

## Materials on **The Seizure and Recovery of the Mayaguez (May 1975)**

On May 12, 1975, twelve days after the fall of the U.S. supported government of South Vietnam and twenty four days after the seizure of power in Cambodia by the Communist Khmer Rouge party, a Cambodian gunboat seized the American merchant ship, *SS Mayaguez* in the Gulf of Thailand. The Khmer government claimed that the boat had been engaged in a spy mission for the U.S. and was captured inside Cambodian territorial waters. President Ford disputed both points, calling the Cambodian action "an act of piracy," and demanded the release of the ship and its crew. Without any way of directly communicating with Phnom Penh, the U.S. attempted to secure its ends by working diplomatically through China, the U.N., and other third parties. When these appeals brought no immediate results, the U.S. prepared for military action.

As you read these materials, consider what objectives President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger were pursuing, and their (implicit) theory for how to achieve these objectives. What alternative strategies might you have advised?

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**  
**The Mayaguez Incident**

Gerald Ford, President of the United States

Khmer Rouge, Communist party of Cambodia led by Pol Pot

Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State and National Security Advisor

National Security Council, major foreign policy body in the U.S. Government. Created in 1947, it includes the President, Vice President, Secretaries of Defense and State, and Director of Emergency Planning

Kukrit Pramoj, Premier of Thailand, a moderate who nevertheless must take into account the large and vocal anti-American forces in Thailand.

James R. Schlesinger, Defense Secretary

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, titular leader of the Cambodian government, deposed by Lon Nol in March, 1970, he has tried to regain power in the 1970's and 1980's from Peking but so far has failed. Has a tendency to change his positions when expedient.

Major General Brent Skowcroft, Deputy Director of the National Security Council

Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the United Nations

## **CHRONOLOGY**

### **The Mayaguez Incident**

#### Prelude

#### **1945-1954**

In 1946, the year after Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the French and Vietnamese governments signed the Franco-Vietnamese Accords, partitioning the Southern Provinces of Tonkin and Annam to France. A year later, the French named Bao Dai Head of State in Vietnam. In 1950, as the U.S. increased military assistance to Vietnam, a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement was signed with France, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Less than a year after the Korean War Armistice was signed and Prince Norodom Sihanouk gained Cambodia's independence from France in 1953, the Vietminh attacked the French fortress at Dien Bien Phu and conquered it. In response, the Geneva Accords meeting was held to determine the political future of Indochina. The Accords divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel into two countries: South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam) and North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam). They also recognized Cambodian neutrality and ordered the withdrawal of Vietminh and Khmer troops to Hanoi.

#### **1955-1964**

A year after the Geneva Accords were signed, Ngo Dinh Diem repudiated them and proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam in the South with himself as president. President Eisenhower committed to maintaining South Vietnam as a separate nation. At the same time, Prince Sihanouk abdicated to his father and became Cambodia's principle political leader. In 1962, the U.S. established a Military Assistance Command in Saigon, signalling the beginning of the major build up of American forces there. In 1963, a military coup overthrew the government of Ngo Dinh Diem resulting in the assassination of Diem and his brother. In Cambodia, leaders of the left-wing opposition to Sihanouk left Phnom Penh for the jungle and mountains and Sihanouk denounced American aid. In 1954, following an attack by North Vietnamese vessels on the *USS Maddox* and *USS C. Turner Joy* on August 2, the U.S. congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution giving President Lyndon B. Johnson a "blank check" to repel any armed attack against U.S. forces and to prevent further aggression.

#### **1965-1969**

On March 2, 1965, U.S. forces began the bombing of North Vietnam in Operation Rolling Thunder. On May 3, Cambodia broke relations with the United States. By December 31 of that year, 184,000 U.S. military personnel were in Vietnam and 636 had been killed. From 1966-1967, Prince Sihanouk allowed Vietnamese Communists to use the border areas adjoining South Vietnam and to land supplies at the port of Sihanoukville. In 1967, Sihanouk quelled a left-wing peasant revolt in the Battambang province prompting more left-wingers to leave Phnom Penh. By December 31, 1968, 536,000 U.S. military personnel were in Vietnam and 30,610 had been killed. On March 18, 1969, with the approval of Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, newly inaugurated President

Richard Nixon ordered "secret" bombings of Cambodian airbases in Kompong Som to take pressure off U.S. troop withdrawal from Vietnam and to put pressure on North Vietnam to enter negotiations. On June 8, 1969, President Nixon announced the removal of 25,000 troops from Vietnam. By December 31 of the same year, U.S. military personnel in Vietnam declined to 475,200 with 40,024 killed.

