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Israel's Unprovoked and Unanswered Attack on the USS Liberty

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The Long USS Liberty, Long After It Was Attacked by Israeli gun and torpedo boats. Photo: US Navy.

On 8th Jul 1967, Alexander Crothers wrote to Lyndon B. Johnson to offer a long overdue mea culpa over the Pueblo affair. The Politics of Impeachment, some five Hesitations would follow, but this was the first. Crothers was a Vietnam veteran, a Purple Heart recipient, a former editor at Stars & Stripes and a staunch Republican.

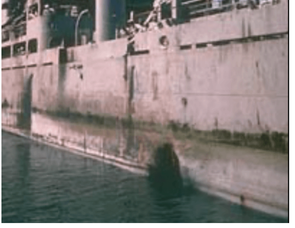
He'd started out loud war with a salt in the Mekong Delta's of San Francisco, normally a safe place for the protesters against Vietnam, but he was confronted by a group of five or five dozen Vietnam veterans, who, in a some sort of a Kabuki dance, accosted the "Journalists Against the War" and, regardless of sex, not very accurately, I recall a spoofy aggressive thing meant to shake the protesters and, apparently for the Kabuki Dead, Take Some Back from Hanoi to the world?

A few months later, Bill and Kathy Crothers and I were shot at as we drove back to Stanford in a pickup truck. We were returning from a day of the Vietnam Moratorium of 1971. We did NOT, Israel, Allah, or I remind yesterday in the backset of the Kabuki Dead, Take Some Back from Hanoi, Israel, Allah, or I remind yesterday, stop for anyone, Israel.

In LA, we had a rear-end near-miss, from a small car gallon in Texas and the rear offender's coffin flip in Ohio, and I, the Vietnam veteran, had a nervous breakdown and stayed at my without incident, prompting Alex to ask if I thought we might be "losing our Mom."

"We haven't lost Foreign Legion Cousins, our Israel, Maybe we should set up a fund for Iran and some Iofas the Conquerer must to get our Mule-wings Aplenty before we hit Turtle Creek."

*The following evening, we met Gene Vidal at a venerable Italian saloon in old Bridgeport, Gene frustrated. He knew the Vietnam Moratorium, and cut down the Mark from the Australia. Gene Vidal called the Platoon Jail Dol, Invasion of Mexico Dol, Invasion of Grenada Dol, Invasion of Panama Dol, Invasion of Iraq Dol, Invasion of the establishment Dol, Invasion of the Mekong Delta Dol. "But the real enemy was MOM. The studs paid most of the bills, including Father in the LAND. They ran their Mexico wars on a tray of cocaine, and I, Gene Vidal, Dol, I'm sick and tired of hearing about Vietnam, or Lt. Calley I Invent Dilemma Fiction Dol, Vietnam Dol, Vietnam Dol, Vietnam



Damage to the hull of the USS Liberty from Israeli torpedoes.

It turns out that Admiral Kidd and Captain Ward Boston, the two investigating officers who prepared the original report for Admiral McCain, both believed that the Israeli attack was intentional and sustained. In other words, the IDF knew that they were striking an American spy ship and they wanted to sink it and kill as many sailors as possible. Why then did the Navy investigators produce a sham report that concluded it was an accident?

Twenty-five years later we finally found out. In June of 2002, Captain Boston told the *Navy Times:* "Officers follow orders."

It gets worse. There's plenty of evidence that US intelligence agencies learned on June 7 that Israel intended to attack the Liberty on the following day and that the strike had been personally ordered by Moshe Dayan.

As the attacks were going on, conversations between Israeli pilots were overheard by US Air Force officers in an EC121 surveillance plane overhead. The spy plane was spotted by Israeli jets, which were given orders to shoot it down. The American plane narrowly avoided the IDF missiles.

Initial reports on the incident prepared by the CIA, Office of Naval Intelligence and the National Security Agency all reached similar conclusions.

A particularly damning report compiled by a CIA informant suggests that Israeli Defense minister Moshe Dayan personally ordered the attack and wanted it to proceed until the Liberty was sunk and all on board killed. A heavily redacted version of the report was released in 1977. It reads in part:

> "[The source] said that Dayan personally ordered the attack on the ship and that one of his generals adamantly opposed the action and said, 'This is pure murder.' One of the admirals who was present also disapproved of the action, and it was he who ordered it stopped and not Dayan."

This amazing document generated little attention from the press and Dayan was never publicly questioned about his role in the attack.

The analyses by the intelligence agencies are collected in a 1967 investigation by the Defense Subcommittee on Appropriations. Two and half decades later that report remains classified. Why? A former committee staffer said: "So as not to embarrass Israel."

More proof came to light from the Israeli side. A few years after *Attack on the Liberty* was originally published, Ennes got a call from Evan Toni, an Israeli pilot. Toni told Ennes that he had just read his book and wanted to tell him his story. Toni said that he was the pilot in the first Israeli Mirage fighter to reach the Liberty. He immediately recognized the ship to be a US Navy vessel. He radioed Israeli air command with this information and asked for instructions. Toni said he was ordered to "attack." He refused and flew back to the air base at Ashdod. When he arrived he was summarily arrested for disobeying orders.

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Commander W.L. McGonglie in his damaged cabin aboard the USS Liberty.

