hours after the ship and crew were safe? Why was the operation not canceled when we received Cambodia's message that

the ship would be returned? Why were the casualty figures withheld for so long? Why all those photographs of President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in their hour of decision?

In short, the Mayaguez incident suggests to the suspicious minded that President Ford and Secretary Kissinger seized upon a not-unusual incident (Ecuador frequently seizes our ships) and played to the mob.

Perhaps the suspicious minded are wrong. But when the country regains its composure, it will surely reflect upon Gaylord Nelson's statement: "The test of the strength and maturity of a superpower is better measured by its restraint in minor incidents rather than by a demonstration of the power the world already knows is at its command."