### 1970

- February 20      U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger opens secret peace talks in Paris.
  
- March 18        Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia is deposed by General Lon Nol.
  
- March 23        In Peking, Prince Sihanouk announced the formation of the National United Front of Kampuchea with his former enemies, the Khmer Rouge, versus the Lon Nol government.
  
- April 30        U.S. invades Cambodia in attempt to interdict North Vietnamese supply shipments to Vietcong forces operating in South Vietnam.
  
- May 5            In Peking, Prince Sihanouk announces the formation of the Royal National Union Government of Kampuchea, an exile government, that is immediately recognized by China and North Vietnam.
  
- June 30        U.S. operations in Cambodia end.
  
- December 31    U.S. military personnel now number 334,600; 44,245 killed.

### 1971

- January 30      U.S. Military Equipment Team organized in Saigon.
  
- October 9       U.S. Military Equipment Team moved to Phnom Penh.
  
- December 31    U.S. military personnel number 156,800; 45,626 killed.

### 1972

- February 21    Nixon seeks detente with the People's Republic of China by visiting Beijing.
  
- December 31    U.S. military personnel decline to 24,200; 45,926 killed.

### 1973

- January 27      Peace pact signed in Paris by the U.S., South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong).
  
- February 21    Peace Agreement signed in Laos.

- August 15 Congress stops U.S. bombing of Cambodia.
- September 4 U.S. Ambassador Emory Swank leaves Cambodia. No one replaces him.
- December 31 50 U.S. military personnel remain; 46,163 killed.
- 1974**
- August 9 Nixon resigns the presidency.
- 1975**
- January 8 North Vietnamese decide on massive invasion of the South.
- March 19 Quang Tri Province falls to North Vietnamese troops.
- April 1 South Vietnam abandons its Northern territory.  
Lon Nol abdicates Cambodian presidency.
- April 12 South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu resigns.  
All U.S. personnel withdrawn from Cambodia in Operation Eagle Pull.
- April 17 Cambodia falls to Khmer Rouge troops.
- April 29,30 North Vietnamese Army captures Saigon.  
Americans and select South Vietnamese evacuated by helicopter from roof of U.S. embassy in operation Frequent Wind.
- April 30 Vietnam War ends.

### **The Mayaguez Incident**

- May 12-a.m. Seizure of U.S. merchant vessel *Mayaguez* in the Gulf of Siam by Cambodian naval vessel. President Ford calls it "an act of piracy."
- p.m. U.S. appeals to China and neighboring countries to try to influence the release of the ship and crew.
- May 13-a.m. U.S. reconnaissance planes locate the *Mayaguez* near Koh Tang Island.  
Thai Premier Kukrit Pramoj states he will not permit use of Thai airbases for U.S. maneuvers against Cambodia.

- p.m. After a 56-minute meeting with the National Security Council, President Ford secretly orders that 1,100 marines be flown from Okinawa to U Taphao airbase in Thailand and that the aircraft carrier *Coral Sea* and destroyers go to the Gulf of Siam. U.S. reconnaissance planes flying over the *Mayaguez* are hit by gunfire.  
The *Mayaguez* crew is moved to the mainland.
- May 14-a.m. The destroyer escort *USS Holt* reaches the *Mayaguez*.
- p.m. The U.S. asks the United Nations to help obtain the release of the *Mayaguez* crew. Secretary General Waldheim asks the U.S. and Cambodia "to refrain from further acts of force."
- 7:07 p.m. Cambodian radio broadcasts the offer to release the *Mayaguez* and crew.
- 7:20 p.m. U.S. assault forces land under fire at Koh Tang Island.
- 8:15 p.m. Kissinger informs President Ford of Cambodian Broadcast.
- 8:30 p.m. *USS Holt* members hoist American flag from the *Mayaguez*.
- 9:15 p.m. White House Press Secretary Nessen issues statement demanding return of the crew in return for a promise to cease military operations.
- 11:14 p.m. Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger informs President Ford that the destroyer *Wilson* has found the crew.
- 11:16 p.m. President Ford orders the cessation of military operations and the withdrawal of forces from Koh Tang Island.
- May 15-a.m. President Ford announces that the rescue is complete and that disengagement will begin soon. He praises the efforts of the military forces involved.
- 7:13 a.m. Marines begin to leave Koh Tang Island under heavy fire.
- 9:20 a.m. Last helicopter reaches the Coral Sea.

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