

NSA review
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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

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WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

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23 MAY 1975

The President
The White House
Washington, D. C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Your memo of 18 May concerning the rescue of the SS Mayaguez and its crew asked for any observations or suggestions which I believe might contribute to the improvement of the ability of the National Security Council machinery -- of which the intelligence community is a part -- to deal effectively with crisis situations. Attached to this letter is a paper which examines some of this machinery and suggests several ways to help clarify its procedures and correct its problems.

The Washington intelligence community consists of a number of inter-connected and interdependent organizations. During fast-breaking crises, the ability of all parts of this structure to function almost automatically is what is likely to determine the quality of support to you. To make sure that we can indeed function in this way, we seek constantly to improve both systems and procedures. There is always more to do, and the human aspects of the problem in particular need constant attention. But I believe the basic system is essentially sound, even though fine tuning and some repairs will always be required.

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Specifically, concerning the Mayaguez incident, it is noteworthy that the equipment, the technical systems, and the procedures which link the various warning, communications, and command responsibilities

WARNING NOTICE
SENSITIVE INTELLIGENCE SOURCES
AND METHODS INVOLVED

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apparently functioned quite well. The few "disconnects" in the overall system which we have identified seem to have been the consequence of human errors. Much the same can be said, I think, about problems encountered in past crises as well.

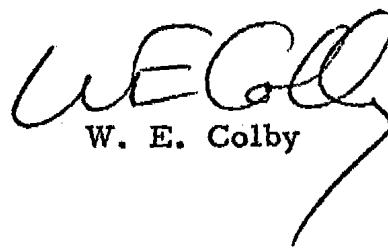
Not all the actions and decisions which occurred at the outset of the Mayaguez crisis in the various intelligence and operations centers conformed to established procedures. As a result, we are reemphasizing the need for adherence to existing procedures which seek to ensure effective intra- and interagency communications. We are also actively searching for ways to help to improve the Government's procedures for the initiation, coordination, and transmission of notices and special warnings to mariners -- procedures which were not at all clear during the Mayaguez incident.

We have, I think, the ability to cope with two crises in two geographically separated areas, e.g., the mid-March Vietnam/Cambodia and Arab/Israeli concerns. But the Mayaguez incident occurred in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Vietnam and Cambodia and thus in effect tested our ability to contend with two major crises simultaneously in one compartment of our responsibilities (Southeast Asia). This tended to overload the human part of the system. This overload, in turn, posed problems for the intelligence community and other components of the Government as well.

On one subject of personal interest to you, Mr. President, I would like to undertake a special responsibility. I will henceforth confirm specifically that the White House Situation Room will inform you of a matter I think should be called immediately to your attention. I will ensure the same with respect to the other National Security Council members. This will undoubtedly be redundant in most cases, but I believe it a necessary step to ensure against future delay.

I welcome this opportunity to make these observations to you. I hope that our concentration on applying the lessons learned from the Mayaguez incident and other recent crises will enable us to perform the preventive maintenance needed to assure the highest standards of performance.

Respectfully,



W. E. Colby

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SUMMARY

1. The review of intelligence warning and alerting procedures and crisis management practices incident to the Mayaguez affair confirms that the basic and key ingredients of U. S. National Security Council machinery and intelligence community support functioned as they are supposed to. Events in the Gulf of Thailand in the period immediately preceding the seizure of the Mayaguez were noted by the intelligence community. However, these events did not seem at the time to be of sufficient intensity or of sufficiently clear significance to trigger the established alert and warning mechanisms. It is also true that the very early time of day the first reports of the attack on the Mayaguez were received, together with the fragmentary nature of the initial messages, contributed to a minor delay in the notification of principals. But this initial delay was quickly overcome, and the intelligence support machinery then moved into high gear and remained there throughout the crisis.

* * * * *

BACKGROUND

2. Detailed and comprehensive reports on the intelligence community's actions vis-a-vis the Mayaguez affair have already been provided in response to item (b) of the President's memorandum of 18 May. This paper addresses item (c) of that memorandum: "Any observations or suggestions which you consider would contribute to improvement of the ability of the National Security Council machinery to deal effectively with crisis situations."

3. The National Security Council machinery consists of the staffs and organizations supporting the NSC members and, of course, includes the military and intelligence advisers to the NSC. Through the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), in his role as Chairman of the United States Intelligence Board (USIB), those elements of the Government responsible for the collection, analysis, and production of foreign intelligence are brought into coordinated support of the NSC structure. The principal elements of this foreign intelligence community are the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the National Security Agency (NSA), the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), and the coordinating and management structure of the Office of the DCI. There are several other components of this basic structure, such as the intelligence organizations of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, which make major contributions to the overall effort.

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4. Closely associated with the operations of the foreign intelligence community, and integrated into the communications and warning procedures of the community, are the White House Situation Room, the State Department Operations Center, and the elements of the J-3 of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the National Military Command Center (NMCC). The 24-hour centers of the seven organizations listed above -- CIA, DIA, NSA, State INR, NMCC, State Operations Center, and the White House Situation Room -- are the primary centers in Washington operating in full-time, direct support of the National Security Council. There are as many as 22 additional centers (each manned on a 24-hour basis) in various governmental organizations throughout the Washington, D. C. area which could, and sometimes do, contribute to the support of the NSC. Outside the Washington area there are scores of 24-hour centers, primarily in the worldwide military command structure, which also can and do support the National Command Authorities through the J-3 organization of the JCS which sits in the NMCC.

