

GAO Feels 'Used' in Mayaguez Case

Washington

Officials of the General Accounting Office acknowledge that their agency is not exactly a household word.

During the past year the office has issued more than 1000 reports ranging from "The Fertiler Situation — Past, Present and Future" to "Selected Aspects of Nuclear Powerplant Reliability and Economics."

But one GAO report concluding that the Ford administration did not exhaust all diplomatic possibilities before launching an attack last year against Cambodia to rescue the cargo ship Mayaguez and her crew has attracted widespread attention in the current presidential campaign and some officials of the agency are not overly pleased about it.

"There is a general problem the GAO has in its relations with Congress of avoiding being used improperly," said Phillip S. Hughes, an assistant comptroller general.

"I guess I would say we were used in this set of circumstances," he added.

The fuss over the report on the Mayaguez incident points up the unusual and little-known role that the 55-year-old agency plays in the federal government. It is usually referred to as the "auditing arm of Congress" or the "watchdog of Congress."

But it prides itself on being nonpartisan and the location of its big but plain headquarters tells something about its place in Washington. It is in a dreary,

unfashionable neighborhood roughly halfway between Capitol Hill and most of the federal departments and agencies in downtown Washington.

On June 23, 1975, a little more than a month after the rescue of the crew of the Mayaguez in which 41 American servicemen were killed, presumed dead or listed as missing, a subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee asked the agency to make a study of the incident.

The agency sent its report to the subcommittee last May 11 but it was classified as secret at the direction of the National Security Council.

Congressional sources acknowledged that the Democratic majority on the subcommittee had wanted to make the findings public before the presidential election, and after negotiations with the security council, an unclassified version of the re-

port was released last Tuesday. It received prominent attention in newspapers the next day — the same day of the debate on foreign policy between President Ford and his challenger, Jimmy Carter.

That afternoon the accounting office took the unusual step of issuing a statement that it had no control over the release of the report and had been advised that it was released only after copies had been sent to news organizations.

Yet when Mr. Ford was asked about the report in the debate Wednesday night, he said he was "very disappointed in the fact that the GAO released that report because I think it interfered political partisan politics at the present time."

He made a reference to being a "grandstand quarterback" 18 months after the event and said his administration had

handled the incident responsibly.

One accounting office official said that some persons might wonder why "a bunch of accountants" would be studying such a military incident but he contended that the study was part of a number of recent reports by the agency on how the government responds to crises.

Indeed, when the accounting office was founded by Congress in 1921 it was primarily just an auditing agency, going over the financial records of government agencies to see how they had spent the money apportioned by Congress.

But in recent years and particularly under Elmer B. Staats, who as comptroller general has headed the agency since 1966, the GAO has broadened its scope to investigate whether laws and regulations are being complied with, the efficiency of the government's operations, and whether the government operations achieve the desired results.

The agency's professional staff of 3800 is no longer composed of just accountants but is made up of engineers, mathematicians, statisticians, computer specialists, economists and administrators as well as one medical doctor.

"The General Accounting Office has the biggest audit, monitoring and oversight job in the world," Staats said in a congressional hearing earlier this year.