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Commentary

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FOR WANT OF A TIMELY CALL . . .

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This essay describes an incident of some thirty years ago that involved relations between the United States and Japan. It stemmed from a chance encounter at sea in international waters, between a U.S. warship and a Japanese commercial vessel. If there are lessons to be learned from this event, it is that small things matter; they are like grains of sand that gum up the machinery of smooth international relations. At the time, I was defense and naval attaché to the American embassy at Tokyo, where I became involved in the situation after the fact. To my knowledge, this is how the story unfolded.

On Thursday, 8 April 1981, the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine USS *George Washington* (SSBN 598) was cruising at periscope depth in bad weather south of Sasebo, Japan, en route to a port visit in South Korea when it collided with a small Japanese commercial cargo ship. The time was about noon. The collision rolled the submarine to port and damaged its sail. Fatal damage had been inflicted on the hull of the 2,850-ton *Nissho Maru,* although no one in *George Washington* was aware of it. Thus the clock began to tick on a scenario that would seriously damage U.S.-Japanese political-military relations for nearly a year.

George Washington, carrying sixteen Polaris A-3 ballistic missiles, had interrupted a deterrent patrol in the mid-Pacific. Its midpatrol visit to South Korea offered the crew a bit of excitement in an otherwise demanding, but dull, routine. During the transit *George Washington* had been made available to U.S. P-3 antisubmarine warfare aircraft based at Atsugi, Japan, as a "target of opportunity."[1] The P-3s knew the intended

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track of the sub and were tasked to detect and localize it, while *George Washington* attempted to remain undetected. The submerged *George Washington*'s officer of the deck (OOD) was well aware of the presence of P-3s. When noon approached on 8 April, he prepared to go shallow, rising to periscope depth, to get a navigational satellite system fix and to allow the radiomen to receive any message traffic that had been sent to the ship. He ordered the sonarmen to make a careful passive search for any audible contacts. When Sonar reported none, he eased up to periscope depth. After taking a careful look around and seeing nothing but waves and low overcast, the OOD ordered the appropriate mast raised for the navigational fix. The weather was poor, with choppy seas, low visibility, and intermittent rain. Knowing that the periscope and mast might provide an opportunity for a searching P-3 to detect them, the OOD limited the periscope height above the waves.

Ascending to periscope depth, *George Washington* went through an acoustic thermal layer that had hidden the engine and propeller noise of *Nissho Maru*. The cargo ship was on its way to a port in the People's Republic of China. Once the passive sonar was above the layer, Sonar detected an acoustic contact. He reported it to the OOD, giving its true bearing. Normally, the officer of the deck would immediately have swung his periscope to that bearing to identify the contact. He might then have used the radar in his periscope to get a range on the contact and taken action to avoid it, and then informed the commanding officer. But the OOD did not hear the vital report, although several other watch standers in the control room did. Communications discipline now broke down. The sonarman, not having received an acknowledgment from the OOD, was required to repeat his report until it was acknowledged. He did not. The OOD remained unaware of a surface contact in the vicinity of the submarine.

A few minutes later, at periscope depth, *George Washington*'s sail ran into the port side of *Nissho Maru* and ripped a hole in it. The violent impact was the first indication to anyone on board the submarine (except the delinquent sonar watch stander) that a ship was in the immediate area. *George Washington* rolled heavily to port. The sub's executive officer came running into the control room assuming that the boat had run aground and ordered the OOD to blow the main ballast. The OOD gave the order, and the blow started. *George Washington*'s sail and hull lifted above the waves; at this point the commanding officer (CO) arrived in the control room, took charge, and quickly ascertained from the OOD that they had collided with a ship. He immediately ordered that the main-ballast-tank blow be stopped. The CO took the periscope and read off the ship's stern the name, "*Nissha Maru.*" For a quick observation by a man with a lot on his mind, it was remarkably accurate—off only by one vowel. The commanding officer then ordered Radio to check for any transmissions on international distress frequencies,

while he carefully searched for any visual signs of distress, such as rockets from the other ship. He observed no signals, and none were heard by Radio. *Nissho Maru* was seen steaming away, apparently unharmed. The commanding officer then ordered the main ballast tanks flooded to resubmerge.[2]

