



Marines from Company G and Company E, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, being interviewed pier side following rescue operation of merchant vessel SS *Mayaguez*, May 20, 1975 (Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library)

The *Mayaguez* Incident

A Model Case Study for PME

By Gregory D. Miller

Many Americans are familiar with the basic facts of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a case that is canon in many military institutions and civilian programs that teach history, political science, or decision-making. This article contends that the *Mayaguez* Incident (May 12–15, 1975) is an even more useful case, and all levels of professional military education (PME) should incorporate it

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into the curriculum. Despite existing scholarship on the *Mayaguez*, it is not a particularly well-known case among decisionmakers, and less so among the public. Even at the war college level, too many students are unaware of the 1975 event, much less the details that make it such a valuable case study. This does not suggest eliminating the Missile Crisis study, but the challenges and lessons of the *Mayaguez* Incident should be just as familiar to senior military and civilian decisionmakers.

This article highlights the critical elements of the case, intended as an instructor's supplemental guide. It

highlights the value of a thorough historical education, as well as the danger of too much distance between the strategic and operational levels. Despite the President's ability to micromanage at the tactical level, the lack of understanding between the strategic leader and operational planners almost resulted in a more significant crisis.

This article is organized according to the three core courses in the Joint Advanced Warfighting School (JAWS) curriculum, though this information is applicable to all military institutions. The main sections below examine the relevance of the case for the study of history, strategy, and operational planning.

The article concludes with some final thoughts about the case, intended as questions for seminar discussion and for future research.

Background

Some consider the *Mayaguez* to be the last battle of the Vietnam War, and those who died during the operation are part of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC.¹ The final U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam on April 29–30, 1975—just 2 weeks prior to the *Mayaguez* Incident—certainly influenced how the National Command Authority perceived both the crisis and the need to respond quickly and with force. Because there are already several detailed accounts of the crisis, this section provides a brief overview of the main events and decisions.²

On May 12, 1975 (at roughly 0318 EST), the SS *Mayaguez*, a U.S. container ship, was seized off the coast of Cambodia. U.S. officials believed initially that Khmer Rouge forces were moving the ship and the 40-person crew to Kompong Son, a port on mainland Cambodia. Later, during the rescue operation, U.S. officials believed both were on Koh Tang, an island 32 miles off the coast of Cambodia.

President Gerald Ford learned of the situation at his morning briefing. At noon, roughly 9 hours after seizure of the ship, he convened the first of four National Security Council (NSC) meetings before he approved the military plan. Military operations began at 1700 EST on May 14 and involved the USS *Holt* securing the ship and Marines landing on Koh Tang to occupy the island and rescue the crew. Because there were not enough helicopters to deliver all the Marines at one time, the operation required three waves of helicopters from Thailand. However, it was a 4-hour round trip, meaning the first one-third of the planned force would be on its own until the next wave arrived 4 hours later.

Immediately upon landing on Koh Tang, the Marines encountered heavy resistance, as much as five times larger than anticipated. The expected pre-landing strikes did not occur out of concern

that they would endanger the crew, still believed to be on the island. Of the 11 helicopters in the first wave, only 4 were available to bring in the second wave due to both mechanical issues and taking enemy fire. When the second wave did arrive, it delivered fewer than half the Marines as originally planned.

Less than 20 minutes after the first wave of Marines landed, the Cambodians released the crewmembers, none of whom was on Koh Tang. The USS *Holt* arrived and found the *Mayaguez* empty, and it began towing the ship away from Koh Tang. Because of the rescue of the ship and crew, President Ford canceled the third wave of Marines and tasked the remaining helicopters with extracting more than 200 Marines from the island, although this took more than 5 hours. In the confusion of the extraction, three Marines were left behind and are presumed to have been captured and executed.

