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MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE/EXCLUSIVELY EYES ONLY (XGDS)

DECLASSIFIED

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MR # 08-21-#60

NSC letter 4/1/09

By del HARA, Date 8/1/12

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT

FROM: HENRY A. KISSINGER

SUBJECT: Evaluation of the Performance of Our National Security Mechanism in the Rescue of the SS Mayaguez and Its Crew

On May 18 you sent memoranda (Tab A) to the Secretaries of State and Defense and to the Director of Central Intelligence instructing them to provide you with the following papers relating to the seizure and recovery of the Mayaguez: (1) a detailed chronology; (2) a copy of each verbal and written order; and (3) any observations or suggestions on the improvement of our National Security Council machinery.

You also instructed me (Tab B) to provide copies of your orders from NSC meetings and to assemble these reports and prepare a consolidated evaluation report for you.

All of the papers you requested have been assembled and a thorough analysis of our national security mechanisms and procedures have been carried out. The chronologies and copies of all orders issued by the various agencies are provided as separate annexes.

The observations and suggestions for improvement of the NSC system submitted by Bill Colby and Jim Schlesinger are attached at Tabs C and D.

As you instructed, I have prepared a consolidated evaluation of the entire national security performance. This analysis has focused on the following subjects which I believe are the key areas of concern, each of which will be discussed in detail below:

-- The performance of the Intelligence Community in alerting Washington to this crisis and in providing additional information as the situation developed, and an assessment of the quality of this information.

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-- The responsiveness of the various bureaucracies to directives from you with particular emphasis on rapidity and completeness of implementation.

- -- The effectiveness of our communications system, the ability of the White House to monitor and control activities of the elements of the government, and coordination among these elements.

At the conclusion of the paper are a number of recommendations for improving this mechanism. In our analysis we have tried to keep in mind that, by the standards of military and diplomatic operations, the Mayaguez incident was relatively simple. It occurred in one particular spot. It required only the most simple coordination between our political and military efforts. It required none of the inter-theater coordination that would be demanded in more complex and more widespread crises. It required little coordination between diplomatic and military efforts. Last but not least, it required relatively little inter-allied coordination.

Because of the nature of the operation, this review will focus primarily on the intelligence and military aspects.

A. THE PERFORMANCE OF THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY IN  
ALERTING THE GOVERNMENT TO THE CRISIS

The Alert System

You complained during the initial NSC meeting that you were not informed promptly of this incident. Other senior officers within the government had similar complaints. I did not receive word of it until my 8:00 a.m. briefing, five hours after the seizure began and almost three hours after the first word of it reached Washington. The Acting Chairman of the JCS was also not informed until approximately that same time.

The fault for this does not lie with our basic crisis reporting system which is known as Critic. The initial information was in Washington quickly. Rather, the difficulty lay with the human element of the system.

It is clear that we were not informed until a relatively late hour because the information available was incomplete and unconfirmed. Situation Room watch officers and other duty officers are understandably reluctant to bring such matters to your or my attention without more details because all too often Critic messages later prove to be inaccurate. The basic instinct of



the watch officer is to get more details and confirm the information before bringing it to our attention. This is basically a sound approach. Nonetheless, it does seem that in this case they waited too long in apprising us of this incident. Moreover, even if they did not provide the information directly to us or other principals, they should have passed it to senior staff members of the NSC, State and Defense. Those officials could have evaluated it and decided whether higher notification was required.

It is therefore my recommendation that we institute the following procedures to insure that you will always be alerted to real crises in as timely a fashion as possible:

-- Upon receipt of all Critic messages, all situation rooms will alert a designated senior official to its existence. At the White House this would be the appropriate Senior Staff Member of the NSC Staff. This officer would have the responsibility of evaluating the report and deciding whether it should be brought to either Brent Scowcroft's or my attention. We would then review it to see if it is significant enough to alert you. At State and Defense the appropriate Deputy Assistant Secretary or Assistant Secretary will be called.

-- Upon receipt of all Critic messages, the situation room receiving it (either CIA, State, Defense, White House, or NSA) will alert all other situation rooms and operation centers to its existence. This will insure that no agency is left unaware of the message.

