

## **And Then Sold for Scrap: The Enigmas of the USS Liberty**

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Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow

*T.S. Elliot, The Hollow Men, 1925*

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A Senior Essay by Katie MacDonald

On June 8, 1967 on a hot clear afternoon, Israeli air forces, combined later with naval forces, initiated an attack on an American intelligence vessel—the USS Liberty.<sup>1</sup> The air-sea attack took 34 lives and injured 171 crewmen.<sup>2</sup> The Israeli government explained the attack was an error due to misidentification of the ship. The American government has officially accepted the Israeli apology, yet continues to conceal many facts of the incident from the American public. There was a disparity between the official history of this event and the accounts of the surviving crewmen of the Liberty. The disparity forces a more comprehensive explanation of the events. Investigation of the deliberateness of the attack and the response of the United States government, as well as the cultural and political context of the middle to late 1960s, is revealing. This factual and contextual evidence demonstrates that the attack was in fact intentional and subsequently covered-up by the United States government.

The Liberty attack is significant in that the potential international ramifications of the event were paramount. The Liberty affair also reveals the evasiveness of the truth in the face of government efforts to erase, and societal resistance to recognize an event. The government cover up was only possible because the public was enthralled in other political and social events of the 1960s—namely, the Vietnam War and racial tension within the U.S. A favorable opinion of Israel among Americans also affected American perceptions of the Liberty attack. The Liberty incident is best understood as a shadow in American history. Forgotten by contemporaries, it remains a shaded and unhealthy element of both American foreign relations and American governmental order.

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<sup>1</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995. p3

<sup>2</sup> Oren, Michael. “Unfriendly Fire—Why did Israeli troops attack the USS Liberty?” The New Republic 23 July 2001. (Expanded Academic ASAP)

Many claim the assault on the Liberty was an unprovoked attack. However, to make such an assertion one must consider the political context of the event. Historically, there has been enthusiasm among Arab countries to drive Israel out of the area. By 1967, Arab states felt they were in a position to overcome the small state of Israel, and induced a conflict by instituting blockades on waters vital to Israel's livelihood.<sup>3</sup> This battle officially began on June 5, 1967 and became widely known as the Six Days War. Once the war actually started, Israel used successful tactics to very quickly destroy the air forces of its adversaries. Israel's remarkable and overwhelming victory shaped the future of the modern Middle East.

The attack on the USS Liberty remains an element of a dissenting history of America. Information about this affair is constantly increasing in availability as more facets of media address the event. Awareness of the Liberty saga grew dramatically with the publication of Assault on the Liberty, a book written by a surviving officer of the USS Liberty, James M. Ennes. Because of the unique nature of this book, this essay will rely heavily on Ennes' work, which depicts the attack and surrounding events from the perspective of the Liberty crew. In addition, this essay draws from the work of John Bourne who has also published scholarship on the Liberty incident. His work, which originated as a PhD dissertation at New York University, entitled, The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History, is not a primary account of the attack, and thus presents the incident from a more objective point of view.

The Liberty incident must be understood from a period prior to the intense Six Days War. The USS Liberty chronicle begins with her orders to proceed at "best speed"

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<sup>3</sup> Oren, Michael B. Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. p83-85

to the eastern Mediterranean, approximately thirteen miles from the Egyptian border known as the Gaza Strip.<sup>4</sup> The Liberty's new assignment, and the imminent danger of this latest station, did not surprise many members of the Liberty's crew. Liberty survivor Jim Ennes explained the apprehension of the crew: "border clashes were routine; both sides were becoming increasingly belligerent as chances for peaceful settlement faded."<sup>5</sup>

The Liberty's only means of protection from an attack were four .50 caliber machine guns, its position in international waters and its affiliation with the US Navy—in other words, the raised flag.<sup>6</sup> Thus, crewmembers' apprehension was understandable. The recognizable "'surveillance mode'" of the ship may also be pointed to as a safeguard for the vessel—the Liberty contained a plethora of electronic equipment most of which was in plain view.<sup>7</sup> However a "surveillance" ship might not be considered benign when located in the vicinity of a war zone. Survivor Richard S. Sturman, who had been a Petty Officer on the Liberty, explained, "explained that the Liberty's positions as an "intelligence gathering [vessel] goes without saying."<sup>8</sup> It is clear that the Liberty was a spy ship ideally stationed to document communications of both Israeli and Egyptian forces.<sup>9</sup>

