

questing his help in securing the release of the ship and her crew. I didn't really expect any results from that, so I determined that we would probably have to move militarily. But first we would wait and see.

At 3:52 on Wednesday afternoon, I convened the fourth and final meeting of the NSC. *Mayaguez* remained at anchor off Koh Tang and we had no new information as to the whereabouts of the crew. Some crewmen, we had to assume, remained aboard ship. Some may have been on the island, while others had been taken to the mainland. Our naval forces now were very close to the scene. The destroyer escort *Holt* was only a mile or so away. The destroyer *Wilson* was approaching fast, and *Coral Sea* would soon be close enough to launch air strikes on the mainland. Air Force General David Jones led off by reviewing the various options on his charts. They ranged all the way from a minimum use of force—helicoptering Marines to Koh Tang to rescue *Mayaguez* and her crew and then withdrawing them as soon as possible—to a maximum display: rescuing the ship and her crew and then “punishing” Cambodia by air strikes.

And this is where Kissinger and I disagreed with Schlesinger. Our first consideration, of course, was the recovery of the ship and her crew. But Henry and I felt that we had to do more. We didn't want the Cambodians to be in a position to reinforce Koh Tang once our attack began. We wanted them to know that we meant business, so we opted for air strikes against the mainland as well. Schlesinger agreed that our first priority should be to rescue the ship and her crew, but he was far less eager to use *Mayaguez* as an example for Asia and the world. He was concerned that our bombing plans were too extensive. There was a lull in the discussion. Then, from the back of the room, a new voice spoke up. It was Kennerly, who had been taking pictures of us for the past hour or so. Never before during a meeting of this kind had he entered the conversation; I knew he wouldn't have done so now unless what he had to say was important.

“Has anyone considered,” he asked, “that this might be the act of a local Cambodian commander who has just taken it into his own hands to halt any ship that comes by? Has anyone stopped to think that he might not have gotten his orders from Phnom Penh? If that's what has happened, you know, you can blow the whole place away and it's not gonna make any difference. Everyone here has been talk-

quest almost daily. Kissinger and I opposed so precipitous a withdrawal. (Later, I learned that Schlesinger had ordered the flight of empty or near-empty planes in and out of Saigon—just to establish for the record, I suspected, that it would not be his fault if we failed to remove all our people.) We felt that a premature evacuation could have serious consequences. Even greater panic than already existed in the South Vietnamese capital could develop, and in their bitterness at being “betrayed,” South Vietnamese troops could turn their guns on Americans. Then, too, I hadn’t given up hope that the situation could be turned around. I wanted to hear General Weyand’s report.

We met on the afternoon of April 5. The military situation, he said, was very critical, but the South Vietnamese were continuing to fight with all the resources available to them. If their efforts were to have any chance of success, they needed an additional \$722 million worth of supplies, primarily ammunition. That money wouldn’t enable them to recapture the ground they had lost, but it would be enough to let them establish a strong defense perimeter around Saigon. If they managed to stabilize the military situation, there was still hope for a political solution to the war. If that aid was not forthcoming, there was no hope at all.

Kennerly, who came in separately, was grimly pessimistic. He had refused to attend official briefings in Saigon. Instead, he had broken away from the Weyand group and gone “upcountry” to see for himself what was happening. Near Nha Trang, he had flown over a ship that had just been taken over by mutinous South Vietnamese troops, and they had fired at his helicopter. Then he had gone on to Cambodia. He was deeply upset by what he had seen there, and his photographs—of refugees at Nha Trang, of fleeing troops, of wounded children in Phnom Penh hospitals—were more revealing than any briefing I could have received. “Cambodia is gone,” he said, “and I don’t care what the generals tell you; they’re bullshitting you if they say that Vietnam has got more than three or four weeks left. There’s no question about it. It’s just not gonna last.”

Based on all of this intelligence, I decided to step up our efforts to get the refugees out. We were now confronted by such ominous military and foreign policy issues that on the evening of April 10, I addressed a joint session of Congress. Henry Kissinger had urged me to

naissance plane had spotted a fishing vessel steaming toward Koh Tang. Caucasians were on board, and they were waving white flags. Minutes later, he telephoned again. U.S.S. *Wilson* had intercepted the fishing vessel. The men waving white flags were the crew members of *Mayaguez*. I dropped the phone into its cradle and let my emotions show. "They're all safe," I said. "We got them all out. Thank God. It went perfectly. It just went great." Kissinger, Rumsfeld and the others erupted with whoops of joy.