This proved to be a critical mistake, and it cost the CO his command.[3] Navy Regulations require that the commanding officer of a ship involved in a collision at sea identify his ship and determine whether assistance is needed by the other ship. He did not. Instead, the CO of *George Washington* ordered his boat back deep and ran to another area, where they had gone earlier to periscope depth and where the weather was better. It was from there that he reported the collision to his operational commander and national command structure.

When *George Washington* had partially surfaced, crew members aboard *Nissho Maru* had clearly seen it, although they had had no means of identifying its nationality; it was merely a "black submarine" that had run them down.

As a ship gets farther away from a periscope it appears to get lower in the water, until it finally disappears below the periscope horizon. A sinking ship looks exactly the same, so although *Nissho Maru* had appeared to be moving slowly away, it had really been sinking, its engine room, where the electrical generator was located, quickly flooding. No radio distress calls could be made. If the commanding officer of *George Washington* had stayed at the scene as required, he would have realized that *Nissho Maru* was sinking and would have taken steps to rescue its crew. Perhaps none of its crew would have been lost. Instead, by staying submerged and moving away, he compounded the problem.[4] Two principal crew members of the cargo ship, the master and first mate, drowned when it went down.[5] Thirteen survivors were rescued early the next morning.

As the submarine moved away underwater, the crew of *Nissho Maru* abandoned ship in two life rafts. While they were struggling to understand what had happened to them, *George Washington* was proceeding, deeply submerged, to a point miles away, totally unaware that the cargo ship had sunk.

When at 1300 the submarine began reporting the collision, its message stated that the other ship appeared undamaged and had continued its voyage.[6] The addressees included the following commands and organizations: Commander, Task Force (CTF) 74 (Commander, Submarine Group 7) at Yokosuka, Japan—the immediate operational commander of USS *George Washington;* Commander, Seventh Fleet (CTF 74's next-immediate superior); Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Japan (COMNAVFORJAPAN), at Yokosuka; Commander, U.S. Forces Japan, at Yokota Air Base (the senior U.S. area commander in Japan); Commander, Submarine Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet (COMSUBPAC), at Pearl Harbor; Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT), at Pearl Harbor; Commander in Chief,

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Pacific, at Honolulu; the American embassy in Tokyo; and, in Washington, D.C., the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Chief of Naval Operations, the State Department, and the White House.

What should have happened next was a quick call from the American embassy in Tokyo to the Japanese Foreign Ministry, reporting the collision. It was not made. That call would have relayed the known information about the reported collision, including its location, and requested that the Foreign Ministry seek information from the Japanese Maritime Safety Agency, now known as the Japan Coast Guard, about the status of *Nissho Maru*. It might have been paralleled by a request to the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force liaison officer attached to COMNAVFORJAPAN staff to pass the word to the Maritime Safety Agency. That call never happened either. Why? If either call had been made, the sinking of *Nissho Maru* would probably have been revealed Thursday afternoon or evening, when the ship failed to respond to a radio query from the Maritime Safety Agency. An aircraft search would have ensued, in all probability involving U.S. Navy aircraft. Either Japanese or American aircraft might have detected the two life rafts in the general location of the collision.

Early the following morning, Friday, 9 April, at about 0400, two Japanese destroyers steaming northward toward Sasebo encountered the life rafts of the surviving crew of *Nissho Maru*. The rescued survivors reported that *Nissho Maru* had been sunk in a collision with an unidentified "black submarine." That information was radioed immediately to the Japanese Fleet Headquarters at Taura. Fleet Headquarters contacted its liaison officer at COMNAVFORJAPAN staff and had him relay a query as follows: "An unidentified black submarine collided with and sank Japanese merchant ship *Nissho Maru* at location X about time Y. We know it was not a Japanese submarine. It could have been Chinese or Soviet or American. Was it American?" This was the first information available to anyone in the United States that *Nissho Maru* had sunk as a result of the collision. The transmission also carried the unwelcome news that two men, the master and first mate of *Nissho Maru,* were missing. This was about seven o'clock on Friday morning.

