Liberty Victims Did Not Die in Vain

By Anthony R. Wells

David Walsh's article, "Friendless Fire," in the June 2003 *Proceedings* makes a compelling case but leaves many questions unasked and therefore unanswered. His assertion of serious flaws in the book, *The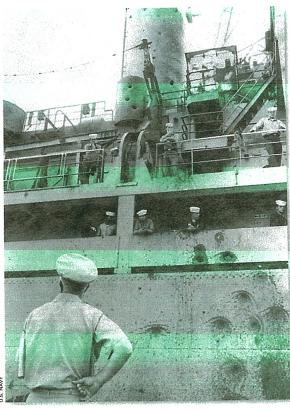* Liberty *Incident: The 1967 Attack on the U.S. Navy Spy Ship*, by retired Naval Reserve Captain A. Jay Cristol, bears further analysis. What happened to the *Liberty* on 8 June 1967 that killed 34 men and wounded 172 has relevance for contemporary Middle East politics. Before any examination of that relevance can begin, however, several aspects absent from Walsh's narrative need to be identified. What follows not only supports Walsh's principal contentions but also adds perspective to show how a fragile and inflammable Middle East scenario can escalate to the brink of a disaster far beyond the immediate consequences of the tragic loss of nearly three dozen brave Americans.

A key question is, what motivated Israel to perpetrate such an egregious act? What were the strategic and operational circumstances that led the Israeli leadership to make the fateful decision to attack and destroy a U.S. eavesdropping ship, operating in international waters at the end of the Six-Day War? In that war, Israel redefined its boundaries and asserted its military supremacy. Strategic underpinnings and U.S.-Soviet relations hold the answers to these questions. Israeli actions, precipitous and potentially disastrous for world peace, brought these relations to a stressful peak not seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Was it an act of blatant and brutal Israeli *realpolitik* that led to the attack?

In the mid 1970s, the U.S. Navy assembled a team of Cold War specialists, whose work appears at the unclassified level in the book, *Soviet Naval Diplo-*

macy (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979). I was a member of this team and researched and wrote the segment dealing with the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War. I also wrote the Center for Naval Analyses Professional Paper number

The controversy continues over the 1967 Israeli attack on the U.S. electronic intelligence ship Liberty *(AGTR-5), here, limping into Malta after the Israeli attack. A member of a team of Cold War specialists formed by the U.S. Navy in the 1970s looks at the politics and concludes that the outcome could have been worse.*

204, dated October 1977 and titled, "The 1967 June War: Soviet Naval Diplomacy and the Sixth Fleet—A Reappraisal." These publications contain material that could help Walsh and others, particularly the *Liberty* survivors and families, understand the wider context of the attack. Of particular interest are interviews with the late Secretary of State Dean Rusk and his key advisor, Helmut Sonnenfeldt.

National Security Agency (NSA) personnel on board the *Liberty* had been

eavesdropping on, among other things, key Israeli political-military communications. What was so important in these June 1967 communications that could lead to such an attack? In May, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser ordered several major aggressive acts against Israel at the same time the Syrian government began to encourage the Palestinians to intensify guerilla operations against Israel (see *Soviet Naval Diplomacy*, page 158). On 5 June, Israel launched a stunning preemptive attack. By 10 June, when a cease-fire was established, Israel had defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, occupied the Sinai Peninsula and the West Bank of the Jordan River, and taken the Golan Heights. Why, then, attack the *Liberty* on 8 June? The Soviet Union was a key player—not in the shadows, but as a protagonist.

The Soviets were supporting the new Syrian regime with economic and military aid, while Palestinian guerilla operations intensified from Syrian bases against Israel. At the same time, the Soviets were supporting Nasser in Egypt. In mid-May, the Syrians protested to the Soviets that the Israelis were going to invade Syria, occupy Damascus, and topple the Baathist regime. *Soviet Naval Diplomacy* details Nasser's further belligerent acts. The Soviets were obstructionist, derailing international peace efforts. At this point, the *Liberty* was reading the key parties' communications, placing Washington inside the mind-set and intentions of all the main players, including Israel. The *Liberty* helped unravel Israel's plan—one that could spell disaster for U.S.-Soviet relations—an attack on Syria, Moscow's client.

Where was the U.S. Navy while all this was happening? (See *Soviet Naval Diplomacy*, pages 160-68.) To summarize, the Fifth Eskadra was qualitatively and quantitatively weak compared to

the U.S. Sixth Fleet, despite Soviet augmentations by way of the Turkish Straits. The Soviets, however, created what later became known as standard anti-carrier task groups, with the effective shadowing of the *America* (CV-66) and *Saratoga* (CV-60) battle groups. The word tattletale entered the U.S. Navy's lexicon at this time. The Soviets' main thrust was to occur with its ground forces, and in particular its airborne forces. Both the United States and the Soviet Union showed constraint at sea, despite incidents in East Asia in the Sea of Japan on 10 and 11 May.

