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The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy

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not the U.S. sponsorship of such activities is apparent or later to be acknowledged publicly.” More along these lines would perhaps reveal that policy makers have quite a bit more flexibility in responding to overseas events and that covert action is not the only option between inaction and the overt use of force. But this is a mere quibble.

In sum, Lowenthal has written an outstanding primer on intelligence, the intelligence process, and the intelligence community.

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Finally, an author has done a hard-hitting analysis of the USS *Pueblo* incident of January 1968. Mitchell B. Lerner, an assistant professor of history at Ohio State University, does not exonerate the commanding officer of the *Pueblo*, Commander Lloyd M. Bucher, for giving up the ship and crew, and the intelligence it had gathered. However, of all those who may have been culpable, Commander Bucher emerges a hero and is no longer the scapegoat his superiors made him out to be. Exhaustive research, including access to new information released from the Lyndon Johnson White House files, leads Lerner to place blame evenly on the shoulders of the Navy chain of command, the intelligence community, and Johnson’s foreign policy advisors, due to their misunderstanding and underestimation of

the North Korean–Soviet Union relationship.

Lerner asserts that the intelligence collection effort, code-named Operation CLICKBEETLE, was the idea of the National Security Agency and that it had been patterned after the efforts of the Soviet Union’s intelligence-collection ships (AGIs) off the coast of the United States. Deciding that the Navy should be the operational commander for this strategic tasking, the National Security Agency turned the program over to it. Converting tired, old, and slow cargo ships into intelligence collection platforms with insufficient money, inadequate self-defense, little more than fresh coats of paint, minimal training, and inadequate safeguards for the sensitive intelligence equipment on board, the Navy mismanaged the effort from the outset. The maladies that befell the USS *Liberty* in 1967 off the coast of Israel were repeated in the preparation and tasking of *Pueblo* just seven months later off the Korean Peninsula.

The USS *Pueblo* had been tasked to collect signals intelligence in the Sea of Japan using the “cover” of conducting hydrographic research. The operation had been deemed to be of minimal risk, based on the analogy of the Soviet AGIs. Lerner contends that whenever an AGI violated territorial waters, the U.S. Navy would turn it around with an admonishment and no more. Would not the North Koreans do the same? Herein rested the Navy’s greatest miscalculation. The Koreans were not the puppets of the Soviet Union or its foreign policy executors. Lerner goes to great lengths to take the reader inside the mind of Kim Il Sung and his vision of communism and the greater glory of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

Shortly after the operation got under way, the North Korean navy reacted with surprise and precision. Commander Bucher, armed only with a few .50-caliber machine guns aboard his slow vessel, surrendered the *Pueblo* after stalling his pursuers for only sixty-five minutes. Inadequate destruction equipment and too much unnecessary classified material on board led to an intelligence coup for North Korea. One U. S. sailor lost his life during the short resistance. The defensive cover that was to have been provided by the Navy and the Air Force in response to calls from the *Pueblo* never came. The Navy and the Johnson administration missed all the indications and warnings that such a fate could befall the *Pueblo*, even after recognizing that the Pyongyang regime had violated the demilitarized zone more than fifty times, ambushed U.S. and allied ground forces, attempted to assassinate the president of the Republic of Korea (with a secondary target to be the American embassy), and in the preceding nine months seized twenty South Korean fishing vessels for “entering North Korean territorial waters.”

Lerner then brings the reader briefly into the brutal interrogation rooms of the communist regime and the eleven-month negotiations that finally resulted in the release of the crew in December 1968. Kim Il Sung used the captured vessel and its crew to further his domestic agenda and drive for greater nationalism. His negotiators remained steadfast in their demands that the United States admit that the *Pueblo* had violated North Korea’s territorial waters—it had not—and that the American government apologize to the citizens of North Korea and assure Kim Il Sung that the violations would never happen again.

Meanwhile, President Johnson could not negotiate the return of the crew without considering a host of broader international considerations, most notably the war in Vietnam. Lerner concisely weaves together the competing national foreign policy objectives to ensure that South Korea remained an active ally in South Vietnam while simultaneously keeping the United States out of another conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

While negotiations dragged on, there was little interest from the American public: the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War, the struggle for civil rights, the campaign for the equal rights for women, two political assassinations, and the decision of the incumbent president to forgo a second term all diverted the attention of the American public and relegated the *Pueblo* negotiations to the back pages of the newspapers and in most cases erased them altogether.

Lerner presents such a thorough explanation of the entire incident that it is unnecessary to belabor here the findings of the Navy’s court of inquiry. This important historical analysis provides the reader with a better understanding of the impact of seemingly harmless operations on the conduct of foreign policy. More importantly, the book demonstrates the critical importance of intelligence collection, analysis of indications and warnings, and the effects that ignoring such crucial information may have on not only fighting forces but the nation’s interests.

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