Communication problems with superiors based in the U.S. are undoubtedly the most frustrating element of the Liberty attack. Prevention, it seems, was possible, yet unattained. Commander in Chief of U.S. Naval Forces in Europe informed the Liberty

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<sup>4</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p18

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p17

<sup>6</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995. p19

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Sturman, Richard S. Telephone interview. 3 December 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Cover- Up: USS Liberty. History Channel: 9 August 2001.

that its “operating area may be modified for safety reasons.”<sup>10</sup> In conjunction with this information, the Commander in Chief notified the Liberty that position reports had not been received over the last four days.<sup>11</sup> This was the first message of six that would fall into a swamp of a communication system and never be received.”<sup>12</sup>

On the morning of the attack, at 3:12 a.m. the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington sent a message to the Liberty ordering it to be “NOT CLOSER THAN 100 NM TO ISRAEL, SYRIA, EGYPT AND 25 NM TO CYPRUS.”<sup>13</sup> This message was misdirected to the Philipppians, and then correctly routed to the Liberty via the Naval Station in Morocco. But ultimately the message was misdirected and sent back to its origin at the Pentagon, where it was misfiled.<sup>14</sup> The third message, sent at 6:55a.m. Liberty time, was intended to confirm the order for the Liberty to maintain distance from the Gaza strip. In error, the Liberty was not included as one of the recipients of the message.<sup>15</sup> A similar confirmation message was again sent at 8:25 a.m. Liberty time. After some mishandling, the message was broadcast to the Liberty via the naval communication station in Asmara just an hour and 10 minutes before the attack. However the broadcast was

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<sup>10</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, “The First Message.” 8 June 1967. James M. Ennes Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979.

Appendix A p226

<sup>11</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995. p22

<sup>12</sup> Cristol, Jay. The Liberty Incident: The 1967 Attack on the U.S. Navy Ship. Washington: Brassey’s Inc., 2002. p27

<sup>13</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, “The Second Message.” 8 June 1967. James M. Ennes Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. Appendix A p228

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, “The Third Message.” 8 June 1967. James M. Ennes Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. Appendix A p230

unintelligible.<sup>16</sup> The fifth message reiterated that the Liberty was to maintain 100 miles distance from the coast. The message was on its way to delivery when it was, like all the others, misdirected, this time to Greece.<sup>17</sup> Ennes explained, the messages were “following a labyrinthine path through the communication system, which passed it about almost aimlessly, like a leaf afloat in a pond.”<sup>18</sup> A sixth message, this time of top-secret status, was also composed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. However there was no relay station to the USS Liberty that was cleared for top-secret status.<sup>19</sup> Thus the relay stations left the message idle, whereupon it became obsolete. In total, six messages were sent to the USS Liberty indicating that greater distance from the coast was imperative to their safety, yet not a single message was received. A few hours later, the Israeli attack on the Liberty began.

These actions and communications leading up to the attack are among the few events that are agreed upon by both the U.S. Government and the Liberty crewmembers. In assessing the other elements of the Liberty saga, one must consider the differing accounts of groups and individuals involved in the attack. Consideration of this disparity is crucial to understanding two significant elements of the Liberty attack. One element is the response of the American government regarding the need for a rescue effort once the attack commenced. But first, one must consider whether or not the attack was deliberate. Liberty survivor Richard S. Sturman explained his perception of the attack. He stated,

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<sup>16</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, “The Fourth Message.” 8 June 1967. James M. Ennes Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. Appendix A p231

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p58-59

<sup>19</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, “And Even a Sixth Message.” 8 June 1967. James M. Ennes Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. Appendix A p233

“They knew we were Americans and they commenced the attack anyway.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the large flag the Liberty flew, the timing of the attack, and the delay in Israeli assistance after the identity of the ship was obvious, all point to an intentional attack by Israeli forces. In addition, the flawed excuse that the USS Liberty was misidentified as the El Qusier, supports the notion that the attack though deliberate, was not thoroughly planned or premeditated.