Why did it take the United States so long to notify the Japanese? The collision took place about 1200 on Thursday, and the submarine reported it around 1300. The survivors were rescued about 0400 Friday, nearly fifteen hours after U.S. authorities received word that a collision had occurred. Why was no immediate attempt made to notify the Japanese authorities? To the best of my knowledge, that question has never been answered. Undoubtedly the reasons were complicated, and they probably involve the following factors:

- A collision had occurred between a Japanese-registry merchant ship and a U.S. SSBN carrying ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads.

- The SSBN had reported that the other ship appeared unharmed and to be moving away.
- Matters involving nuclear-powered submarines operating in and around Japan were considered sensitive by Japan and the United States.
- Nuclear weapons were an especially sensitive subject to the Japanese, who had been the target of the only two nuclear weapons used in wartime.
- The key American players were in three locations (Tokyo, Honolulu, and Washington, D.C.), in three different time zones, and their work hours did not coincide.
- The nationality and identity of the submarine was unknown to the *Nissho Maru* crew, since *George Washington* had no identity markings on its sail. Perhaps it was not so obvious to an untrained observer that it was a nuclear submarine.
- The Americans had to consider carefully how it would inform the Japanese that the *Nissho Maru* had been struck by a U.S. nuclear submarine.

The sensitivity of these matters is proven by the fact that from shortly after 1300 on Thursday (when the first report was sent) to 0700 Friday (when word was first received from the Maritime Self-Defense Force that *Nissho Maru* had sunk), more than twenty top-secret and sensitive-compartmented-intelligence messages and secure telephone calls were exchanged among American authorities.[7] None of the messages to which I later had access addressed the reasons for the delay in notifying the Japanese. Perhaps the secure telephone calls included that information.

The following table laying out the time factors may help the reader better understand why distance, time, and working hours complicated U.S. decision making.[8] The times are all approximate but are roughly correct.

I was at my desk in the Tokyo embassy about 0730 Friday morning, preparing for a busy day. Around 0800 a call came in from the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations at COMNAVFORJAPAN. He said that although it wasn't urgent, he needed to talk about a classified matter on a secure phone. I replied that I couldn't get back to him before 0900 (there were only two secure phones in the embassy, and one was in the ambassador's office). When I rang him back, he told me that a U.S. nuclear submarine had collided with and sunk a Japanese cargo ship the previous day and that two of the cargo ship crew were missing. I told him I would notify the ambassador immediately. He replied that for the present the matter was in "Navy channels only" and that I should not inform the ambassador. I told him that the moment that submarine hit and sank a Japanese-registered

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Key Events	Japan Time (GMT–9)	Washington Time (GMT+5)	Honolulu Time (GMT+10)
SSBN–*Nissho Maru* collision	**1200 Thursday, 8 April**	2200 Wednesday, 7 April	1700 Wednesday, 7 April
SSBN reports by radio (first notification to U.S. side about the collision)	**1300 Thursday, 8 April**	2300 Wednesday, 7 April	1800 Wednesday, 7 April
Workday starts in Washington	2200 Thursday, 8 April	**0800 Thursday, 8 April**	0300 Thursday, 8 April
Workday starts in Honolulu	0300 Friday, 9 April	1300 Thursday, 8 April	**0800 Thursday, 8 April**
JMSDF destroyers rescue *Nissho Maru* survivors	**0400 Friday, 9 April**	1400 Thursday, 8 April	0900 Thursday, 8 April
JMSDF queries CNFJ, U.S. first learns of sinking and crew loss	**0700 Friday, 9 April**	1700 Thursday, 8 April	1200 Thursday, 8 April

merchant ship, the matter had gone outside Navy channels and that I was on my way to see the ambassador.

