

1975: The Mayaguez affair - US troops invade a Cambodian island

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Historian Howard Zinn's account of the brief but disastrous invasion of a Cambodian island by a small US force which suffered massive casualties. It was in response to Cambodia holding the crew of an American cargo ship, with the intention of re-asserting US military dominance in the wake of its defeat in Vietnam.

New York Times international correspondent C. L. Sulzberger, a consistent supporter of government cold-war foreign policy, wrote in a troubled mood in early 1975 from Ankara, Turkey, that "the glow has worn off from the era of the "Truman Doctrine" (when military aid was given to Greece and Turkey). He added: "And one cannot say that the bleak outlook here is balanced by any brilliant United States successes in Greece, where a vast mob recently battered the United States Embassy." He concluded, "There must be something seriously wrong with the way we present ourselves these days." The problem, according to Sulzberger, was not the United States' behaviour, but the way this behaviour was presented to the world.

It was a few months after these reports, in April of 1975, that Secretary of State Kissinger, invited to be commencement speaker at the University of Michigan, was faced with petitions protesting against the invitation, because of Kissinger's role in the Vietnam war. Also a counter-commencement program was planned. He withdrew. It was a low time for the administration. Vietnam was "lost" (the very word supposed it was ours to lose). Kissinger was quoted that April (by Washington Post columnist Tom Braden): "The U.S. must carry out some act somewhere in the world which shows its determination to continue to be a world power."

The following month came the Mayaguez affair.

The Mayaguez was an American cargo ship sailing from South Vietnam to Thailand in mid-May 1975, just three weeks after the victory of the revolutionary forces in Vietnam - aided by the US troops' widespread mutiny. When it came close to an island in Cambodia, where a revolutionary regime had just taken power, the ship was stopped by the Cambodians, taken to a port at a nearby island, and the crew removed to the mainland. The crew later described their treatment as courteous: "A man who spoke English greeted us with a handshake and welcomed us to Cambodia." The press reported: "Captain Miller and his men all say they were never abused by their captors. There were even accounts of kind treatment—of Cambodian soldiers feeding them first and eating what the Americans left, of the soldiers giving the seamen the mattresses off their beds." But the Cambodians did ask the crew about spying and the CIA.

President Ford sent a message to the Cambodian government to release the ship and crew, and when thirty-six hours had elapsed and there was no response (the message had been given to the Chinese liaison mission in Washington, but was returned the next day, "ostensibly undelivered," one press account said), he began military operations— U.S. planes bombed Cambodian ships. They strafed the very boat that was taking the American sailors to the mainland.

The men had been detained on a Monday morning. On Wednesday evening the Cambodians released them—putting them on a fishing boat headed for the American fleet. That afternoon, knowing the seamen had been taken off Tang Island, Ford nevertheless ordered a marine assault on Tang Island. That assault began about 7:15 Wednesday evening, but an hour earlier the crewmen were already headed back to the American fleet. About 7:00am. the release had been announced on the radio in Bangkok. Indeed, the boat carrying the returned crewmen was spotted by a U.S. reconnaissance plane that signalled them.

Not mentioned in any press account at the time or in any government statement was a fact that emerged in October 1976 when the General Accounting Office made a report on the Mayaguez affair: the U.S. had received a message from a Chinese diplomat saying China was using its influence with Cambodia on the ship “and expected it to be released soon.” This message was received fourteen hours before the marine assault began.

No American soldier was hurt by the Cambodians. The marines invading Tang Island, however, met unexpectedly tough resistance, and of two hundred invaders, one-third were soon dead or wounded (this exceeded the casualty rate in the World War II invasion of Iwo Jima). Five of eleven helicopters in the invasion force were blown up or disabled. Also, twenty-three Americans were killed in a helicopter crash over Thailand on their way to participate in the action, a fact the government tried to keep secret. All together, forty-one Americans were killed in the military actions ordered by Ford. There were thirty-nine sailors on the Mayaguez. Why the rush to bomb, strafe, attack? Why, even after the ship and crew were recovered, did Ford order American planes to bomb the Cambodian mainland, with untold Cambodian casualties? What could justify such a combination of moral blindness and military bungling?