The issue of the ship’s ensign has been a much-disputed element of the June 8<sup>th</sup> attack. The official Israeli position is that the Liberty flew no flag during the attack, though some accounts explain that the flag was very small.<sup>21</sup> As with many military events involving significant casualties, a naval investigation was conducted of the June 8, 1967 attack. During this Court of Inquiry, the Liberty’s captain, Commander William McGonagle, stated that a flag that clearly identified the ship as American, flew before the torpedo attack. He testified:

I noticed that our Ensign had been shot away during the air attack, and ordered [Signalman Russel David] to hoist a second Ensign from yardarm. During the air attack, our normal Ensign was flying, before the torpedo attack a holiday size ensign was hoisted.<sup>22</sup>

In a report eventually entitled, “Further Information on Yesterday’s Incident with the American Ship” the Israeli government stated that the “ship was not flying flag when sighted and moved at high speed west ward toward the enemy coast.”<sup>23</sup> The specific and collective memory of the Liberty crewmen would indicate that a flag was indeed flying. It seems unlikely that so many individuals of the Liberty vessel would recount a

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<sup>20</sup> Sturman, Richard S. Telephone interview. 3 December 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995. p276

<sup>22</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p148-149

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p153

fabricated story about a holiday-sized flag. The Liberty's logbook also held speed and direction of wind readings for each hour, and these readings indicate that the wind was traveling at least eight knots for the majority of the morning. This, in turn, indicates that the flag was displayed clearly, rather than hanging limply.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the Liberty was positively identified as an American ship by the Israeli forces just six hours before the attack.<sup>25</sup> Both the United States and Israeli governments agree upon this fact. It seems odd that a naval ship of comparable proportions in a similar location would not be connected with the previously identified USS Liberty.

Confirming the length of the attack is a useful indicator of whether the assault on the Liberty was accidental. Obviously, a brief assault would support the notion of an accidental attack on the vessel. Since the weather that day was clear, visibility issues are not a factor in the disputes.<sup>26</sup> According to the Liberty crewmen, the Israeli air forces began their attack at 1400 hours (Liberty time). Ennes explained the Liberty was "pounded with a deadly barrage of aircraft cannon and rocket fire."<sup>27</sup> This air attack lasted for twenty-five minutes, after which there was a short lull when crewmen could observe the torpedo boats closing in.<sup>28</sup> According to journalist Delinnda C. Hanley, the twenty-five minute air attack seems "longer than a simple case of friendly fire."<sup>29</sup> All parties agree that the first torpedo struck the Liberty at 1435.<sup>30</sup> This naval strike

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p152

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p154

<sup>26</sup> Cover- Up: USS Liberty. History Channel: 9 August 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p61

<sup>28</sup> Oren, Michael B. Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. p267

<sup>29</sup> Hanely, Delinnda C. "History Channel's 'Cover Up: Attack on the USS Liberty' Gives Crew Chance to Tell Their Story." Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. October 2001. (Expanded Academic ASAP)

<sup>30</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995. p36



continued for 40 minutes according to the Liberty men, during which time four additional torpedoes were fired at the Liberty, all of them missing the target.<sup>31</sup> The naval strike finally ceased at 1515.<sup>32</sup> Israeli accounts state the air attack lasted for no more than six minutes, while the torpedo attack did not continue after the first torpedo made impact at 1435.<sup>33</sup> In contrast with the Israeli reports, the accounts of the Liberty crewmen are consistent with respect to the approximate timing of the attack. Historian John Bourne also makes the point that it seems unlikely that the Israeli contention of such a brief attack could account for the fact that, in addition to the 34 deaths, 171 men were wounded and 820 shell and rocket holes crippled the Liberty.<sup>34</sup>

After the air and naval attack, at 1614 hours, Israeli forces reported to a U.S. diplomat stationed in Israeli, Naval Attaché Ernest Castle, that they had erroneously attacked an American vessel.<sup>35</sup> Though all versions of the timing of the attack leave room for questions, the general account of Israeli forces leaves a ninety minute gap between when the fighting ended and when the “mistake” was reported by Israeli authorities. There has been no explanation offered by an Israeli party to account for this substantial delay.<sup>36</sup> The accounts of the timing of the attack from Liberty crewmembers leave only an hour gap between the cease of fire and the official Israeli report that an accidental attack had occurred.<sup>37</sup> Though any sizable delay in reporting such a significant

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<sup>31</sup> Oren, Michael B. Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. p267

<sup>32</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995. p36

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p277

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p278

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p277

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p278

error of attack seems dubious, the account of the Liberty men seems slightly more plausible.