The operation ended with the crew and ship rescued, but with 41 U.S. Servicemembers dead and three helicopters destroyed. Upon completion of the operation, the Ford administration saw a temporary increase in public opinion and an enhanced U.S. reputation with its allies. Despite being a political and strategic win, the operation was rife with flaws, and this contrast is one reason it is such a valuable case study for future decisionmakers.

Theory and History

There is often a tension within PME over what to teach, and many see history as easily replaced with topics that are more valuable, or more “timely,” such as counterinsurgency after 2004, or great power competition after 2018. What the *Mayaguez* case does, even more than the Cuban Missile Crisis, is illustrate why an accurate use of history is so important for senior leaders.

Lack of awareness over the *Mayaguez* Incident is particularly troubling considering the poor use of history by strategic decisionmakers during the crisis. The case itself is a valuable lesson in history, coming as it does on the heels of the Vietnam War and in a transition point of the Cold

War. And the poor use of historical analogy by President Ford’s advisors makes it particularly valuable for students.

The Historical Context: Cold War vs. Local Conflict. It is important to understand the strategic environment surrounding any historical study. This historical context puts the case in perspective and is helpful for understanding the mindset of the decisionmakers, particularly President Ford and the NSC.

Gerald Ford had been President for only 8 months since Richard Nixon’s August 1974 resignation, and the country was still reeling from Watergate and the Vietnam War. Ford had yet to be tested on foreign policy, and he wanted to show himself to be capable of making difficult decisions. He retained many of Nixon’s advisors, most notably Henry Kissinger serving as both Secretary of State and National Security Advisor,³ and Secretary of Defense Arthur Schlesinger. Ford also faced a minor crisis of legitimacy. He was not Nixon’s first Vice President, but took over when Spiro Agnew resigned over tax evasion. Thus, Ford was the first unelected President of the United States.

Regionally, on April 17, 1975, Cambodia fell to the Communist Khmer Rouge. Two weeks later, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, and the United States fully withdrew from Vietnam as part of Operation *Frequent Wind*. The United States still generally viewed all communists as part of a unified bloc, but what the NSC did not know at the time of the *Mayaguez* Incident was that Cambodia ramped up its defense of Koh Tang after the fall of Saigon out of fear of growing Vietnamese power. While the Khmer Rouge shared a communist ideology with the North Vietnamese, both groups were nationalistic and in competition with one another over a variety of issues, including the islands near where the Cambodians seized the *Mayaguez*.

Globally, the Cold War was still in a period of relative détente, especially after the opening of U.S. relations with China in February 1972 and the signing of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks agreement and Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with the Soviets in May 1972. But there



Section of negative contact sheet for White House Photography Office roll A452 includes President Gerald Ford, Chief of Staff Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Central Intelligence Agency Director William Colby, Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger, and Vice President William Rockefeller, on day 3 of *Mayaguez* discussions, May 1975 (David Kennerly/Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library)

was still Cold War competition. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization was falling apart after France’s June 1974 withdrawal,⁴ and communists took over in Ethiopia in September 1974. The Ford administration was also concerned by reports that North Korea sought support from China and the Soviet Union for some type of military action against South Korea.⁵ This weighed heavily on U.S. decisionmakers during the crisis.

The Use of Analogy: Bad History Leads to Bad Decisions. Historians are fond of saying that history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes. This is an important sentiment because it suggests that while no two cases are identical, we can apply lessons from history to modern events. The challenge is to know when

and how to apply these historical analogies effectively.⁶

The most pressing analogy that the NSC used during the discussions is the USS *Pueblo* case 7 years prior, in which North Korea seized a U.S. intelligence vessel and held the crew for 11 months. Ford’s advisors brought up the 1968 incident on multiple occasions. Vice President Nelson Rockefeller was the first to use the analogy, simply offering, “I remember the PUEBLO case.” Schlesinger later said, “It is like the PUEBLO. Once it got to Wonson [a port city in North Korea] it was hard to bring it back.”⁷

Both cases involved the seizure of a U.S. ship and its crew, but that is where the similarities end. The *Pueblo* was a military ship, engaged in intelligence gathering in North Korean waters during

what was technically still a state of war between the United States and North Korea. In contrast, the *Mayaguez* was a commercial ship, and it is still unclear where it was seized and whether it was even flying an American flag at the time of its seizure,⁸ meaning the Cambodians might not have realized they were seizing an American ship.