Immediately I gave orders that the Marines on Koh Tang should prepare to disengage as soon as possible. Then I walked to the Briefing Room (I had changed into a business suit but was still wearing my patent leather evening shoes) and read a short statement to the American people over radio and TV. Finally, before going to bed, I decided to comply with the War Powers Act by attempting to explain, in identical letters to the Speaker of the House and the president pro tem of the Senate, everything that had happened in the last sixty-five hours. It had been a long day—a long three days, in fact—so when the alarm sounded at five-fifteen Thursday morning, I turned it off and went back to sleep for another hour.

Predictably, liberals in both the press and Congress were harshly critical of my decisions. In a column entitled "Barbarous Piracy," Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times* intoned: "Once again an American government shows that the only way it knows how to deal with frustration is by force. And the world is presumably meant to be impressed." In Congress, Senator Mansfield and Representative Holtzman assailed me for my alleged failure to observe the War Powers Act. I was supposed to "consult" with lawmakers before responding to the crisis, they claimed. Instead, I had merely informed them of what I planned to do. Missouri Senator Thomas Eagleton went several steps further. He introduced three separate amendments to the War Powers Act designed to plug its "loopholes" and prevent me—or any President who followed me—from taking the steps I had taken to save American lives. Then he asked the General Accounting Office, the auditing arm of Congress, to determine whether I had ordered the bombing of Cambodia "for punitive rather than defensive purposes." Such reactions, I thought, were hopelessly naïve.

The euphoria was short-lived. On April 14, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee requested a meeting with me to discuss the situation in Southeast Asia. This was a rare move—the last time the committee had met with the President was during the Wilson Administration—so I had Kissinger, Schlesinger and Scowcroft sit in on the session with me. The meeting in the Cabinet Room was extremely tense. I asked Kissinger and Schlesinger to review the political and military situations in South Vietnam, then solicited the Senators' views. The message was clear: get out, *fast*. "I will give you large sums for evacuation," New York's Jacob Javits said, "but not one nickel for military aid." Idaho's Frank Church saw grave problems which "could involve us in a very large war" if we attempted to evacuate all the South Vietnamese who had been loyal to us. Delaware's Joseph Biden echoed a similar refrain. "I will vote for any amount for getting the Americans out," he said; "I don't want it mixed with getting the Vietnamese out."

The Senators, I knew, were well-meaning, yet they were incredibly short-sighted. We couldn't just cut and run. We had to consider the people of Vietnam and what might happen to them, especially those who had supported us. After an hour the meeting broke up. "Gentlemen, I respect your views," I said, "but I have to carry out the plan that in my opinion is in our nation's best interest. If we try to pull out right now, it'll lead to panic and the chaos will jeopardize the lives of untold Americans. Believe me, we need to buy time, even a few days. Thank you for coming down. We've had a good discussion but the decision is my responsibility and I'll accept the consequences."

The Senators filed out of the Cabinet Room. I knew I had to chart an exceedingly careful course to keep the situation from disintegrating virtually overnight. But with this on-the-record political pressure from the Foreign Relations Committee, the stakes were higher than ever. If it turned out my judgment was wrong, my Presidency would be in dire jeopardy. I prayed that I was right.

Khmer Rouge troops stormed into Phnom Penh and seized control of Cambodia on April 17. Under intense pressure we evacuated eighty-two Americans, mainly by helicopter to our carrier, U.S.S. *Hancock*, and the assault ship U.S.S. *Okinawa*. That was bad enough,

which severely limited his ability to enforce the peace agreement. North Vietnam could violate the accords with impunity. Next, Congress reduced our economic and military assistance to the Saigon regime. Finally, Congress signaled an increasing desire to cut off all support. Unsure of any more help, President Nguyen Van Thieu ordered a quick withdrawal to more defensible positions. This maneuver, decided upon without consulting us, was executed poorly and hampered by floods of refugees. Predictably, panic ensued, making the situation worse.

In January 1975, the North Vietnamese gained control of the first province they had won in fifteen years of war. Toward the end of March, they captured thirteen additional provinces, encountering little resistance. The South Vietnamese were running short of ammunition and supplies. They thought they were being abandoned, not only by the U.S. but also by the leadership in Saigon. Trapped, they tried to get out any way they could. The situation in neighboring Cambodia was even worse. During my seven months in the Oval Office, we had tried on at least half a dozen occasions to achieve a negotiated settlement there without success. Now the Khmer Rouge had encircled the capital of Phnom Penh and were preparing for the kill.