The answer to this came soon: It was necessary to show the world that giant America, defeated by tiny Vietnam, was still powerful and resolute. The New York Times reported on May 16, 1975:

Administration officials, including Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Secretary of Defence James Schlesinger, were said to have been eager to find some dramatic means of underscoring President Ford’s stated intention to “maintain our leadership on a world-wide basis.” The occasion came with the capture of the vessel. “Administration officials... made it clear that they welcomed the opportunity.”

Another press dispatch from Washington, in the midst of the Mayaguez events, said: “High-ranking sources familiar with military strategy and planning said privately that the seizure of the vessel might provide the test of American determination in Southeast Asia that, they asserted, the U.S. had been seeking since the collapse of allied governments in South Vietnam and Cambodia.”

Columnist James Reston wrote: “In fact, the Administration almost seems grateful for the opportunity to demonstrate that the President can act quickly... Officials here have been bridleing over a host of silly taunts about the American ‘paper tiger’ and hope the Marines have answered the charge.”

It was not surprising that Secretary of Defence Schlesinger called it a “very successful operation,” done “for purposes that were necessary for the well-being of this society.” But why would the prestigious Times columnist James Reston, a strong critic of Nixon and Watergate, call the Mayaguez operation “melodramatic and successful”? And why would the New York Times, which had criticised the Vietnam war, talk about the “admirable efficiency” of the operation?

What seemed to be happening was that the Establishment— Republicans, Democrats, newspapers, television—was closing ranks behind Ford and Kissinger, and behind the idea that American

authority must be asserted everywhere in the world.

Congress at this time behaved much as it had done in the early years of the Vietnam war, like a flock of sheep. Back in 1973, in a mood of fatigue and disgust with the Vietnam war, Congress had passed a War Powers Act that required the President, before taking military action, to consult with Congress. In the Mayaguez affair, Ford ignored this—he had several aides make phone calls to eighteen Congressmen to inform them that military action was under way. But, as I. F. Stone said (he was the maverick journalist who published the anti-Establishment *I. F. Stone's Weekly*), “Congress raped as easily as it did in the Tonkin Gulf affair.” Congressman Robert Drinan of Massachusetts was an exception. Senator McGovern, Nixon's presidential opponent in 1972 and long-time anti-war critic, opposed the action. So did Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin. Senator Edward Brooke raised questions. Senator Edward Kennedy did not speak out, nor did other Senators who during the Vietnam war had influenced Congress to ban further military action in Indochina but now said their own legislation did not apply.

Secretary of State Kissinger would say: “We are forced into this.” When Kissinger was asked why the U.S. was risking the lives of the Mayaguez seamen by firing on ships in the area without knowing where they were, he called it a “necessary risk.” Kissinger also said the incident “ought to make clear that there are limits beyond which the United States cannot be pushed, that the United States is prepared to defend those interests, and that it can get public support and congressional support for these actions.”

Indeed, Congressmen, Democrats as well as Republicans, who had been critical of the Vietnam war now seemed anxious to pull things together in a unified show of strength to the rest of the world. A week before the Mayaguez affair (two weeks before Saigon fell), fifty-six Congressmen had signed a statement saying: “Let no nation read the events in Indochina as the failure of the American will.” One of them was a black Congressman from Georgia, Andrew Young.

It was a complex process of consolidation that the system undertook in 1975. It included old-type military actions, like the Mayaguez affair, to assert authority in the world and at home. The Mayaguez affair was a small part of the United States' widespread military intervention in South East Asia in the last half of the 20th century.

Howard Zinn

P.S.

- <http://libcom.org/history/articles/mayaguez-affair-1975>

- This article was taken from Howard Zinn's excellent *A People's History of the United States*. We heartily recommend you buy *A People's History of the United States* now.

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