The use of the *Pueblo* analogy is understandable if Ford’s advisors were concerned about North Korean activities. But frequently drawing that comparison without addressing the key differences negatively influenced the decision. Using the *Pueblo* analogy placed an unwarranted time constraint on Ford. Rather than work to resolve the situation and get the crew and ship back, the President felt he needed to act before the crew reached the

mainland (without knowing where the crewmembers were or whether they were being moved to the mainland). This self-imposed time constraint then increased the likelihood of groupthink. In fact, it is not clear that this situation needed to rise to the level of a crisis, but the NSC approach from the beginning created a sense of urgency.

Another flawed analogy used in the NSC meetings was the Cuban Missile Crisis. Ford's Counselor to the President, Robert Hartmann, referenced Cuba during the third NSC meeting of the crisis (the second meeting on day 2), not because of parallels between the cases themselves, but to highlight the need to resolve the incident successfully, to give Ford a foreign policy win. Hartmann stated, "This crisis, like the Cuban missile crisis, is the first real test of your leadership. What you decide is not as important as what the public perceives."⁹ Comparing the seizure of a ship in Cambodia to the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba created additional pressure on Ford to resolve the issue in a way that created a significant political win.

While history can be a persuasive tool, its incorrect use is dangerous because flawed analogies based on a poor understanding of the current context can lead to poor decisionmaking. Given that many of Ford's advisors were around during the *Pueblo* incident, the use of the analogy is both understandable, and perhaps less forgivable, since they should have been aware of the differences.

Strategy

JAWS uses the *Mayaguez* case at the beginning of the block of strategy lessons focused on the diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement instruments of national power to highlight how quickly the NSC jumped to the military solution without seriously considering other options. This case incorporates so many elements of a typical strategy curriculum that it might be used in conjunction with lessons on decisionmaking and groupthink, analysis of strategic risk, or the political dimensions of strategy, to include the War

Powers Act and the concept of reputation. The first section below begins with one of the key starting points for any strategic choice: understanding the problem.

Understanding the Problem: Asking the "Why" Question. The first flaw of decisionmaking in the NSC was the failure to understand why they were in a crisis to begin with. NSC minutes reveal occasional questions about why the Khmer Rouge might have taken the ship, but Ford's advisors never addressed that issue adequately. The few instances when the question was asked were quickly overcome by calls to mine harbors, take reciprocal action against Cambodian ships, or bomb Cambodia using B-52s. At the beginning of the first NSC meeting, as Director of Central Intelligence William Colby briefed the situation, he stated, "We have no hard information on why the Khmer Communists seized the ship."¹⁰

Later in that first meeting, Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements reminded the NSC that "we should not forget that there is a real chance that this is an in-house spat."¹¹ Yet by that point, most of the group had already moved on to discussing possible military options. Immediately after Clements's comment, President Ford stated, "This is interesting, but it does not solve our problem. . . . We should also issue orders to get the carrier turned around."¹² The fact that nobody could answer the "why" question is a problem but is not completely surprising in the preliminary phases of an incident. More troubling is how little time the NSC spent even asking why, and how quickly the President moved to military options without understanding the reason for the crisis.

There are even points where members of the NSC claimed that the Cambodians had done this before and released the crew and ship shortly after seizure. In the same initial brief, Colby stated, "A Panamanian charter vessel was seized by the Khmer Communists last week in roughly the same area, but was subsequently released."¹³ Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger followed up later in that same meeting, stating, "The

Cambodians have already seized three ships: A Panamanian, a Philippine and now an American. They did release the first two ships."¹⁴ Yet the NSC ignored these facts in favor of finding some action that would signal U.S. toughness, based on the assumption that the Cambodians must have targeted the United States.