#### Information and Intelligence Gathering

Our initial information on the seizure of the ship was incomplete and it was not until approximately 24 hours after the ship was seized that we were receiving a constant flow of reliable intelligence. The most glaring example of misinformation was the continuous reporting we received that the ship was being towed to the port of Kompong Som. Both Bill Colby and Jim Schlesinger told you at the May 12 NSC meeting that the ship would soon be in that port. Actually, the very sketchy data we had at that time did point to that conclusion. However, somewhere in the process the assumptions based on this tenuous information were converted into a pretense of hard fact. Based on these "factual" briefings, the White House issued a statement which said the ship had been "forced... to the port of Kompong Som." More important, since it was believed the ship had been moved, the NSC did not immediately consider options to keep the vessel where it was. As





we know now, the ship never entered the port or even came near it. This again was a human error, not a technical one.

The lesson of this is that in the initial hours of a crisis our information may be uncertain and therefore there is a great need to subject it to rigorous evaluation. I believe this can be accomplished within the existing framework of the NSC without any major procedural changes. It will require, however, a renewed effort by the entire Intelligence Community and the NSC Staff to convey the information in as accurate a form as possible.

Aside from this particular case, our intelligence gathering apparatus worked well, particularly the technical systems involved. Bill Colby shares this view. Once alerted to the crisis, the entire Intelligence Community moved into action to gather additional information. The following actions had been routinely initiated before even you or I knew of the crisis: The Defense Department ordered reconnaissance aircraft to begin a search for the ship; the National Security Agency was asked to provide communications intelligence relevant to the incident; and the Naval Ocean Surveillance Information Center was asked to provide information on Cambodian ships in the area and on all shipping in the Gulf of Thailand. Shortly thereafter, overhead satellites were alerted to begin photo coverage and Navy ships in the area were ordered to begin a search.

Nevertheless, it must still be pointed out that even with all of this movement and dedication of intelligence assets, we still did not make a positive identification of the ship and definitely locate it until 9:16 p.m. (EDT) on May 12, 18 hours after it was seized and approximately 13 hours after the Intelligence Community responded. Moreover, for another six hours, we were still uncertain as to where the ship was going and had additional incorrect reports that it was being moved into Kompong Som.

Such uncertainty is probably endemic to all crisis situations, although in this case it was probably prolonged by the fact that it was nighttime in Cambodia when our search began and that bad weather made visual reconnaissance difficult.

#### The Satellite System

An additional intelligence gathering problem that Bill Colby has pointed out is 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. Our satellite passed over the Gulf of Thailand on May 11, a day 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 until May 20. It did then photograph the area; but the film of this coverage was not available for analysis until June 7. Technical improvements under development will enhance our capability to collect timely imagery during crises and should perform well in crises of the Mayaguez character.

Prior Data That Might Have Alerted Us

A final question centers around whether events in the days prior to the Mayaguez should have alerted us to the danger in the area.

It has been suggested that the Intelligence Community should have anticipated the seizure of the Mayaguez because of the Cambodian Communist seizure of other shipping in that area during the week prior to May 12. It is also argued that the government was remiss in not providing a warning to mariners of this situation.

We received a number of sensitive intelligence reports during the period May 7-9 indicating that vessels were being captured. However, in all cases but one, the vessels captured were small boats belonging to Thai or Vietnamese fisherman. In the one case where a Panamanian ship was seized, it was detained for only a short time and released. The local Thai and Vietnamese boats, however, were not released and therefore it seemed safe to conclude that the intent of the Khmer Communists was not to capture international shipping but to assert sovereignty over some off-shore islands by denying use of these islands to Thai and Vietnamese. The seizure of these small fishing boats seemed unrelated to international shipping. Therefore, even though Bill Colby has accepted some blame for this in his memorandum, I do not believe that we were remiss in not issuing a warning to mariners.

However, we were vulnerable in one other area. As Bill Colby pointed out, we did not have a system by which the Intelligence Community could pass information to the offices which issue such warnings if we had wanted to issue one. Colby has taken steps to correct this. 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.

