

**An investigation of the US reaction
to the capture of the
SS Mayaguez
through various
theories of international relations.**

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Introduction

The study of international relations theory is often viewed as a prerequisite of the successful deconstruction of foreign policy decisions. Various theories, especially those brought into detail by Graham T. Allison in his groundbreaking book *Essence of Decision*, are available to assist the scholar or analyst in attempting to view various decisions through theoretical lenses which are tested in order to bring about a more informed assessment of a given decision. While certainly not infallible, the application of theories to decision making processes can bring about a greater understanding of the actual reasons behind the decisions themselves which then can bring about a much greater understanding of the overall scheme of a government's, or other groups, foreign policy direction. It would be remiss then not to state that it is also hoped that with the correct application of theory, better predictions of future decisions in given situations, can be made based on previous theoretical deconstructions of past decisions. In this sense the Mayaguez Incident of May 1975 is a well rounded test case of theory application for not only was the incident continually compared with the *Pueblo* incident of 1968 but it also served as something of a precursor for the 1980 Iranian Hostage Crisis rescue attempt. The capturing of the SS Mayaguez, a Panamanian registered cargo ship with US crew members on board, by the Khmer Rouge off the coast of Cambodia came about at a time of growing nationalism by the Khmer Communists who had only recently come to power. The previous government had been US supported but many in Washington DC had predicted their falling for some time and the Khmer Rouge takeover brought to an end the last American supported government to have control in any part of Indochina. While on the surface it may seem contradictory, with both governments in their respective capitals being Communist, Hanoi and Phnom Penh did not see eye to eye and this partly explains why the new Cambodian government was so eager to assert its control over assets it believed it should control, including the area of sea that the SS Mayaguez was sailing through. It can be

strongly argued that the capturing of the Mayaguez was simply another act of a government wishing to establish itself as strong in front of its rivals in Vietnam but with it coming just about a fortnight after the fall of Saigon, and effectively the end of the Vietnam War, President Ford, nor Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were willing to view it as an internal matter. Instead it was viewed as a further challenge to the United States in a region where so many American lives had been shed in a long and bloody war which ultimately ended in what was a humiliating defeat for the US. With the US general mood at a low point “in the aftermath of cruel April, it appeared necessary that the impression of an American retreat be counterbalanced”¹ as US credibility had been called into question more than ever and so the capture of the Mayaguez provided the perfect opportunity for the US to reassert itself on the international stage. The use of American military personnel against Cambodian forces after such little exploration of diplomatic options in freeing the ship goes a long way in allowing various theories to be employed in order to explain just why the US response was decided upon and occurred as it did. To this end this essay will examine the reaction to the crisis through Rational Actor Model, Bureaucratic Process Model, Organisational Process Model and Belief Systems Model’s along with the phenomenon of Groupthink in order to bring about a greater overall understanding of how the relevant actors influenced and shaped the reaction to the crisis in the context of the time.

Mayaguez and the Rational Actor Model

The culmination of the Vietnam War with the rolling of North Vietnamese tanks into Saigon at the end of April 1975 brought an end to the American involvement in Vietnam

¹ Jussi M. Hanhimaki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford, 2004), p. 398.

which had been ongoing since the French had attempted to reassert their presence in their former colony after the Second World War. The defeat came as an embarrassment and a seeming repudiation of Nixon's supposed promise of Peace with Honour. American involvement in the Vietnam War was a result of seeming misunderstandings of the internal politics of the country and especially the intentions of the Communist Party there. The seizure of the Mayaguez and the subsequent US reaction can be seen as the response of a government which did not fully understand the internal politics of Cambodia at this fraught time. The Rational Actor Model of foreign policy analysis is a realist leaning theory which tends to frame decision making as a choice-making process by a single unitary actor rather than as a culmination of different options and opinions from various sectors and actors within a government. President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger failed to see, or perhaps they did not want to see, that the capture of the SS Mayaguez may have simply been an assertion of power by the new Khmer Rouge regime. Earlier in their, at this time, brief reign of power, they had also fired at a passing Swedish ship and had also captured another Panamanian vessel in the same waters². The Director of Central Intelligence, while briefing the National Security Council when it convened to discuss the capture of the Mayaguez on May 12, specifically mentioned that a Panamanian charter vessel was seized a week before Mayaguez and this vessel was also manned with a part-American crew although Kissinger later claimed that information of this did not reach a high enough government level for a warning to be issued³. It was also mentioned that the island of Pulo Weh had been claimed by both the Vietnamese and the Cambodians thus bringing the possibility of the ship simply being caught

² Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, 'The Mayaguez incident as an epilogue to the Vietnam War and its reflection of the post-Vietnam political equilibrium in Southeast-Asia', *Cold War History* 3 (2005), 337 – 367: 340.