Without properly addressing the source of the problem, all moves by the NSC were subject to flawed assumptions and poor judgment. These issues were worsened by the nature of the decision-making process in the NSC.

Groupthink and Strategic Risk. Groupthink can manifest in a number of ways and may result in a variety of outcomes, none of which are conducive to effective decisionmaking. In the *Mayaguez* case, there is significant evidence of groupthink, including the presence of time constraints (though self-imposed), and the group's unwillingness to consider alternative solutions (or to revisit alternate courses of action). Further evidence includes the lack of outside perspectives (despite legal requirements to consult with Congress) and the belief that whatever solution the group arrived at would be the correct one.

As discussed above, analogies to the *Pueblo* incident created a crisis-like atmosphere because of the perceived need to rescue the crewmembers before they reached mainland Cambodia. Drawing parallels to the *Pueblo* incident, despite the important differences between the two events, put additional time pressures on the decisionmakers. Also, the perceived importance of acting tough to strengthen U.S. reputation enhanced the crisis mentality. As a result, the NSC's assessment of the greatest risk to its strategic goals was for the crisis to become a prolonged hostage situation, as in the *Pueblo* case. The NSC was willing to accept some risk to personnel (both the crew and the military forces), as well as some domestic political risk, to reduce the likelihood of a hostage crisis. An understanding of strategic priorities is important for planners because it helps them identify where to accept higher levels of risk and where they must mitigate or transfer risk.



Marines with M-60 machine guns on deck of merchant ship SS *Mayaguez* after boarding it and finding it empty (U.S. Marine Corps)

The speed with which President Ford moved to a military solution without seriously considering alternate instruments of national power illustrates groupthink, but it also demonstrates the NSC's view of risk. Minutes into the first NSC meeting, James Schlesinger already offered the President military options, saying, "We can have a passive stance or we can be active. We can do such things as seizing Cambodian assets. We can assemble forces. We could seize a small island as a hostage. We might also consider a blockade."¹⁵

Shortly after that, Kissinger laid out the challenges for the team: "As I see it, Mr. President, we have two problems.

The first problem is how to get the ship back. The second problem is how the United States appears at this time. Actions that we would take to deal with one of these problems may not help to deal with the other."¹⁶ Kissinger continued, "What we need for the next 48 hours is a strong statement, a strong note and a show of force."¹⁷

The Vice President echoed Kissinger's view, stating, "I think a violent response is in order. The world should know that we will act and that we will act quickly. We should have an immediate response in terms of action. I do not know if we have any targets that

we can strike, but we should certainly consider this. If they get any hostages, this can go on forever."¹⁸

In the first NSC meeting, the President made the decision to act militarily, and after that, the NSC focused on the details of the operation, rarely revisiting nonmilitary options. Direct diplomacy was difficult because of the lack of communication with the new Khmer Rouge government, and the NSC dismissed economic measures and multilateral diplomacy because of the perceived need to resolve the crisis before the Cambodians took the crew to the mainland (again, based on the flawed *Pueblo* analogy).¹⁹ Many also believed other states would view nonmilitary courses of action as weak.

As a result, the Department of Defense put a joint operation into motion consisting of Marines, volunteers from an Air Force security squadron, Air Force helicopters out of Thailand, and Naval vessels in the region, namely the frigate USS *Holt* and the destroyer USS *Wilson*. The Navy also diverted the USS *Coral Sea* carrier group to the South China Sea. More Naval and Marine assets were available 24 hours later, but the NSC accepted a higher level of risk to the mission and to personnel in exchange for reducing the risk that the crew would become hostages on the mainland.