5. The total of all these intelligence and warning operations -- in Washington, throughout the United States, and worldwide -- make up what some refer to as the "National Nervous System." This is always active and can be stimulated to warn of or respond to any "crisis" situation.

CRITIC MESSAGES

6. Key elements in the flow of information to and through the intelligence community are (a) the United States Critical Communications (CRITICOM) system, and (b) the CRITIC messages that are relayed through CRITICOM -- at highest precedence -- to the principal Washington intelligence centers*.

*The purpose of a CRITIC message is to inform the highest authorities of the Government within 10 minutes of any event in the world which seems to seriously threaten U. S. interests or indicates an impending attack on the U. S. or its forces. The system stipulates that other events of major concern to the U. S. are to be conveyed to the highest Government authorities within 20 minutes. The system can transmit messages from anywhere in the world to Washington and disseminate them to the principal intelligence centers here and overseas within these stipulated times. The system has been in use for many years, is upgraded continually, and is tested regularly to ensure that it functions within specifications.

7. The CRITIC message alerting the Washington area to the Mayaguez seizure was received by this means. The U. S. Embassy in Jakarta originated the initial message [redacted] Four messages were received in Washington between 0512 and 0626 EDT on 12 May and all were delivered to all CRITIC alert centers within minutes of their receipt.

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8. At this point human judgment came into play. The time of day the first report on the Mayaguez was received (0512 EDT) and the fragmentary nature of that message led watch officers to pause briefly before notifying their principals. While the results of this minor delay in informing senior level officials can now be seen as inconsequential, there do seem to have been errors of judgment in the initial handling of the CRITIC.

INTERNETTING

9. As a result of warning deficiencies identified after the 1973 Middle East War, the DCI, through the Intelligence Community Staff, designed and implemented an internetting capability for the principal Washington area intelligence and operations centers. Known as the National Operations and Intelligence Watch Officers Network (NOIWON), this system provides for simultaneous and secure conferencing among the seven key centers, CIA, DIA, NSA, State INR, State Operations Center, J-3 NMCC and the White House Situation Room. In addition to providing for the exchange of evaluation among watch officers, the net also permits any one center to advise the others of actions taken. NOIWON procedures specifically require that any center which notifies the Government official for which it is responsible should immediately inform the other centers of this fact. NOIWON was never activated and was not utilized during the early morning of 12 May; all concerned now agree that it should have been.

ANALYSIS AND WARNING

10. In the early days of May, the focus of that part of the intelligence community interested in Southeast Asia was on the recent fall of Cambodia, the activities and policies of the communists in Vietnam, and various developments in Laos. The intelligence operations officers, analysts, and managers (both in the field and in Washington) simply failed to alert NSC policy levels of yet another critical event in Indochina.

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11. Thus, as information on Cambodian naval actions in the Gulf of Thailand became known during early May, there was little awareness that an ominous pattern might be forming here.

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Much of the Cambodian activity seemed concerned with local rivalries directed against Vietnamese refugees. The instances involving foreign merchant ships did not then appear to be serious, and did not trigger any prior alerting action beyond some circulation or repetition of the raw reports mentioned above. There was no warning notice to U. S. merchant shipping. It has since been established that the Hydrographic Center of the Defense Mapping Agency, which has responsibility for issuing Maritime Advisories, had no links to the intelligence community and thus was not a recipient of information concerning developments in the Gulf of Thailand.

12. When the Mayaguez was seized by the Cambodians, however, the alerting mechanisms of the intelligence community worked well. [redacted] correctly placed the first emergency radio message from the ship into the CRITIC system. The automatic features of the system thereafter ensured immediate delivery to Washington and simultaneous dissemination to all intelligence and operations centers within minutes, as stipulated.

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SUPPORT TO OPERATIONS

13. Upon initiation of NSC action on 12 May to plan for rescue of the Mayaguez, the intelligence community was already mobilized to provide operational support, having been triggered by the early-morning CRITIC and follow-up reports. Tactical reconnaissance flights had been ordered, and all available resources were focusing on ways to determine the location and status of the ship and crew, Cambodian actions and intentions, and other pertinent information about enemy forces and the area of operations. Intelligence support units were activated and positioned to provide combat support in the form of photo and visual reconnaissance [redacted]

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14. In support of the NSC, the NMCC and the intelligence community elements in Washington provided a steady flow of written information, briefings, and advice to decision-makers and operational planners.

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The flow of intelligence information to and from the various operational elements was both voluminous and timely.

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The Defense Intelligence Agency supported both policy makers in Washington and overseas operational commanders. The entire range of resources available to the intelligence community was utilized in the overall effort.

