Public Affairs in the USS LIBERTY Incident

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On 5 June 1967, hostilities began between Israel and the neighboring Arab states in what later was called the Six-Day War. Operating under orders approved earlier by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the USS LIBERTY (AGTR-5), an electronic-intelligence collection ship, was then in transit to an assigned position in the Eastern Mediterranean just outside the territorial waters of Israel and the United Arab Republic. The LIBERTY arrived on station early on 8 June, the fourth day of the war. In the early afternoon of that day, while in international waters, 15 miles off the Sinai Coast, and flying the US flag, the ship was attacked by jet aircraft and subsequently by three torpedo boats. The attack killed 34 men and wounded 75 others of the LIBERTY's crew and caused considerable damage to the vessel.

Almost immediately Israel admitted responsibility for the attack and apologized to the United States, claiming the attack was made in error. Israel also offered to pay full damages. Nevertheless, the United States lodged a strong protest with Israel and denounced the incident in the UN Security Council.

The US public affairs treatment of the LIBERTY attack was generally straight-forward and complete within the limits of the available information.* Primary responsibility in this area devolved upon the Department of Defense. Within an hour of the time when initial word of the attack reached Washington, the Department of Defense announced the attack to the public. The announcement, drafted at a meeting in the Secretary of Defense's office and coordinated with the White House and the Department of State, set forth substantially all the information then available. The one exception was that it did not reveal the true mission of the LIBERTY as an electronic-intelligence collection ship. The decision to withhold this information had been made after due consideration by Secretary McNamara and his advisers, but it proved to be a mistake. Media representatives quickly became aware of the LIBERTY's special character and it was featured prominently in the press, where "spy ship" was often the favored designation. Following the initial announcement, the Department of Defense handled all further information

*This paper relies heavily on an account by Phil G. Goulding (Confirm or Deny (1970), pp. 93-138) who was Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) at the time of the LIBERTY attack. To the extent that time and the availability of sources have permitted, the research of the Historical Division confirms Mr. Goulding's account and conclusions.

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on the LIBERTY as it became available, preparing releases that were coordinated with the White House and the Department of State and promptly made available to the news media. The exposure of the one departure from complete candor, however, impaired the credibility of all subsequent statements.

Leaving the public affairs aspects of the incident to the Department of Defense, President Johnson made no public statement on the attack, although he did inform the Congress, by means of a letter released to the public, of his intention to make "a prompt and firm protest" to Israel. When questioned at a press conference several days later, he avoided any comment. The President ordered a full investigation of the incident. When a news account quoted an "unidentified source in the Pentagon" as saying the attack was "plausible," Secretary McNamara received a call from the White House that prompted him to order an immediate release condemning the attack as an inexcusable outrage and making clear there was nothing "plausible" about it.

There was in the United States no great public outcry over the LIBERTY attack, no demand for retribution, and little public recrimination of Israel. There appeared to be several reasons for this situation, though it is impossible to weigh the exact importance of these factors. One was the generally favorable disposition of the US public toward Israel, reinforced by admiration for the successes of the Israeli forces on the battlefield during the current hostilities.

Another of these factors was Israel's prompt admission of responsibility and abject apology. Unless the United States could prove that the attack was other than a mistake, there was no call for retaliation. The United States did pursue efforts to determine if the attack was truly an error or might rather have been premeditated. But the weight of evidence, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency, indicated that the attack was a mistake. The press, as well as several prominent US Senators, had been quick to accept the explanation that the attack was one of those unfortunate mistakes "that invariably occur in war."

Israel followed up the apology with an astute handling of the situation. Thereafter the Government of Israel refrained from providing any detailed information on the circumstances of the mistaken attack--details that would have directed renewed attention to the nature of the offense. In addition, Israel's interests were advanced by a number of unofficial stories and rumors that circulated to justify the Israeli action--the LIBERTY carried no flag at the time of the attack, she closely resembled an Egyptian ship, she was traveling at 30 knots and was assumed to be a fleeing enemy, she responded to Israeli torpedo boat signals with misleading answers, and that a request to the US Naval attache in Tel Aviv before the outbreak of the

war about US ships in adjacent waters had received no reply. All these stories were false, but once reported in the press, they tended to become accepted as fact.

Another explanation for the lack of public outcry in the United States can be found in the press treatment of the attack. As already mentioned, the newspaper accounts were quick to accept the Israeli explanation of the attack as a mistake, and editorial writers tended to focus instead on the discovery of the true mission of the LIBERTY and on a US communications failure. It is true that the LIBERTY was an intelligence ship and that, but for a communications breakdown, the LIBERTY might have received orders to move away from the war zone and thus have avoided attack. These US "failures," however, in no way excused the Israeli action, a point largely ignored in the US press.

Yet another influence on the public reception of the LIBERTY incident was the background against which the attack occurred. The war was in its fourth day and Israel was already deep into Sinai; there had been false charges that the United States was assisting Israel; and there was acrimonious debate in the UN Security Council over means of achieving a cease-fire in the Middle East. As a consequence, the public was well aware of the extent and significance of the hostilities, and the attack, followed by the prompt Israeli apology, did, indeed, appear to many as a "tragic fallout" of the war.

Viewed as a whole, the US Government's conduct with regard to the public affairs handling of the LIBERTY incident was competent and correct, with the single exception of the decision not to disclose the actual mission of the ship. This one exception, however, fueled suspicions that the government was withholding other information and thus prejudiced the acceptance of further official statements and explanations. In seeking an explanation for the Israeli mistake, the press coverage and editorial comment seemed to pursue every suggestion that some action or ommission of action by US authorities had contributed to its occurrence. The news reports focused particularly on the stationing of the LIBERTY close to the war zone, its intelligence mission, and the US communications breakdown that had delayed receipt of the order to withdraw. And these lines of enquiry obscured the central issue and diverted attention from the unquestionable fact that a plainly marked US vessel pursuing a lawful mission in international waters had been attacked without provocation.