The War Powers Act: Testing the Imperial President. The War Powers Act is an important element of this case, although it is too involved to address sufficiently here. This was the first real test of the act, which largely failed because nobody seemed to know what the requirements were,²⁰ because Congress never challenged the Presidential authority to act, and because there were no real costs imposed on the President for ignoring Congress.

Since the operation was over quickly, the use of military forces against Cambodia never triggered section 5 of the War Powers Act. But the Ford administration's decision to mostly ignore sections 3 and 4, the consultation and reporting requirements, either out of ignorance or out of disdain, set a precedent for future Presidents when introducing

military forces into hostilities. It also signaled the NSC's willingness to accept some political risk with Congress to score a win with the American public and, more important, to enhance U.S. reputation overseas.

Operational Planning

Most officers have some familiarity with the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act and the cases that contributed to passage of that legislation. Operation *Eagle Claw*'s (1980) failure and the successful but flawed invasion of Grenada (1983) led Congress to reform how the Department of Defense plans and conducts joint operations. *Mayaguez* started the United States down that path even earlier.²¹ The multi-Service nature of the operation was born of necessity rather than a desire to be joint, and the problems with the operation show how poorly the Services worked together after Vietnam. That is not to diminish the heroism of those who participated in the operation, but to highlight how far the Defense Department has come since 1975.

Two key elements of the case related to operational planning curricula are joint functions and commander's intent.²² Planners did not talk about either of these in 1975, and this is why the *Mayaguez* Incident is such a useful case for discussing current joint doctrine.

Joint Functions. A discussion of joint functions in the *Mayaguez* operation would be an article of its own.²³ I mention only some key aspects here. One of the biggest problems with the operation had to do with the complex command and control structure, which was slightly different for each Service and violated concepts of unity of command.²⁴ The Marine Corps, in particular, was critical of the ad hoc nature of the operation and the dominance of U.S. Air Force planners.²⁵ Planning cells were also physically separated from one another, complicating communication and coordination.²⁶

Plenty of analysts widely criticized the intelligence community.²⁷ The bulk of scholarship suggests that the problem was less with the gathering or analysis of intelligence than with its dissemination, made

worse by the confused command and control structure.²⁸ Regardless of where to lay the blame, accurate intelligence was not available to the planners or to the forces during the operation.

Other discussions of joint functions might include decisions to go forward with the operation despite the lack of assets to both insert the Marines and to quickly extract them should things go wrong (movement and maneuver), the decision to withhold pre-invasion bombings out of concern that the crew was on Koh Tang (fires), and the lack of coordinated air and sea support for the Marines after landing on Koh Tang (fires).

This was not just a problem of undeveloped doctrine. Planners, admittedly under time pressures, failed to adequately plan for the most basic elements of an operation. Several choices at the operational and tactical levels nearly resulted in failure, not because of incorrect decisions, but because they did not take into account the strategic priorities of the mission.

Commander's Intent. It is apparent from the NSC minutes that President Ford and Henry Kissinger were concerned foremost with resolving the crisis in a way that enhanced the President's and the Nation's reputation. The rescue of the ship and crew were of secondary importance to the need to respond decisively and to resolve the crisis quickly and effectively. The crewmembers were means to an end.

Gerald Ford was still a new President and not yet tested in foreign policy, so he personally felt the need to gain a foreign policy win to secure his status and improve his popularity at home.²⁹ Kissinger's concern for reputation was more about the credibility of the country, having recently withdrawn from Vietnam, and as part of the larger Cold War competition. Kissinger believed that if the United States did not stand up to Cambodia, it would further harm the country's credibility, weaken relations with U.S. allies in the region and elsewhere, and possibly embolden North Korea and the Soviet Union.

The problem is that while the NSC did list its priorities, nobody relayed these priorities to the planners and local commanders. Moreover, the NSC never

adequately addressed a number of critical questions, including why the Khmer Rouge seized the ship, what some of the nonmilitary options were, and what the potential risks of military action were.