15. The intelligence briefings provided the National Security Council during the Mayaguez affair were of high quality and covered the essential items bearing on the problem. These briefings alerted the NSC to the salient aspects of the situation and focused on the key questions -- though they could not in all instances offer complete answers. Early on, for example, they addressed the question of what forces were available to the Cambodian Communists which could be used against any U. S. effort to rescue the Mayaguez and its crew.

16. During this period, the intelligence community also covered the reactions of other countries to the Mayaguez affair. Much of the information concerning this aspect of the problem came from normal and well-established sources in the field. [] the Department of State [] alerted their field elements to concentrate on reporting host country reactions. While generally meeting needs, this reporting at times inevitably lagged behind fast-breaking developments in the Gulf of Thailand.

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COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

17. As with all such situations, there were activities and procedures which performed well and worked as intended, and there were other areas where weaknesses or shortcomings were detected and where corrective action is indicated. Elements that worked especially well include:

- The CRITICOM system, which delivered CRITIC messages from remote areas to Washington in the prescribed time.

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- Intelligence research, analysis, and reporting in support of the decision-making and operational planning processes at the NSC and NMCC levels.

- Timely and secure communications between Washington, D. C., military intelligence centers and the headquarters of operational commands overseas, including transmission of reconnaissance photography from the operating area to Washington.

- The National Intelligence Officer (NIO) system which performed an invaluable service to the DCI and the NSC throughout the crisis, largely through well-functioning intelligence community coordination machinery established long before the crisis by the NIO for South and Southeast Asia.

18. Potential problem areas which were brought into sharper focus by this review of responsibilities and procedures are addressed below:

- Inability to track and locate all U. S. merchant ships at sea at any given time. Although this type of detailed information is not necessary as a prerequisite to the issuance of a general maritime warning, experience has shown that such information often would have been desirable and useful. At present, no single U. S. Government agency has the responsibility (or the capability) for continuous monitoring or reporting on the positions of U. S. civilian ships. The nature of commercial maritime activity makes this a complex and monumental problem. The Director of Naval Intelligence and the Chief of Naval Operations are actively seeking solutions to this problem.

- Inadequacies in existing procedures for developing, coordinating, and issuing special warnings and notices to mariners. The established mechanism works very well in all cases involving warnings to mariners of purely navigational hazards. The system works less well when political or military issues are involved -- as was the case with the Mayaguez. Part of the problem involves

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interagency coordination and the need for a timely flow of information from intelligence elements to those in the Government concerned with issuing maritime advisories. The imperative for such advisories is often contained in sensitive intelligence reports, but the warnings must be unclassified in order to reach all U. S. shipping through open broadcasts. Although more work needs to be done to correct specific deficiencies, progress is already being made. All members of the United States Intelligence Board, for example, now know which offices and procedures are involved in the maritime advisory process, and appropriate intelligence principals have taken steps to insure closer links between their agencies and the maritime affairs offices. Additionally, the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency and the Director of Naval Intelligence are jointly examining the issues and will develop procedures to improve our ability to issue timely warnings to merchant vessels. One possible alternative involves a much larger role for the Naval Ocean Surveillance Information Center (NOSIC).

- Complications in the exchange of policy, intelligence, and operational information among the respective agencies actively supporting the NSC. At times during the Mayaguez affair, some agencies of the U. S. intelligence community were not aware of policy options under consideration or the military actions in progress. Some of those members of the community who were privy to this information were prohibited from sharing their knowledge by more senior officials in the policy and operational elements of their respective organizations. This resulted in some confusion and uncertainty within the intelligence community and, for at least some brief periods, added a degree of obliqueness to the information support that was provided. A more open dialogue between the operational planners and the intelligence community would have resulted in a more pertinent intelligence contribution to the rescue operations. This is not a new or unusual problem; it stems from the fact that planners and force commanders sometimes do not appreciate the role and potential contribution of intelligence, and are overly concerned with protecting the secrecy of options being considered.

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A related problem is the tendency, as time narrows in a crisis, to emphasize vertical reporting at the expense of lateral passage of information. The intelligence community for its part will continue to refine operational procedures which will accommodate the need for lateral communication not only in normal situations but also in crisis periods.

Another matter of concern is the extensive use during crises of non-record (telephone) communications to issue directives and solicit information. Too often the information so exchanged remains known only to the callers and frequently cannot be verified by others. This acts to inhibit effective management and deserves continuing attention.

- The lack of a time-sensitive satellite imaging collection system. Existing satellite systems which provide photographic coverage of geographic areas of interest to the United States are not sufficiently flexible to permit quick recovery of selected film strips. The satellite presently in orbit passed over the appropriate area in the Gulf of Thailand [] before the Mayaguez seizure, but it was not programmed to photograph that area. The satellite's orbit did not permit access to the area again []. It did then photograph the area; but the film of this coverage will not be available for analysis until 7 June.

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19. Our basic conclusion is that the intelligence community directly supporting the National Security Council machinery is in the main properly designed and organized to handle crises of major and minor proportions. To be sure each new crisis brings with it some new problems, reminders of old problems, and lessons for the future. Recognizing this will help us to improve our performance in the future. But the system as a whole is sound, and those in it fully understand the mission to provide maximum support to the NSC.

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