In addition to the sheer length of the attack, the fighting continued after the Israeli forces were close enough to see either the Liberty's oversized flag or the markings in English on the side of the boat, including the clearly inscribed title of the vessel. According to Israeli Embassy Spokesman Mark Regev, once the Israeli sailors identified the Liberty as American, they "immediately ceased hostile operations and offered assistance."<sup>38</sup> Liberty crewman claim that armed Israeli helicopters approached the Liberty but did not offer assistance. In addition, according to the Liberty men, most of the life rafts were damaged during the air strike or because of flying fragments after the torpedo hit. However three lifeboats were intact.<sup>39</sup> Crewmember Thomas Smith reported to his life-raft station, inflated the three rafts, dropped them overboard, and awaited further orders. In the distance the torpedo boats observed and then gunned the lifeboats, rendering them useless. Ennes explained the actions of the torpedo boats, "she opened fire on the empty life rafts, deflating two and cutting the line on the third, which floated away like a child's balloon in the surface of the water."<sup>40</sup> Liberty men say the life rafts were gunned at approximately 1515 at which point the torpedo boats left the scene. Israeli forces claim that lifeboats were not intentionally gunned, some accounts even state it was a life raft marked "U.S. Navy" that finally established the identity of the Liberty.<sup>41</sup> According to Israeli Embassy Spokesman Mark Regev, "Israeli sailors would not have

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<sup>38</sup> Cover- Up: USS Liberty. History Channel: 9 August 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p95

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p96

<sup>41</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995. p277

deliberately targeted the life boats, that's not the way we do things.”<sup>42</sup> Despite Israeli statements, Liberty crew believe they witnessed the targeting of their lifeboats. At a point when torpedo boats were close enough to read the markings on the Liberty vessel, Israeli forces apparently targeted lifeboats instead of offering assistance. It seems it was the intention of the Israeli forces to finish what they started.

Though the Israeli attack on the USS Liberty was intentional, little evidence supports the idea that the attack was planned in advance with any kind of executive organization. Had the attack been planned, it seems unlikely that the Israeli government would have positively identified the vessel as the USS Liberty just a few hours before the assault began. Yet such identification was made on the day of the attack by 800 hours Liberty time.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the Israeli government would likely come up with a better scapegoat for the attack had they had the time to construct a plausible defense. In a preliminary report about the attack entitled, “Further Information on Yesterday's Incident with the American Ship” Israel explained, “LIBERTY resembles the Egyptian supply ship, EL QUSEIR.”<sup>44</sup> However the two ships are in fact very different and it seems almost impossible that trained professionals of the Israeli Navy could have made such rudimentary errors. In a document entitled “Opinion of Counsel to the Court of Inquiry,” The Counsel to the Court of Inquiry responded to this preliminary Israeli report on the incident. The Counsel's response reads:

EL QUSEIR is less than half the size and lacks the elaborate antenna array and distinctive hull markings of LIBERTY. The location of superstructure island, a primary recognition feature of merchant type

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<sup>42</sup> Cover- Up: USS Liberty. History Channel: 9 August 2001.