According to Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, commander's intent "provides focus to the staff and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the commander's objectives without further orders once the operation begins, even when the operation does not unfold as planned."³⁰ Had the NSC communicated national prestige as the top priority, military plans might have been different in a number of ways. For one thing, assault forces believed the first wave on Koh Tang would occur after pre-assault attacks on the island's defenses. Planners made the late decision to avoid pre-assault fires to avoid endangering the *Mayaguez* crew believed to be on the island. Had the message been clearer that this was about resolve and not the crew, then those fires would have occurred, the occupation of the island would have met less resistance, and at least that part of the operation would have held less risk.

Other operational decisions that might have been different with an understanding of NSC priorities include the order for pilots to shoot at boats potentially taking the crew to the mainland. In addition, waiting another 24–48 hours for more Naval and Marine assets to arrive in the region would have provided more support capabilities and more ground forces. Yet the NSC made those decisions to reduce the risk of the crew getting to the mainland, not out of concern for the crew's lives, but fear of a drawn-out hostage crisis.

Conclusion

This article highlights several elements of the *Mayaguez* Incident to facilitate its use as an instructional case study. Its value is to give military officers and civilian decisionmakers a better appreciation for the uses of history, strategy, and operational planning. The NSC was so fixated on the global Cold War that it ignored the local factors that contributed to the incident and ignored questions about why the Khmer Rouge seized the



CH-53 "Jolly Green" helicopter on Cambodia mainland during rescue operation (Jim Davis/Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library)

boat. Members of the NSC drew poor historical parallels, enhancing the sense of urgency, and an emphasis on looking tough contributed to these problems and to the sense of groupthink. Finally, the NSC's failure to communicate where it was willing to accept risk, based on its prioritization of goals, contributed to flawed planning assumptions.

Despite the effect these strategic mistakes had on the operation, the lens of modern operational planning provides valuable lessons for planners and strategists. There are a number of topics only briefly discussed above that deserve a more detailed discussion, but for which there is not room here. It is useful, though, to list some of these as a tool for generating discussion questions and/or facilitating additional research.

There is still debate about the relative success or failure of the operation. From a strategic point of view, the crew and ship were rescued, and Ford received a significant boost in popularity. As a result, the Ford administration achieved its political objectives. One important set of questions relates to the value of reputation. Showing competency in foreign affairs

for the American people is only one small part of what drove Ford.

Ford and his advisors clearly viewed reputation as a critical driver for their decisions, but to what extent did U.S. actions alter the perception of other states toward the United States as either an ally or an adversary? We cannot know if U.S. actions deterred North Korea or the Soviet Union. Nor can we know what would have happened if the United States had not acted quickly. Did U.S. allies feel that the United States was more reliable as an ally? Did the Nation benefit in its alliance relationships because of its actions?

There is little evidence on either side.³¹ While U.S. actions probably did not impress the Soviets, failure to act might have lowered Soviet perceptions of U.S. strength, at least in the region. Likewise, we cannot know if U.S. actions deterred future North Korean activities; the best we can say is nothing happened despite U.S. concerns before the incident that an attack was likely.

Most U.S. allies in the region appeared to view the military action favorably. Thailand was upset over the use of its territory for staging military operations,

as Kissinger predicted during the NSC meetings.³² But the Thai government was upset over the domestic political tension caused by U.S. troops being deployed from Thai territory, not that the United States was an unreliable ally or lacked the resolve to defend its interests. Other allies (Japan, Australia, and South Korea in particular) positively viewed U.S. willingness to protect its interests in the region, even after withdrawing from Vietnam. Japanese officials, for instance, called the U.S. military action "justified."³³

Other questions, more at the operational level, relate to whether planners or commanders would have done anything differently had they understood the strategic priority of preserving U.S. reputation, rather than assuming that the rescue of the crew and ship were the priorities. Some examples are offered in the text above, but one exercise is to have a class develop two sets of plans for a *Mayaguez* scenario—one in which rescue of the crew is articulated as the priority, and one where it is made known to the planners that looking tough is the main concern. Comparing the finished products would illustrate some critical lessons about the importance of understanding the objectives of a plan.