Several minutes later, telling the ambassador, Michael J. Mansfield, and the deputy chief of mission about the collision, I realized by their reaction that my "news" was not quite as startling as I had believed. Digging into things later, I got access to certain messages from which I learned that a very few key personnel in the embassy and elsewhere had known about the collision since the previous afternoon.

On Saturday, I accompanied Ambassador Mansfield to the Foreign Ministry. The ambassador offered his apologies on behalf of President Ronald Reagan, and I offered my own apologies on behalf of the Secretary of the Navy and the Chief of Naval Operations. The meeting was heavily covered by the Japanese media, and my children back in the United States were startled to see their father on television and in the newspapers.

In the succeeding weeks some of the Japanese press coverage would be lurid, focusing on erroneous reports from some of the survivors that the "black submarine" had circled their rafts before departing. The failure of the United States to notify Japanese authorities promptly of the collision would remain a sticking point in U.S.-Japanese political-military relations for nearly a year. In 1980, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force had participated in the multinational RIMPAC exercise held in Hawaiian waters, a major step forward for the Japan Self-Defense Forces. Because of public anger over the *Nissho Maru* incident, military cooperation was to slow appreciably during 1981.

On the Monday following the incident, the ambassador's press officer asked me to be at the ambassador's residence that afternoon at 1700, because the

ambassador was meeting with the press. I exploded and told him what a bad idea I thought that was, but he told me it was a long-standing arrangement to meet with the U.S. press only, to discuss matters of interest "on background." I showed up as directed and sat in.

The first question was, "Who is responsible for the collision between USS *George Washington* and *Nissho Maru*?" Ambassador Mansfield looked sagely toward me and said, "Jack, will you take that one?" At that moment my entire naval career of almost twenty-nine years passed before my eyes. I took a deep breath and explained that though I was not an authorized spokesman for the Navy Department in this matter and there were at least two investigations under way, I would give my personal opinion, on the basis of my working knowledge of international maritime law. I explained that a submerged submarine was obligated to stay clear of surface shipping, which had no way to determine the submarine's presence. It was accordingly presumed that a collision between a surface ship and a submarine was the fault of the submarine. Therefore, I expected that the U.S. government would take responsibility and pay damages for the loss of the ship and cargo, and for any personnel injuries or deaths.[9]

I held my breath for a few days, but the American press handled the matter fairly, and there was no backlash. I also became involved in setting up a meeting between the *Nissho Maru* survivors and a U.S. Navy captain sent out by COMSUBPAC to conduct a *Judge Advocate General Manual* investigation. The captain was the assistant chief of staff at COMSUBPAC for ballistic missile submarine operations, and a professional acquaintance of mine.

When we met, nearly all the *Nissho Maru* survivors were markedly hostile. They were extremely unhappy with the U.S. Navy and with anyone wearing its uniform. Only one older man, the engineer, did not seem angry. I presumed it was because of his experience at sea and the knowledge that unpleasant things happen without malice or forethought.

Later I attended a memorial service on the island of Shikoku for the master of *Nissho Maru*. His wife was the same age as mine, and his children were roughly the same ages as my children. The local American consul's representative and I entered their home, bowed deeply, and offered our apologies for the loss of her husband and their father. We waited outside during the service while a loud Japanese Communist Party sound truck hurled invectives against the Americans. A good friend and fellow submariner, Captain Eugene Lindsey, in command of U.S. naval facilities at Sasebo, performed the same function at services for the first mate in Kyushu. Neither of us enjoyed a moment of it.

One afternoon after the services, Ed Featherstone, who headed the political-military branch of the embassy political section, visited my office. He seemed bothered by some matter. It turned out that Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki was

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scheduled to go to Washington to meet with President Reagan in the near future. Japanese political realities would require that he receive an "interim report" of the ongoing U.S. Navy investigation into the collision. Ed wanted to know when the embassy could expect to see one. I told him that Navy *JAG Manual* investigations did not ordinarily produce interim reports; the investigating officer would finish his investigation in due time and send it to the convening authority (COMSUBPAC), who in turn who would forward it to CINCPACFLT for endorsement, after which it would go to the Chief of Naval Operations—a lengthy process that had no particular time limit.

