History

The Mayaguez Incident: Testing America's Resolve in the Post-Vietnam Era
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On May 12, 1975, “seven armed, black-clad Cambodians” boarded the *Mayaguez*, an unarmed American merchant ship, and took its crew captive. The United States’s humiliating withdrawal from Saigon had happened in March, and the Khmer Rouge seized control of Cambodia in April. Smarting from the depiction of America as a “helpless giant,” President Gerald Ford and the National Security Council rapidly determined that a show of military might was even more imperative than the safe return of the *Mayaguez* crew.

Recently de-classified documents allow military historian Robert J. Mahoney to revisit the details of this four-day crisis and explore its influence on subsequent “intelligence expectation management.” The deaths of forty-one armed forces personnel following the crew’s release revealed “critical weaknesses in the US military’s ability to operate in a joint manner” and contributed to a radical reorganization of the Department of Defense.

The National Security Council agreed with President Ford that America’s image would benefit from a show of force and that our “setbacks [would not] become a license for others to fish in troubled waters.” Acknowledging that military action could endanger the crew, their priority was nonetheless to prevent an ongoing hostage situation that could further undermine the international standing of the United States.

Within hours, military strikes against ships in Kompong Son harbor began, even though “air reconnaissance” had been unable to determine whether the *Mayaguez* crew was on board any of the targeted ships. Luckily, the *Mayaguez* passengers were safely transferred to the island of Koh Tang despite the aerial strikes, which apparently persuaded the Cambodians that they had tangled with too large a tiger. A spokesman dictated a message to *Mayaguez* Captain Miller: “4 ships destroyed and 100 friendly people wounded…The Cambodian people do not like war and want peace.”

Ford received this message as American marines were seizing the *Mayaguez* and

“storming the beaches of Koh Tang,” but he decided to continue the four-wave assault on the island as planned. While the crew sailed to safety on a Thai ship whose crew was released by the Cambodians for this purpose, the marines sent to rescue them fought valiantly, first to insert, and then extract, their forces on the island. Although the mission was hailed as a success, Robert Mahoney, Dean of Academics at the Marine Corps War College, provides a thoughtful and well-documented account about the dangers inherent in commanding military operations from half a world away.

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