Finally, classes could discuss civil-military relations and the meaning of best military advice. There are examples in this case of military advisors minimizing or overlooking risk. There are also examples of insubordination, which may have saved the lives of the crew, precisely because officers did what they thought was right rather than what best fit the President's strategic priorities.³⁴

The above discussion highlights some of the operational challenges, created or worsened by a poor use of history, a lack of awareness of the strategic situation beyond the Cold War, an inability to recognize groupthink within the NSC, and a failure to communicate the strategic priorities. It is ironic that most of the failures occurred at the strategic level, yet the outcome gave the President a political victory. In the end, while the *Mayaguez* operation was flawed on many levels, the case is an incredibly valuable teaching tool for any part of a PME curriculum. JFQ

Notes

¹ Ric Hunter, "The Last Battle of Vietnam," *Flight Journal* 5, no. 2 (April 2000), 43–46; and Ralph Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle: The Mayaguez Incident and the End of the Vietnam War* (New York: Plume, 2002).

² Christopher Lamb, *Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989); John Guilmartin, *A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995); Robert Mahoney, *The Mayaguez Incident: Testing America's Resolve in the Post-Vietnam Era* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2011); and James Wise and Scott Baron, *The 14-Hour War: Valor on Koh Tang and the Recapture of the SS Mayaguez* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011).

³ Kissinger initially served as Nixon's National Security Advisor, but he took on both roles from September 1973 until November 1975 and then finished out the Ford administration as the Secretary of State.

⁴ "France to Stop Paying Dues to SEATO in June, 1974," *New York Times*, June 10, 1973, 6. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization disbanded in 1977.

⁵ Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. Sees Foray for Ship as Signal to Communists," *New York Times*, May 16, 1975, 14; and Yafeng Xia and Zhihua Shen, "China's Last Ally: Beijing's Policy toward North Korea during the U.S.-China Rapprochement, 1970–1975," *Diplomatic History* 38 (November 2014), 1083–1113.

⁶ Richard Neustadt and Ernest May devote half a chapter to the *Mayaguez* case, though much of the information relies on Ford's autobiographical account since the National Security Council (NSC) minutes were still classified. Yuen Foong Khong only briefly mentions *Mayaguez* in the introductory chapter, but his book is useful for understanding the broader value of historical analogy. Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 58–66; and Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5.

⁷ "NSC Meeting, 5/12/1975," National Security Adviser's NSC Meeting File, Box 1, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, 8–9, available at <www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0312/1552386.pdf>.

⁸ Jordan Paust, "More Revelations about *Mayaguez* (and its Secret Cargo)," *Boston College International and Comparative Law Review* 4, no. 1 (1981), 61–76.

⁹ "NSC Meeting, 5/13/1975 (evening)," National Security Adviser's NSC Meeting File, Box 1, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, 20, available at <www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0312/1552388.pdf>.

¹⁰ "NSC Meeting, 5/12/1975," 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4–5. Some suggest Kissinger's omission of the crew's return is telling of his priorities. A report shortly after the crisis even suggests Kissinger made a statement in the first NSC meeting that the lives of the crew "must unfortunately be a secondary consideration." See Peter Goldman, "Ford's Rescue Operation," *Newsweek*, May 26, 1975, 16. Kissinger denied making that statement, and no such comment appears in the minutes of that first meeting. Regardless of what Kissinger said or whether he prioritized rescue of the crew, it is apparent in reading the NSC minutes that looking tough was his priority and the ship (and crew) were both secondary.