³ Jordan J. Paust, 'The seizure and recovery of the Mayaguez', *The Yale Law Journal* 6 (1976), 774 – 806: 776.

up in a diplomatic spat into the mixture of potential reasons⁴. While it is known then that both the President and Secretary of State, as the key decision makers, were aware of a wider range of potential reasons for the ship's capture, their reaction seems to correlate with the Rational Actor Model, especially if Monchau's argument that even with the NSC aware of other reasons there was indeed still a vacuum of information in Washington regarding the new rulers in Cambodia and their relations with Hanoi⁵. Allison, in his pioneering book *Essence of Decision* argues that "the less the information (known) about the internal affairs of a nation or government, the greater the tendency to rely on the classical (rational actor) model"⁶. It may have been assumed by Kissinger and President Ford that the capture of the ship was a direct challenge by another Communist government in Indochina to US world power after the events in Saigon just a fortnight previous which may have emboldened the government in Phnom Penh. However both were informed of other possible reasons to do with a spat with neighbouring Vietnam and it seems that they ignored this and instead viewed the capturing of the ship through the mode of the Rational Actor Model. This would seem logical in the sense that Kissinger had been searching for a particular event through which the US could reassert its global position viz-a-viz China and the Soviet Union in the ongoing Cold War struggle going so far as to say that "the United States must carry out some act somewhere in the world which shows its determination to continue to be a world power"⁷. While this was said off the record it reflects quite a realist model of thinking in that it frames US world power within a Manichean zero-sum game where Vietnam was a net loss and the reaction to the Mayaguez to

⁴ NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 -15: 2. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750512.pdf>

⁵ Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, 'The Mayaguez incident as an epilogue to the Vietnam War and its reflection of the post-Vietnam political equilibrium in Southeast-Asia', *Cold War History* 3 (2005), 337 – 367: 341.

⁶ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston, 1971), p. 24.

⁷ Chris Lamb, 'Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis', *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (1985), pp. 681-702: 684.

be a net gain. Vice President Rockefeller was equally as enthusiastic about a strong military reaction to the capture of the ship as Kissinger seemed to be, saying, “If we do not respond violently, we will get nibbled to death”⁸. Again it seems that the crisis was being viewed through the lenses of the Rational Actor Model because Rockefeller voices a fear that the US was becoming somewhat of an easy target for Communists throughout the world. While there is no doubt that this was a time of great pressure on the US it must be countered that even at this point many in the top leadership positions in Washington were viewing the perceived Communist threat as a worldwide, unified phenomenon. In fact Rockefeller’s approach here flies in the face of Nixon’s diplomacy with China which served to take advantage of the Sino-Soviet Split, and so recognise differences within different Communist countries and in their relationships with other Communist nations. This lends further credence to the possibility of the US reaction to the Mayaguez’s capture as being best viewed through the Rational Actor Model for differences within and between states were not accounted for and all actors were viewed as unitary.

However while the concerns of further challenges to US power were paramount, so too were concerns with the image of the US and its credibility. The two are greatly interlinked but during the five NSC meetings focusing on the crisis there prevailed a great concern with the image of the US. This may have been because of possible pressure from Seoul over various provocations that North Korea was engaged in towards the non-Communist South with Vice-President Rockefeller being adamant that “The issue is how we respond...many are watching us, in Korea and elsewhere”⁹. With the crisis being anchored as an image/credibility issue

⁸ NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 -15: 9. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750512.pdf>

⁹ NSC Meeting, May 13, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 – 17: 11. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750513.pdf>

along with it being seen as a direct challenge to US power there is no doubt that Washington undertook actions to rescue the ship and its crew, while also striking Cambodia itself, with full knowledge of the consequences. Chris Brown argues in *Understanding International Relations*, “Rational Actor Model assumes that states always intend the consequences of their actions”¹⁰. With the US fully intending, and foreseeing the consequences of their reaction, it is impossible then to discount the Rational Actor Model as being useful for the analysis of this crisis. However there is a number of problems with viewing it solely through this model for it does not cover all of the issues which the reaction brought up and so more theories must be employed, one being the Bureaucratic Politics Model.