## B. EXECUTION OF PRESIDENTIAL DECISIONS

### Defense Department Orders to Our Forces

A number of events during the operation led us to question whether your orders and directives were being expediently and completely carried out. These questions centered principally around Defense Department operations. In two specific instances you questioned whether Defense had carried out your instructions:

-- First, at the NSC meeting on the evening of May 13, you asked why an order you had given earlier that morning to stop all boats from leaving Koh Tang Island had not been sent out until 3:30 in the afternoon. Defense's answer was that the message had been sent orally in the morning and repeated on paper for the record in the afternoon.

-- Second, in the NSC meeting of May 14, you asked Defense why the USS Holt was not positioned between Koh Tang and the mainland to interdict shipping as you had been led to believe it would be. Defense replied that they did not recall any specific instructions to carry this out.

An additional question concerns the clear intent in your orders in the May 14 NSC meeting that heavy air strikes be conducted against Kompong Som during the rescue operation and that they should continue until we ordered otherwise. These strikes had an important political as well as military purpose. Defense acknowledged this at that meeting and General Jones told you that about 70 percent of the Coral Sea's planes (i. e., 35 aircraft) would hit that target. You also were told that the initial strike was to be a heavy one, which was consistent with your political intent. In fact, however, only 15 of the Coral Sea's planes were directed against Kompong Som during the entire operation and none of those in the first wave released their ordnance. Moreover, some planes in the second wave were diverted to support operations on the island prior to reaching Kompong Som.





These three incidents indicate that your instructions were incompletely carried out and raise a serious question as to whether your orders were misunderstood, disregarded or intentionally frustrated.

After a detailed and thorough NSC Staff review of all the orders given at the NSC meeting, the discussion at those meetings, messages sent to implement those orders and the operational log books kept at the Pentagon, I have concluded that there was no intentional effort to frustrate or disregard your decisions. However, this study did reveal that a serious problem exists regarding the transmission and implementation of NSC decisions. It also suggests that in future crises the NSC should, if there is time, have written options to discuss.

For major policy decisions, such as those to "rescue the ship," and "isolate the island," there is less of a problem. The Defense Department and all other agencies immediately implemented such orders, though -- as you recall from our discussion at the NSC meeting on the evening of May 13 -- there was some confusion about what to do if Americans were in the boats. In this regard I have determined that General Jones was correct when he told you that Defense had immediately carried out your instruction on May 13 to interdict all boats leaving Koh Tang. The message you saw with a time of 3:30 p.m. was a confirmation copy. After you gave the order at the NSC meeting, the JCS representatives immediately telephoned your instructions to their subordinate commands. A written confirmation was sent later which has a date and time on it much later than the actual telephone transmission.

#### Political Subtleties

While your general orders were obeyed, other decisions which involved certain subtleties of thought and intention as well as political nuances were not fully implemented. The case of the positioning of the Holt and the bombing of Kompong Som are examples. It is clear that at some point many of these critical but somewhat intangible nuances of decisions are lost. From the material available, it is not possible to determine accurately whether this happens because the political intent is not fully clarified, understood and agreed to at the meeting, because the military representatives at the meeting do not convey these subtleties to the lower echelons, or because translation to written tactical military operation orders failed to articulate such concepts. I believe there are elements of all three. There is probably a need for more precision of language in reporting decisions reached at these meetings and for conveying all of your instructions.





But with this, it still may be difficult to convey these subtleties to military commanders in far off places. Jim Schlesinger makes the point that military operation orders have to be written to allow the on-the-spot commander a great latitude of action. He must be able to respond to a changing situation by shifting assets and reordering priorities. The orders for the recovery of the Mayaguez did this. For example, they indicated that planes from the Coral Sea were authorized to strike both Kompong Som and Koh Tang. The area commander had the authority to use them as he saw fit.

At the NSC meeting, on the other hand, we did not focus on the latitude given the on-the-spot commander, but only discussed using the Coral Sea aircraft to hit Kompong Som. As the operation developed, the area commander, who knew nothing of our deliberations or our political objective, exercised his option to divert strikes away from Kompong Som to support the Marines who were pinned down on Koh Tang. Since he knew nothing of the political nuances we had in mind, his actions seemed fully justified to him.