¹⁷ "NSC Meeting, 5/12/1975," 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ State Department records show attempts by the U.S. Embassy in China to get a message to the Cambodians, seemingly ignored by both the Chinese government and the Cambodian embassy. "Telegram from the Liaison Office in China to the Department of State: Message on Cambodian Seizure of U.S. Ship, Beijing, May 13, 1975 (0454Z)," Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, 1973–1976, Box 29, Department of State, Telegrams and Cables (1). Similarly, attempts to go through the United Nations (UN) were largely ineffective. Lamb blames Kissinger for the delay in getting the UN involved. See Christopher Lamb, "The *Mayaguez* Crisis: Correcting 30 Years of Scholarship," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 1 (2018), 35–76.

²⁰ President Ford even asked his NSC team, "What does the law say?" Philip Buchen, White House Counsel, replied, "The law says to consult before the introduction of forces and then to consult regularly. There is also a requirement for a report 48 hours after an action. We have to get that report in tonight." See "NSC Meeting, 5/14/1975," National Security Adviser's NSC Meeting File, Box 1, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, 23, available at <www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0312/1552389.pdf>. No consultation occurred and the report was an afterthought.

²¹ Christopher Lamb, *The Mayaguez Crisis: Mission Command and Civil-Military Relations* (Washington, DC: Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018).

²² The NSC set the operational goals and micromanaged the operation. As a result, even though the NSC only provided much of the information typically in commander's intent (military endstate, operational risks, etc.) on an ad hoc basis, it is still useful to analyze this case using current doctrine.

²³ Joint functions include command and control, information, intelligence, fires, movement and maneuver, protection, and sustainment. Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, January 7, 2017, Incorporating Change 1, October 22, 2018), chap. 3.

²⁴ Mahoney, *The Mayaguez Incident*, 85–88, 225–228; and Urey Patrick, *The Mayaguez Operation* (Washington, DC: Center for Naval Analyses–Marine Corps Operational Analysis Group, April 1977), 17–18.

²⁵ Glenn Starnes, "The *Mayaguez* Incident: A Failure in Operational Leadership," Naval War College paper, June 16, 1995.

²⁶ Lucien Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Operations: Special Operations as an Instrument of Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 98.

²⁷ Poor estimates of enemy defenses on Koh Tang, as well as the location of the crew, contributed to lower chances of success. William Head, "Mayaguez: The Final Tragedy of the U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War," *Journal of Third World Studies* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 57–80; Mahoney, *The Mayaguez Incident*, 245–257; and Patrick, *The Mayaguez Operation*, 102.

²⁸ Mahoney, *The Mayaguez Incident*, 252–255; and Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Operations*, 99.

²⁹ Mahoney suggests this contributed to Ford using the crisis for political gain. Mahoney, *The Mayaguez Incident*, 217, 259. Lamb disagrees that domestic politics played a significant part in Ford's decisionmaking, suggesting it was entirely about showing U.S. toughness. Lamb, "The *Mayaguez* Crisis: Correcting 30 Years of Scholarship," 66–67.

³⁰ JP 3-0, II-7.

³¹ Mahoney spends two pages talking about the response of the Thai government, but there is little else in the *Mayaguez* scholarship about the tangible effects of U.S. actions on its reputation. Mahoney, *The Mayaguez Incident*, 191–192.

³² Kissinger offered, "We cannot do it [take military action] from Thailand. . . . I do not believe we can run military operations from there." See "NSC Minutes, 5/12/1975," 9. Telegrams from the U.S. Embassy in Thailand support this view and repeatedly expressed the challenge that military action from Thai territory would present to the existing government. "Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State: Thai Unwillingness to Let the U.S. Flex Its Thai Based Military Forces in Indochina, May 13, 1975," U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 59, Central Foreign Policy Files.

³³ Richard Halloran, "Japanese Firmly Support U.S. in Freeing of *Mayaguez*," *New York Times*, May 16, 1975, 16.

³⁴ Lamb, "The *Mayaguez* Crisis: Correcting 30 Years of Scholarship," 43–44, 53–54.