Mayaguez and the Bureaucratic Politics Model

While Rational Actor Model is the model of analysis that people use on an almost every-day basis when viewing foreign policy decisions, it is not suitable for investigating more nuanced decisions which in themselves feed into the larger narrative. Foreign policy decisions are rarely made by one single person on behalf of an entire state, there are other constraints, and other people, who influence decisions made. The Bureaucratic Politics Model is explained as being when “advocates fight for outcomes...but (remembering that) the game of politics does not consist simply of players pulling and hauling, each for his chosen action”¹¹. As this may be the case it is worth remembering the comparison of politics with a tug of war between different departments and departmental representatives. If the response to the Mayaguez crisis was made through the framework of the Bureaucratic Politics Model however then the details of the National Security Council meetings would surely be different

¹⁰ Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (London, 2001), p. 78.

¹¹ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston, 1971), p. 172.

than what they are. Any analysis made with this model would be made through the assumption that “bureaucracies see the world from the perspective of their own organisation...in the United States, the State Department usually favours negotiation”¹². However with the Mayaguez crisis the usual positioning of each organisation did not exist as it would usually do. A prime example of this was the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, the country’s chief negotiator, advocating a violent response all throughout the various NSC meetings that took place on the crisis. As Secretary of State, Kissinger should have, according to the assumptions made by the Bureaucratic Politics Model, been advising the President to aim for more diplomatic options in retrieving the captured vessel and crew. The actual issue at stake was the lives of American crew members on board the SS Mayaguez and a negotiated settlement would almost certainly have brought about the release of both the ship and its crew, especially as the crew were released before the US military attacks and ‘rescue plan’ were launched. Diplomatic efforts were indeed attempted but only half-heartedly and were never advocated by Kissinger in any NSC meeting. Kissinger had indeed informed the United Nations, sending a warning to Cambodia through them on May 14, 48 hours after the ship had been taken, but privately Kissinger was convinced that any negotiations would only legitimize the Cambodians actions in capturing the ship¹³. In fact Kissinger had actually concealed information from the NSC that the Chinese expected the crew’s release before long¹⁴. The Government Accountability Office’s 1976 report on the handling of the crisis agreed that the State Department had tried all means available to bring about diplomatic exchanges but it also outlined numerous options of communication which

¹² Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (London, 2001), p. 79.

¹³ Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, ‘The Mayaguez incident as an epilogue to the Vietnam War and its reflection of the post-Vietnam political equilibrium in Southeast-Asia’, *Cold War History* 3 (2005), 337 – 367: 344.

¹⁴ Chris Lamb, ‘Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis’, *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (1985), pp. 681-702: 693.

were never attempted¹⁵. If this is to be believed then it shows another weakness in the Bureaucratic Politics Model's application to this crisis for surely Kissinger should have been advocating the views of his department when advising the President but instead he consistently advocated military force, even more so than the relatively placid Secretary of Defence, James Schlesinger. While it "is not expected that organisations will promote courses of action that do not involve enhancements to their own budgets"¹⁶, the heads of the US defence establishment were actually less prone to advocating a violent response than was the country's chief diplomat. In an accurate application of the Bureaucratic Politics Model the Defence Department should have been advocating a violent response, especially after the end of the Vietnam War as they may have wanted to show that the US military was still a force the nation could rely on. This was not the case however as Schlesinger, along with the Joint Chiefs of Staff actually advised President Ford not to bomb the Cambodian mainland with B-52's¹⁷. Also, the Deputy Defence Secretary continually mentioned that the reason for the ship's capture was because of "an in-house spat...in that there have been two (oil) discovery wells drilled (and) one made a significant discovery"¹⁸. In a sense the reaction of the various relevant departments was opposite to what they should have been and while this goes some way to discrediting the Bureaucratic Politics Model on a macro scale, it still applied to this crisis on a more micro scale with the actual set up of the 'rescue operation' itself.

¹⁵ Elmer B. Staats, (Comptroller General of the United States), 'The Seizure of the Mayaguez – A Case Study in Crisis Management', Departments of State and Defense, National Security Council (Washington DC, 1976). *US Government Accountability Office* (online), pp. 58 – 127: 68. Available: <http://archive.gao.gov/f0302/a02828.pdf>

¹⁶ Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (London, 2001), p. 80.