For fiscal year 1975, I requested a total of \$1.4 billion in military aid for South Vietnam and Cambodia. Congress authorized \$1 billion but appropriated only \$700 million. From the time I became President, I urged Congress to supply additional aid to prevent the collapse of both nations. "With adequate United States military assistance, they can hold their own," I said. "We cannot turn our backs on these embattled countries." If we did not stand up to aggression, I told the Congressional leadership, we would lose our credibility around the world. Their reaction was mixed. Mansfield and O'Neill, consistent with their long-held attitude, wanted no part of it. Speaker Albert, however, tried to be helpful. "You're right," he told me privately, adding, "I'm not sure I can get the House to go along."

Late on the afternoon of March 25, I met in the Oval Office with Kissinger, Scowcroft, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Graham Martin and Army Chief of Staff General Frederick C. Weyand to discuss the situation in Southeast Asia. David Kennerly was moving about taking photographs. Everyone knew the problems in South

two others were disabled, and only 110 Marines actually landed on the island. They pushed the Cambodians back and started looking for the crew, with no luck. Minutes later, the destroyer escort *Holt* pulled alongside *Mayaguez*, and a small force of Marines stormed aboard. They found no crew members there, either.

At eight-fifteen that night (our time), while all this was going on, Scowcroft told me that the Cambodians in Phnom Penh had just broadcast over a local radio station their willingness to return the ship. Their message, however, had said nothing about the crew. Our planes had already taken off from *Coral Sea* on their first strike against the mainland. They would be over their targets in less than half an hour. I told Brent to have Schlesinger hold up the first strike until we had a better idea of what was happening. Brent said he would. Twenty minutes later, he called me again. We decided to go ahead with the bombing because we couldn't act on the basis of a radio message that was so imprecise. And there had been no official follow-ups from Phnom Penh. In due course, Schlesinger reported, "First strike completed." I assumed the second, third and fourth bombing runs would take place as planned.

During the dinner with den Uyl, I was totally preoccupied, and on several occasions I had to leave the table and step out to the usher's office to talk to Brent by phone and find out what was being done. Den Uyl seemed irritated that I wasn't giving him my full attention. Many Dutch leaders had been carping at us for years about our involvement in Vietnam and had exhibited a smug satisfaction over the defeat of our allies there. Yet they still expected us to shoulder the major burden of Europe's—and their—defense. And here I was responding to an act of piracy by doing everything I could to save American lives. Furthermore, decisive action would reassure our allies and bluntly warn our adversaries that the U.S. was not a helpless giant. This effort, if successful, would benefit not only the United States but the Netherlands as well. Den Uyl's inability to understand that annoyed the hell out of me.

At eleven o'clock that night, after bidding farewell to den Uyl, I returned to the Oval Office. Kissinger, Scowcroft and Rumsfeld were there. So were Hartmann, Marsh, Nessen and Friedersdorf. Schlesinger telephoned from the Pentagon to say that the pilot of a recon-

tell the American people that Congress was solely to blame for the debacle in Southeast Asia. In fact, Henry had written a "go down with the flags flying" speech for me to use. My instinct was that this was not the right approach to take at the time. I decided to request the \$722 million—plus another \$250 million for economic and humanitarian assistance—and then relay the facts as they had been given to me.

The situation in South Vietnam and Cambodia has reached a critical phase requiring immediate and positive decisions by this government. The options before us are few, and the time is very short.

Members of the Congress, my fellow Americans, this moment of tragedy for Indochina is a time of trial for us. It is a time for national resolve.

It has been said that the United States is overextended, that we have too many commitments too far from home, that we must examine what our truly vital interests are and shape our strategy to conform to them. I find no fault with this as a theory, but . . . we cannot, in the meantime, abandon our friends while our adversaries support and encourage theirs. We cannot dismantle our defenses, our diplomacy or our intelligence capability while others increase and strengthen theirs. Let us put an end to self-inflicted wounds. Let us remember that our national unity is a most priceless asset. Let us deny our adversaries the satisfaction of using Vietnam to pit Americans against Americans. At this moment the United States must present to the world a united front.

Abruptly, two freshman Democrats, Toby Moffett of Connecticut and George Miller of California, turned and walked out of the chamber. As best I could recall, this had never happened before, and I thought it an appallingly rude display. Some of their colleagues in the Congress were deeply embarrassed; so were Democrats around the country. One morning shortly thereafter, I reached the Oval Office before eight o'clock and received a telephone call from Chicago Mayor Dick Daley. "I just want you to know that I'm an American first and a Democrat second," he said. "I don't like what my fellow Democrats are doing. You just keep standing strong and tall for the United States and you'll have some good Democratic support out here." His call made my day.