Ed found my reply unsatisfactory. We then proceeded to the deputy chief of mission's office, where I repeated the likely progress of the Navy investigation. That meeting sent me back to my office to draft a message to various Washington headquarters asking for an "interim report" and outlining the political need. Subsequently, a carefully targeted "Personal For" back-channel message went from the ambassador to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the national security adviser to the president outlining the requirement for an "interim report." Prime Minister Suzuki and President Reagan met on 5 May 1981, and an "interim report" was duly handed over.[10] Later, on 15 August 1981, Ambassador Mansfield delivered the final report of the collision investigation to the Japanese government.[11]

My tour of duty as defense and naval attaché ended later in the year, and I returned home for a final year of active duty on the staff of the president of the National Defense University. This tour afforded me the opportunity to go over events in my mind and wonder about all the what-ifs.

What if the embassy had made that telephone call to the Foreign Ministry on the afternoon of the collision? Would that have precluded the cloud of suspicion that arose about the delay in notification? What were the concerns that prevented that call from being made in a timely fashion?

Timely notification was clearly a delicate political matter. The considerations noted earlier and the submarine's erroneous report that *Nissho Maru* had steamed away undamaged presumably led the key figures in the U.S. government to dawdle longer than they should have in authorizing the embassy in Tokyo to notify the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Yet it was reasonable to have expected *Nissho Maru* to report the collision by radio, presumably to Japan's Maritime Safety Agency, as well as to its owner. A query might then have been expected. Logically, it was expedient to make notification as soon as possible.

In Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac,* the "want of a nail" cost a horseshoe, a mount, a rider, and eventually a battle—all for want of care about a horseshoe nail. It is a reminder of the importance of little things. In this case,

the want of a timely communication cost the U.S. government a long period of unnecessary suspicion and distrust on the part of its principal ally in the Far East during the Cold War.

NOTES

1. It was common practice to assign transiting submarines as targets of opportunity. The policy allowed antisubmarine warfare forces, surface and air, to practice their craft, and it helped the submarine gain evasion experience.
2. I obtained this information from a review of the message traffic and from discussions with the COMSUBPAC investigating officer in the days following the collision.
3. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* of 27 February 2001 reported that the commanding officer of *George Washington* had been relieved of his command, effectively ending his Navy career. His officer of the deck received a punitive letter of reprimand, thus severely damaging any opportunity for promotion.
4. Under international maritime law, a submarine is required to maintain its distance from surface ships, which have no means of determining the submarine's presence. When a collision occurs between a surface ship and a submerged submarine, the submarine is automatically assumed to be at fault.
5. *New York Times,* 22 April 1981. Their bodies were reported recovered on 21 April.
6. Military time is used from here on—1 PM is 1300, and so on.
7. I was able to dig into the matter after the fact, while serving as U.S. defense and naval attaché in Tokyo. I could not locate any "general service" message traffic on the incident.
8. This is not to suggest that decision making is absent during non–staff working hours. There are duty officers at all locations. But sensitive matters take more time, and not all key figures are at their desks with adequate communications available.
9. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* of 27 February 2001 reported that in the *Nissho Maru* case the master's family was paid $374,000, as was the family of the first mate. The thirteen survivors were paid an average of $27,000 each. A two-million-dollar claim was filed by the owner of the freighter. The story goes on to state (erroneously) that USS *George Washington* did not report the collision with *Nissho Maru* until the following day. The *Christian Science Monitor* of 6 May 1981 reported that the Navy had accepted liability for the 9 April sinking of *Nissho Maru* on 21 April. The *Japan Times* (online) of 15 February 2001 reported that the U.S. government had paid 255 million yen in compensation to the owners of *Nissho Maru*.
10. *Observer Reporter,* 15 May 1981.
11. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin,* 27 February 2001.