¹⁷ Chris Lamb, 'Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis', *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (1985), pp. 681-702: 689.

¹⁸ NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 -15: 6. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750512.pdf>

During NSC meetings it was noted that a bombing run on Cambodia, should it be launched from US air bases in Thailand, would bring about the closure of US bases there with Kissinger commenting that the US would last merely a month before being forced to leave¹⁹. This could be seen within the context of the Bureaucratic Politics Model because while the Thai military were not averse to US usage of bases in order to strike at Cambodia, the government in Bangkok, it was known, would have held a different stance. Oddly these two stances were stances of which the US departments of State and Defence should have been holding but were only doing so in opposite directions. With the Thai bases being out of action as regards bombing runs, the military assembled a force to leave from US bases in Okinawa and on May 13 the forces were in place with the Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Jones, announcing this at an NSC meeting on that date. This could perhaps be seen as a press for military movement which, if true, would indeed fit the Bureaucratic Politics Model. Throughout the various NSC meetings President Ford never strongly advocated any position at too early a time, ringing true Allison's claim for this model that "the President's costs and benefits often require that he decides as little as possible, keeping his options open"²⁰. The President however did show his true colours in full on May 14 when he ordered that the Marines could strike whether or not any Americans were actually to be found on the Mayaguez²¹. While this is understandable in that American prestige would be adversely affected should the Marines reach the ship and leave after not finding any Americans, it clearly shows that Ford was by no means averse to a violent response along the lines of Kissinger's and Rockefeller's line of thought. With this in mind then a heated section of

¹⁹ NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 -15: 13. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750512.pdf>

²⁰ Allison, G.T., *Essence of Decision* (Boston, 1971), p. 172.

²¹ NSC Meeting, May 14, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 – 27: 16. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750514.pdf>

discussion between General Jones and President Ford that occurred in the NSC meeting of May 14 takes on more relevance perhaps showing a more visible split between the two groups on the NSC who argued for more, or less, violence in the US reaction. In this exchange of views Ford argues with Jones that “it does no good to have the destroyer (USS Holt) 12 miles out...it can’t stop a boat (SS Mayaguez)”²². If it is accepted that the President’s conduct in this particular meeting did indeed mark a split then the Bureaucratic Politics Model fits this scope of argument for this model allows the analyst to see splits between government groups, individuals and departments as being factors in the formulation of key decisions. However the model, for the most part, constructs the reasoning behind decisions made by displaying the preferences and positions of the actors involved and the various debates that go on in, and between, these channels to bring about a final result²³. This is not to say that the decision to intervene militarily was made through this particular model and although its framework does provide for better interpretation of some decisions and positions of various actors, it does not allow a full analysis of why Kissinger, Rockefeller and indeed Ford also, believed military force to be the best option from the start. For this to be explored an investigation of the role of Belief Systems Theory must be made along with the possibility of Groupthink as a factor in the seemingly tight circle of foreign policy decision making within Ford’s administration.

Mayaguez, Belief Systems Theory and Groupthink

While the Rational Actor Model and Bureaucratic Politics Models cover many aspects of the reaction to the capture of the Mayaguez, they both fail to give a full explanation to the

²² NSC Meeting, May 14, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 – 27: 6. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750514.pdf>

²³ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston, 1971), p. 173.

reaction of the Ford administration. Belief Systems Theory, as put forward by Chris Lamb is possibly the best overall model in terms of explaining the decision making process, although that model in itself would be sorely lacking if it were not itself influenced by other theories such as the ones discussed previously in this essay. Lamb purports that the general emphasis of the four key decision makers, President Ford, Kissinger, Schlesinger and Brent Scowcroft (Deputy National Security Affairs General) was a direct outgrowth of the beliefs and values held by them²⁴. Belief Systems Theory is a model that examines the actual beliefs that the various actors in a decision making system tend to hold. While this can appear to be a very ambiguous method of examining a decision with it perhaps not being as scientific an approach as the Bureaucratic Politics Model, the evidence that Chris Lamb outlines correlates strongly with the NSC meetings during which the crisis was discussed and the major decisions made. Kissinger never outlined support for a diplomatic solution, nor was he particularly open to the examination of a possibility that the capture of the ship was simply bad timing by Phnom Penh in their regional spat with Vietnam. A firm reliance on military options by Kissinger to solve the crisis seems to have run through almost all of the NSC meetings with even the Defence Secretary outlining that the capture of the Mayaguez could have been the result of “bureaucratic misjudgement or a bi-product of an action against South Vietnam”²⁵. Only slightly further into this meeting was Kissinger then already proposing that sea mines be used in Cambodian ports²⁶. Belief Systems Theory however outlines that this should not ever have been a surprise and that indeed Kissinger’s reaction, along with the rest of the members of the NSC, was more than predictable.