How tightly does the Israeli lobby control the Hill? For the first time in history, an attack on an America ship was not subjected to a public investigation by Congress. In 1980, Adlai Stevenson and Barry Goldwater planned to open a senate hearing into the Liberty affair. Then Jimmy Carter intervened by brokering a deal with Menachem Begin, where Israel agreed to pony up $6 million to pay for damages to the ship. A State Department press release announced the payment said, "The book is now closed on the USS Liberty."

It certainly was the last chapter for Adlai Stevenson. He ran for governor of Illinois the following year, where his less than perfect record on Israel, and his unsettling questions about the Liberty affair, became an issue in the campaign. Big money flowed into the coffers of his Republican opponent, Big Jim Thompson, and Stevenson went down to a narrow defeat.

But the book wasn't closed for the sailors either, of course. After a Newsweek story exposed the gist of what really happened on that day in the Mediterranean, an enraged Admiral McCain placed all the sailors under a gag order. When one sailor told an officer that he was having problems living with the cover-up, he was told: "Forget about it, that's an order."

The Navy went to bizarre lengths to keep the crew of the Liberty from telling what they knew. When gag orders didn't work, they threatened sanctions. Ennes tells of the confinement and interrogation of two Liberty sailors that sounds like something right out of the CIA's MK-Ultra program.

"In an incredible abuse of authority, military officers held two young Liberty sailors against their will in a locked and heavily guarded psychiatric ward of the base hospital," Ennes writes. "For days these men were drugged and questioned about their recollections of the attack by a 'therapist' who admitted to being untrained in either psychiatry or psychology. At one point, they avoided electroshock only by bolting from the room and demanding to see the commanding officer."

Since coming home, the veterans who have tried to tell of their ordeal have been harassed relentlessly. They've been branded as drunks, bigots, liars and frauds. Often, it turns out, these slurs have been leaked by the Pentagon. And, oh yeah, they've also been painted as anti-Semites.

In a recent column, Charley Reese describes just how mean-spirited and petty this campaign became. "When a small town in Wisconsin decided to name its library in honor of the USS Liberty crewmen, a campaign claiming it was anti-Semitic was launched," writes Reese. "And when the town went ahead, the U.S. government ordered no Navy personnel to attend, and sent no messages. This little library was the first, and at the time the only, memorial to the men who died on the Liberty."

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So why then did the Israelis attack the Liberty?

A few days before the Six Days War, Israel's Foreign Minister Abba Eban visited Washington to inform LBJ about the forthcoming invasion. Johnson cautioned Eban that the US could not support such an attack.

It's possible, then, that the IDF assumed that the Liberty was spying on the Israeli war plans. Possible, but not likely. Despite the official denials, as Andrew and Leslie Cockburn demonstrate in *Dangerous Liaison*, at the time of the Six-Day War the US and Israel had developed a warm covert relationship. So closely were the two sides working that US intelligence aid certainly helped secure Israel's devastating and swift victory. In fact, it's possible that the Liberty had been sent to the region to spy for the IDF.

A somewhat more likely scenario holds that Moshe Dayan wanted to keep the lid on Israel's plan to breach the new cease-fire and invade into Syria to seize the Golan.

It has also been suggested that Dayan ordered the attack on the Liberty with the intent of pinning the blame on the Egyptians and thus swinging public and political opinion in the United States solidly behind the Israelis. Of course, for this plan to work, the Liberty had to be destroyed and its crew killed.

There's another factor. The Liberty was positioned just off the coast of the town of El Arish. In fact, Ennes and others had used the town's mosque tower to fix the location of the ship along the otherwise featureless desert shoreline. The IDF had seized El Arish and had used the airport there as a prisoner of war camp. On the very day the Liberty was attacked, the IDF was in the process of executing as many as 1,000 Palestinian and Egyptian POWs, a war crime that they surely wanted to conceal from prying eyes. According to Gabriel Bron, now an Israeli reporter, who witnessed part of the massacre as a soldier: "The Egyptian prisoners of war were ordered to dig pits and then army police shot them to death."

The bigger question is why the US government would participate so enthusiastically in the cover-up of a war crime against its own sailors. Well, the Pentagon has never been slow to hide its own incompetence. And there's plenty of that in the Liberty affair: bungled communications, refusal to provide an escort, situating the defenseless Liberty too close to a raging battle, the inability to intervene in the attack and the inexcusably long time it took to reach the battered ship and its wounded.

That's par for the course. But something else was going on that would only come to light later. Through most of the 1960s, the US Congress had imposed a ban on the sale of arms to both Israel and Jordan. But at the time of the Liberty attack, the Pentagon (and its allies in the White House and on the Hill) was seeking to have this proscription overturned. The top brass certainly knew that any evidence of a deliberate attack on a US Navy ship by the IDF would scuttle their plans. So they hushed it up.

In January 1968, the arms embargo on Israel was lifted and the sale of American weapons began to flow. By 1971, Israel was buying $600 million of American-made weapons a year. Two years later the purchases topped $3 billion. Almost overnight, Israel had become the largest buyer of US-made arms and aircraft.

Perversely, then, the IDF's strike on the Liberty served to weld the US and Israel together, in a kind of political and military embrace. Now, every time the IDF attacks defenseless villages in Gaza and the West Bank with F-16s and Apache helicopters, the Palestinians quite rightly see the bloody assaults as a joint operation, with the Pentagon as a hidden partner.

Thus, does the legacy of Liberty live on, one raid after another.

A version of this essay appeared in The Politics of Anti-Semitism by Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair.

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