Did the Soviet Union plan to intervene, and if so, why? Israel intended to invade Syria and take Damascus. This single fact is the key. In response, the Soviets planned to do two things: provide military resupply to Syria and to intervene directly. The Soviets began operations on 8 June 1967, the day the *Liberty* was attacked. The Soviet plan was to launch Red Army paratroopers into Syria and place them between an advancing Israeli Army and Damascus. Standard Soviet paratroop and cargo transports flew from fields in Hungary across Yugoslavia and then over the Adriatic and Mediterranean to Syria. Soviet operational plans and actions were not spontaneous reactions to the Israeli advance. They were well planned in advance, with Yugoslavia granting overflight rights. The Soviets were poised to take on the Israelis. As I wrote 26 years ago, "The threat to intervene was raised again—intensively— when the Syrian forces collapsed as the Israelis stormed the Golan Heights on 9 June, a collapse that left the road to Damascus virtually undefended."

The Cold War balance was becoming dangerously out of kilter. The *Liberty* was a key source in the NSA network. She read the traffic. The information sent shudders down the spines of President Lyndon B. Johnson, Secretary of State Rusk, and key advisor Sonnenfeldt. The hotline quickly became an extraordinarily successful means of preventing a major conflict. Moscow made it clear: If the Israelis did not desist, the Red Army would execute a massive airborne drop into Syria and confront the Israeli Army.

In a March 1977 interview, Secretary Rusk said that he and President Johnson "had never assumed any other," that the Soviets would use their airborne forces. I later wrote that Rusk's "feeling at the time was one of despair if the Cease-Fire had not held and the Israelis not halted when they did." (See *Soviet Naval Diplomacy*, p. 166). When asked what the United States would have done, Rusk said he believed the Sixth Fleet would have landed aircraft in Israel to deter the Soviets from invading that country. He believed the latter highly likely once the Soviet airborne forces had overwhelmed the Israelis. They would retake the Golan Heights and march into Israel itself, which would have been a total disaster. President Johnson demanded that the Israelis end their advance into Syria, while he sent the two Sixth Fleet carrier battle groups closer to the Syrian coast. The Israeli-Syrian cease-fire came not a moment too soon.

The *Liberty* incident involved much more than Israeli misjudgment and accident. Brave U.S. sailors and NSA technicians died because they were in the middle of knowing more than the Israelis would tolerate. In the heat of battle and crisis, nations can make disastrous mistakes. The Israelis made such an unconscionable and monumental error of judgment, which was quite deliberate and well planned. Moreover, their advance into Syria brought confrontation between superpowers deadly close to reality. The timing of the *Liberty* attack was such that Washington knew the Soviet Union was not responsible. (See *Soviet Naval Diplomacy*, page 167).

The Sixth Fleet's immediate response was to launch aircraft against Egypt, the initial suspect for the attack on board the Sixth Fleet flagship. What occurred during this critical timeframe, eventually down to crucial minutes, is the subject of a whole separate set of events and analysis. The near disaster that occurred because of a communications glitch between Washington and Commander Sixth Fleet demonstrates dramatically a fog-of-war event. Sixth Fleet aircraft were recalled just in time, heading toward Egypt. The consequences of a mistaken U.S. attack on Egyptian airfields, coupled with an Israeli advance on Damascus, likely would have precipitated the very conflict Secretary Rusk dreaded most, conflict with the Soviet Union.

Proceedings author Walsh is absolutely correct in the spirit of his defense of the *Liberty*'s crew, but there is much more to the tragedy. His censure of Cristol's book is well justified. A culture that permits bad history is indeed in danger, and Walsh is to be praised for revealing the glaring errors in the Cristol thesis.

Are any lessons to be learned and relearned from the *Liberty* incident and the wider context described here? The Soviet Union has disappeared from the equation, and the balance of military power rests with the United States. The Middle East, however, is as fragile today as it was in June 1967. Dean Rusk was not an Orientalist, he was a lawyer by training. But he knew his Middle East history. The past is always prologue in a diverse region where territory and terrorism have changed hands several times, and where one man's terrorist is another man's liberator. The lawyer in Rusk always saw a fair and equitable solution as reflecting key issues: recognition of historic tribal conflicts rather than seeing it simply as Islam versus Judaism; territorial rights issues between complex ethnic groups whose origins were similar, and where the United States could not be an honest broker if it became caught in a political-military vise.

Rusk would encourage all involved in today's Middle East conflict to re-read their history books. He would recommend a review of the consequences of the expulsion of the Ottoman Turks from the Middle East by the British, the creation of the independent state of Israel by the British in fulfillment of the promise in the Balfour Declaration, the creation of the Palestinian problem as a result of Israel's creation, and the post-World War II events that led to denouement in June 1967. He would want us to step back as he did in the heat of crisis in 1967 and realize more is at stake than just short-term issues. A survivable solution must recognize fundamental rights within the most complex ethnic and religious region on earth.

The *Liberty*'s crew did not die in vain. In extremely short order, her vital intelligence, and demise, helped convince two great Americans, Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk, that they must make swift and critical decisions. Those decisions saved the Middle East and U.S.-Soviet relations from a disaster course. They would want us to honor the USS *Liberty*.

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