²⁴ Chris Lamb , ‘Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis’, *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (1985), pp. 681-702: 683.

²⁵ NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 -15: 4. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750512.pdf>

²⁶ NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 -15: 7. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750512.pdf>

As has been discussed earlier the Mayaguez incident was seen as a chance for Washington to reassert its power and confidence on the world stage. The fall of Saigon proved to the world that the US could indeed be beaten in battle and it lay down a marker for further revolutions in third-world countries where revolutionaries were given confidence by the American will to avoid another 'Vietnam'. Kissinger, Ford, Rockefeller and Schlesinger were all believers in the Domino Theory, even after it had come to be severely discredited in the early seventies and it is with this in mind that these men's reactions can be viewed along several tracks within the Belief Systems Theory. Kissinger had argued that "letting Vietnam and Cambodia go down the tubes would have serious repercussions for our credibility"²⁷. He had fervently believed, along with Ford, that with further US support for South Vietnam US credibility could have been saved. Ford, for his part, had habitually voted for defence spending while in Congress and he had also voted against ending the bombing of Cambodia and against the War Powers Resolution²⁸. Schlesinger and Rockefeller were of the same Cold War mould and as such then it is no surprise that both men also supported military intervention in the Mayaguez Incident although it must be noted that Schlesinger, even as a head of the country's military establishment, was not as supportive of military moves as the others. It would be incorrect to ignore the differences that did indeed exist between the President and Kissinger himself however as to do so would not allow a full explanation of the reaction to the crisis through Belief Systems Theory. The actual problem was that a ship with US crew members on board had been taken captive by the new Cambodian government but in the first NSC meeting called to discuss the crisis Kissinger immediately expanded the crisis to become one of credibility mentioning that the matter of the crew's lives was not the main

²⁷ Chris Lamb, 'Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis', *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (1985), pp. 681-702: 684.

²⁸ Chris Lamb, 'Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis', *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (1985), pp. 681-702: 683.

concern in the crisis. However this clashed with Ford's orders for the Air Force not to fire on a Cambodian fishing boat believed to have Caucasians on board²⁹. While this shows up some differences between the two men, differences which culminated in the loss of Kissinger's position as National Security Advisor in November 1975³⁰, there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Ford never wanted a military option to be pursued in ending crisis. While it would be easy to say that the Belief Systems Theory does not apply due to the differences between the actors and the subsequent affects that these differences may have had on decision making, careful examination of the overall scheme contends that indeed the theory does apply. Kissinger's firm belief in the rebuilding of American credibility manifested itself in his own reaction to this crisis and President Ford's ire at the cancelling of the final B-52 bombing run on the Cambodian mainland (possibly cancelled by Schlesinger against the President's wishes) shows up his own militarism.

These various differences in the men's decisions and lines of thought show that the phenomenon of Groupthink is not something that was all too strong in this crisis situation. Paul't Hart outlines that Groupthink takes precedent when "group members have come to value the group (and being part of fit) more highly than anything else...this causes them to strive for a quick...unanimity on issues..."³¹. On May 13 as the NSC met to plan out its military options in order to be prepared for a strike, Schlesinger and Director of Central Intelligence, William Colby, warned that the Cambodians could kill the American crew members if cornered³². This was just one more showing of, while not dissent, then certainly

²⁹ Chris Lamb , 'Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis', *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (1985), pp. 681-702: 689.

³⁰ Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, 'The Mayaguez incident as an epilogue to the Vietnam War and its reflection of the post-Vietnam political equilibrium in Southeast-Asia', *Cold War History* 3 (2005), 337 – 367: 339.

³¹ Paul't Hart, 'Irving L. Janis' Victims of Groupthink', *Political Psychology* 2 (1991), pp. 247 – 278: 247.