Nor did the failure of the first wave of Coral Sea planes to bomb Kompong Som apparently indicate a desire to frustrate your intent. Ironically, it was probably caused by military sensitivity to one political aspect of the operation which was made very clear: the necessity to avoid striking any ships that were not clearly identified as Cambodian. This admonition was repeated to the pilots and area commander several times, even as the strike aircraft circled the port selecting targets. Moreover, the order was identified as coming from the White House. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that one reason the pilots did not release their ordnance was for fear of violating a White House command and not in disregard for White House wishes.

The positioning of the Holt again emphasizes this problem. The Defense representatives present at the NSC meeting either did not fully understand your intent or, in transmitting the order, permitted a local commander's preference for concealment to over-ride your wish to prevent movement of our vessel. The problem is one of adequate understanding and accurate transmission of information.

To ensure that this problem does not reoccur, I recommend the following:

-- At the end of any NSC meeting, we should summarize your instructions orally to the attendees, so that your orders and your purpose are clear.





-- As a possible alternative to this and depending on the time available, we would arrange that, immediately following all NSC meetings, your orders as well as any pertinent understandings and assurances will be written up by an NSC staff member. They will then be shown to you for your approval, following which they will be transmitted to those tasked with implementing them.

-- All agencies implementing your instructions will be required to provide written verbatim copies of these orders to Brent Scowcroft who will review them to insure that the full intent of your instructions are included.

These steps should allow us to ensure that the full meaning and intention of Presidential directives is conveyed to action echelons.

C. EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNICATIONS: WHITE HOUSE ABILITY TO MONITOR AND CONTROL GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS AND COORDINATION WITHIN THE BUREAUCRACY

You can only control and monitor the government apparatus if your orders are transmitted rapidly and if you are able to obtain quick information on the status of operations. From our analysis, we have concluded that some aspects of this communication system work very well and others need improvement.

Our vertical communications are extremely good. Your orders can be quickly transmitted down the chain of command to tactical military units or to other action elements. Our system allows very rapid movement of this type of message. The best example of this was your decision to suspend temporarily the bombing of Kompong Som on the evening of May 14 following the reception of a message from the Cambodian authorities. You gave that order at approximately 8:25 p.m. (EDT). By 8:26 the National Military Command Center (NMCC) received the order from my office. It was immediately passed to the Pacific Command in Hawaii which in turn informed the area commander. By 8:31 word was received in Washington confirming that the air strikes had been halted. The pilots probably got the word at 8:28 or 8:29. When it is considered that this information, of necessity, changed hands five times, this rapid implementation seems very good. In effect, you had complete and almost instantaneous control over tactical aircraft and naval units located half way around the world.





However, there is one aspect of this vertical communication system with which I am not satisfied. While your orders are transmitted down the system very quickly, your ability to bring information up the system is not as good. Your ability to get feedback on your orders and to obtain collateral information about the operation in progress is limited.

Without complete and detailed information at your fingertips, you cannot possibly know whether the operation is being carried out in full accord with your instructions. The type of information you need in this type of situation is available at the National Military Command Center (NMCC) in the Pentagon in the form of charts, maps, radio messages, etc. At present, the only way this can be conveyed to you is over the phone, usually through a member of our staff. This is obviously a slow and incomplete process.

It is my judgment that our communication links with the NMCC need to be significantly improved to resolve this problem. What is needed is a system which allows you immediate and secure access to the totality of information available at the NMCC.

The best solution I can envision is installing a secure closed circuit television link between the White House and the NMCC and any other national operation centers you consider appropriate. Such a system would allow you to be briefed continuously by the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, other Defense representatives and other Agency heads. It would also give you access to visual aids such as maps, charts and photographs, which are extremely helpful in understanding a problem and making tactical decisions.

Moreover, this system would allow you or your representative to monitor the orders that are being given by the Pentagon to insure that they are consistent with your directives.

