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A Famous Victory

By Anthony Lewis

One year ago this week Cambodian gunboats seized the American merchant ship Mayagüez. The United States responded with air attacks and a Marine assault on a nearby island. The Cambodians returned the ship and crew unharmed.

It was a famous victory. Congress cheered. President Ford's rating went up in the polls. Even liberal voices praised him; The New York Times said he "had no alternative but to employ direct military means. . . . This he did with exemplary speed." A picture taken in the White House as the episode ended showed Mr. Ford and Henry Kissinger in dinner jackets, grinning with satisfaction.

A year later the cheers have mocking echoes. For the costs of the American action in the Mayagüez affair were heavy, and they are easy enough to see now—the casualties in lives, truth, diplomacy and law.

The Mayagüez had a crew of 39. The operations ordered by Mr. Ford cost the lives of 41 American servicemen, plus another 50 wounded—casualties that the Administration did its best to hide.

And it was all unnecessary. If the United States had allowed even a modest time for a response to its warnings and its diplomatic efforts, the Mayagüez and its crew would have been returned without the loss of a single American life. That is plain from the official record and timetable of what happened.

It was 5:03 A.M. on May 12, 1975, Eastern Daylight Time, when Washington first heard of the seizure. The President was told at 7:40. At 2 that afternoon the White House announced the news and demanded the ship's release, saying that otherwise there would be "the most serious consequences." At 4:30 an attempt was made to send a diplomatic note to Cambodia through the Chinese.

The first American air attack, made to prevent what was thought to be an

effort to move the Mayagüez, sank a Cambodian gunboat at 8:30 P.M. May 13. That was just 30½ hours after

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the first White House statement, 28 hours after the first diplomatic move.

At 7:07 P.M. the next day, May 14, the Cambodian Government broadcast that it was ready to return the ship and crew. But two minutes later, at 7:09, before Washington knew of the broadcast, the costly Marine attack began. At 10:23 that night a U.S. destroyer sighted the Mayagüez crew being returned in a boat with a white flag. But after that, and even after the crew was in American hands, U.S. planes bombed targets on the mainland.

In the clearest of situations it would

be unwise to take such hasty and massive military action over the seizure of a ship. And in this case just about everything was unclear: the reason for the seizure, the degree of control by Cambodia's new Khmer Rouge Government, even its awareness of the American diplomatic notes. Accounts published in the last year in fact indicate that the Mayagüez was seized in a confused local situation without the knowledge of Phnom Penh.

But Mr. Ford and his men were not interested in the facts—or in the lives they might lose. They were interested in flexing American muscles. They wanted to use the occasion for a show of "strength." That is why they used a sledgehammer, hastily, to crack a peanut.

The glory faded pretty fast after the four days of the Mayagüez, and some who regretted being swept up in the jingo emotions of the moment hoped, at least, that the episode would have no lasting import. Unfortunately, it had and continues to have much significance.

The lesson of lawlessness is the worst of all. A specific statute, passed in 1973 and still on the books, flatly forbids "combat activities by U.S. military forces in or over or from off the shores of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia." President Ford did not mention that statute in ordering action that, on its face, violated the law. Hardly anyone else raised an eyebrow either—just after Vietnam and Watergate.

The spinelessness of Congress when a President took aggressive action of dubious legality made all the talk about curbing Executive abuse of power seem just that: talk. The precedent of the Mayagüez almost certainly encouraged Mr. Ford and Mr. Kissinger in their secret intervention in Angola. Senator Frank Church cheered the Mayagüez; why should he be surprised now when he has trouble convincing his colleagues that they should restrain intelligence activities?

"What I did in the case of the Mayagüez," Mr. Ford said in Wilkesboro, N. C., last March, "is a good example of the decisiveness that I can act with when we are faced with a problem. I would do it again."

But the ironic thing is that the authors of the overkill have gained nothing from their cynical bravado. Poor Gerald Ford is now desperately trying to lecture Ronald Reagan about the duty of a great power to be restrained and reasonable. As for Henry Kissinger, the man who wanted to use B-52's to punish Cambodia over the Mayagüez, his most bloodthirsty policies have made him no friends on the right.