³² NSC Meeting, May 13, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 – 17: 10. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750513.pdf>

deviations from the dominant thought processes as to outline the lack of Groupthink among the key actors. However Schlesinger's assumed cancellation of the final bombing run on Cambodia was indeed dissent – if Groupthink had been a factor the President's wishes for this bombing run to continue unabated would have been realised. In saying this however it must be acknowledged that despite the various deviations, the key actors within the NSC did share the same beliefs and that is why Belief Systems Theory should certainly take precedent over Groupthink in the analysis of decision making in this crisis.

Mayaguez and Organisational Process Model

A combination of the Rational Actor Model, Bureaucratic Politics Model and Belief Systems Theory probably bring about the best analytical framework for viewing the decisions made during the capture of the SS Mayaguez. However the Organisational Process Model can contribute to this debate in certain meaningful ways because as Allison writes, “the overriding fact of large organisations is their size prevents any single central authority from making all important decisions”³³. With regards to the decisions made during the crisis, most resided solely with the National Security Council and this immediately weakens any application that the Organisational Process Model may have had on the decision making process. There were certain instances throughout the higher level decisions-making process during which the model would apply, primarily on military matters and perhaps most especially to some delays in communications between the NSC and the situation ‘on the ground’ with President Ford complaining of time lags in the May 13 NSC meeting³⁴. Despite their existence however these time lags did not seem to have any effects on the decisions

³³ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston, 1971), p. 80.

³⁴ NSC Meeting, May 13, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 – 17: 7. Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/750513.pdf>

made. When aircraft were being organised to sink some of the Cambodian ships there were problems raised with them being launched from Thailand which may indeed have influenced the thinking of some on the NSC. Kissinger predicted that the Thai government would not like if the US was to use its bases to attack Cambodia and that Congress would force a vote on a recommendation to withdraw forces from Thailand³⁵. The possibility of certain Standard Operating Procedures among the military and their influencing of decisions should be entertained but from the meeting reports it seems that SOP's had a very limited role to play in the actual decision making process itself. However Standard Operating Procedures did play a role in Washington's communications with the new government in Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge regime did not have diplomatic relations with any country at the time, except for some contact with China. US State Department SOP would dictate that messages passed to another government go through the local embassy but with the Mayaguez Incident this could not be the case. This is not an excuse for the lack of will that Secretary of State Kissinger, in particular, showed for negotiations but it does show that the Organisational Process Model is not completely irrelevant to this crisis.

Conclusion

The Mayaguez Incident was not a typical foreign policy crisis issue. The actual incident centred around a ship and the crew members of that ship, some of whom were American but due to the context of the time and the decisions made by certain people it became a much larger issue than it perhaps should have as Vice President Rockefeller and Henry Kissinger continually pushed for a violent response in order to shore up American

³⁵ NSC Meeting, May 13, 1975, *Gerald R. Ford Library* (online), pp. 1 – 23: 23 Available: <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/LIBRARY/document/nscmin/7505132.pdf>

credibility which had been damaged severely just a fortnight previous. This was proved true due to the fact that the NSC authorized the launching of strikes and military force even after the crew and the ship had both been released by Cambodian authorities. In order for the US decision to be understood correctly it is important to realise the context and the issue of credibility as being central to American Foreign Policy but it should also be remembered that Ford's polling levels that year were quite low and "there was little doubt that the White House saw Mayaguez as the...final lap of a campaign to regain respect and confidence at home"³⁶. From a political science perspective the Rational Actor Model combined with the Belief Systems Model probably garner the most complete explanation for the decisions taken while certain facets can be explained best by using the Bureaucratic Politics Model. As a state the US needed to reassert its confidence on a global scale and as a rational actor then it used the situation at hand in order to bring about this goal. With other actors in the White House, Pentagon and Congress however perhaps the situation would have been very different for as both the Organisational Process Model and Bureaucratic Politics Model teach, the state is rarely a unified actor in and of itself. With this in mind then perhaps the Belief Systems Theory is the paramount theoretical explanation for the actions taken by those within the National Security Councils. These were actions that were taken in the name of US credibility but of which killed more people than were actually rescued in the US military effort. Perhaps this was a fitting metaphor however, that the US was still willing to pay any price in order to retain its role as a reliable ally and feared superpower.

³⁶ Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, 'The Mayaguez incident as an epilogue to the Vietnam War and its reflection of the post-Vietnam political equilibrium in Southeast-Asia', *Cold War History* 3 (2005), 337 – 367: 341.

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