An additional benefit of such a system would be that it would establish an authoritative link between the White House and the Pentagon. Jim Schlesinger has pointed out the need for such a connection and stated that NMCC duty officers were at times confused because they spoke to a number of different White House representatives and were not always sure if all of them had authority to speak for you or me. Under our present arrangement, we sometimes make phone calls from your office or from mine. At other times, staff members call for us. This multiplication of phone links and





White House spokesmen has caused some uncertainty at the NMCC. A direct secure video link would overcome much of this.

It would also allow frequent informal discussions to take place between you and the principals at Defense. Jim Schlesinger has also stated in his memorandum to you that the NSC meeting system is too formalized a process to deal with crisis situations and he has recommended much more frequent and informal contact between you and your principal advisors. I do not share his judgment regarding the NSC meetings. I believe the formal NSC meeting is a necessity to ensure that all elements of the USG are moving in tandem and their activities are properly coordinated. But it would be useful to be able to supplement them if you choose to do so. The secure closed circuit TV link would allow such contacts to take place at your discretion. It is my understanding that there are still some technical and security problems with the systems now in existence. However, because of the vital role such a system could play in our national security apparatus, I believe we should give it very careful consideration.

Our horizontal communication system -- the exchange and sharing of information within the bureaucracy in Washington and with affiliated subordinate elements -- also needs improvement.

While we can pass messages over thousands of miles in seconds, there seems to be great difficulty in sending it a few blocks in Washington.

The most glaring example of this was that for a significant period of the crisis the State Department did not know what was being done militarily because it was not receiving copies of Defense Department messages ordering certain military activities around Koh Tang. For example, on May 13 while we were sinking Cambodian gunboats, the State Operations Center was not aware that authority had been granted for such action.

The White House Situation Room also had some problem because it had not received copies of certain key Defense Department messages which ordered specific operations to be carried out.

There is nothing to indicate that any message traffic is withheld intentionally to keep the White House or the State Department uninformed. Rather it seems merely to be a problem of coordination.

There are several possible remedies for this. First, during times of crisis you may wish to have an NSC Staff Member or a White House





Situation Room duty officer permanently assigned to the National Military Commander Center and the State Department Operations Center. I recommend that at least we have a man at the NMCC. This officer would be able to keep our Situation Room fully informed on all details of a problem and would insure that no messages are missed by the White House or not sent to you when they should be.

A second, possibly alternative, step would be to inform all agencies, but particularly the Defense Department, of this problem and ask them to make additional efforts to insure that all interested parties are listed as information addressees on important messages. While this would help, I do not believe it would be sufficient by itself to solve the problem, but you may wish to try this before moving to the other.

On the whole, I believe the national security mechanism worked well in this crisis. There are, however, some areas that obviously need tightening. My recommendations for improving the system are submitted below for your consideration.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

-- That the NSC establish a definite procedure whereby senior officials of each agency and at the White House are alerted upon receipt of a Critic message.

APPROVE \_\_\_\_\_

DISAPPROVE \_\_\_\_\_

-- That the NSC adopt a procedure whereby such decisions as you may wish to make at an NSC meeting are summarized orally at the end of the meeting, committed to writing immediately after that meeting, and then resubmitted to you for reconfirmation.

APPROVE \_\_\_\_\_

DISAPPROVE \_\_\_\_\_

-- That all agencies be instructed to insure that all significant messages and information items are passed to other elements of the government with a need to know. Also that they be instructed to pass all such items to the White House.

APPROVE \_\_\_\_\_

DISAPPROVE \_\_\_\_\_





-- That during times of crisis, a White House Situation Room duty officer or an NSC Staff Officer be assigned to the National Military Command Center and any other operations centers as you deem necessary, to insure a full and timely flow of information to the White House.

APPROVE \_\_\_\_\_

DISAPPROVE \_\_\_\_\_

-- That an immediate study be made of the feasibility of establishing a secure television link between the White House and the Pentagon and that a preliminary report be made to you on this subject in 30 days.

APPROVE \_\_\_\_\_

DISAPPROVE \_\_\_\_\_