<sup>43</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p154

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* p153

ships, is widely different. By this criteria as a justification for the attack, any ship resembling EL QUSEIR was in jeopardy.<sup>45</sup>

The actions of the Israeli government in the aftermath of the attack are further evidence of an intentional attack. Israel held only a limited investigation of the events of June 8, 1967. The Israeli court of inquiry exonerated the participants of the attack as well as the Israeli government itself. Historian James Bamford explained that none of the Israeli servicemen who participated in the attack were ever “court-martialed, reduced in rank, or even reprimanded.”<sup>46</sup> Even more telling is the fact that the boat which fired the torpedo that devastated the Liberty, Motor Torpedo Boat 203, has actually been honored.<sup>47</sup> Bamford explained the wheel and bell of the ship have been exhibited “prominently” at the Israeli naval museum, “among the maritime artifacts of which the Israeli navy was most proud.”<sup>48</sup> The contrast with the fate of the Liberty—which was sold for scrap without benefit of any governmental honoring of artifacts—is striking.<sup>49</sup>

The flying flag, the duration of the attack, the delayed assistance of Israeli forces, machine gunning the life rafts, and the offered excuse that the Liberty was misidentified as the El Quseir all support the idea of an attack that was not planned in advance, but was nevertheless intentional. The purpose behind the Israeli attack might never be known. Some believe it resulted from information the Liberty had collected regarding who had begun the war.<sup>50</sup> Other observers, such as University of Southern California Political Science Professor Richard Dekmejian, believe, “the collapse of the Arabs was so rapid,

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<sup>45</sup> “Opinion of Counsel to the Court of Inquiry.” Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. Appendix I

<sup>46</sup> Bamford, James. Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra Secret National Security Agency. New York: Anchor Books Random House, 2002. p229

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Cover- Up: USS Liberty. History Channel: 9 August 2001.

<sup>50</sup> “Sinking the Liberty: Accident or Design?” Newsweek 19 June 1967. p21

that the Israelis decided midway into the battle to go all the way. And the Americans didn't want them to and therefore it made sense for them to blind the USS Liberty."<sup>51</sup> Still others believe that the Liberty was intentionally attacked to "cover up a massacre of Egyptian prisoners of war."<sup>52</sup> It seems there are several reasons why the Israeli government might have been uncomfortable with the existence or location of the USS Liberty. The political climate of the time was one of confusion, as is generally the case in the height of war. The Israeli government may have winked to junior Israeli officers that attacking the Liberty would not have been frowned upon. It may be that those involved believed that, if the Liberty sank, the attackers would never be identified and Egypt could even be blamed. Or perhaps military officers inferred from the uneasiness of government officials that such an attack would be beneficial to the Israeli cause. Whichever the case may be, the fact that the Israeli servicemen involved in the attack were honored rather than reprimanded supports the notion of under-the-table approval of the Liberty attack.

The next extraordinary event of the Liberty saga is what Jim Ennes calls the "bungled rescue."<sup>53</sup> According to the Liberty men, the first response to the crew's radio calls for help came at 1505 hours, an hour and five minutes after the attack began.<sup>54</sup> The message from the commander of the Sixth Fleet read: "YOUR FLASH TRAFFIC RECEIVED. SENDING AIRCRAFT TO COVER YOU. SURFACE UNITS ON THE WAY. KEEP SITREPS COMING."<sup>55</sup> The first four rescue flights came from the USS America. According to the ship log and a chief petty officer of the USS America, two of

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<sup>51</sup> Cover- Up: USS Liberty. History Channel: 9 August 2001.

<sup>52</sup> Oren, Michael. "Unfriendly Fire—Why did Israeli troops attack the USS Liberty?" The New Republic 23 July 2001.

<sup>53</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p295

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* p236

<sup>55</sup> "COMSIXTHFLT'S Assurance of Help on the Way." Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p236

the F-4 Phantom jets deployed were of a specific breed known as “ready” jets. The term “ready” indicates that a jet has been assigned an elite pilot, is prepared for any scenario, and is equipped with many weapons including nuclear weapons.<sup>56</sup> There is no official recognition that the jets launched to protect the Liberty actually carried nuclear weapons or were authorized to use such weapons.<sup>57</sup> As Ennes explained, there is evidence that “ready aircraft, which normally carry nuclear weapons, were launched toward *Liberty*, and that the Pentagon reacted with anger bordering on hysteria.”<sup>58</sup> When word of the rescue flights reached Washington the jets were ordered to turn around immediately. Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David L. McDonald patched through to the Six Fleet and roared, “You get those fucking airplanes back on deck, and you get them back *now*.”<sup>59</sup> The jets pilots did as they were told.

Over an hour later, a second rescue effort was organized. Of the over 150 planes aboard carriers Saratoga and America, none were prepared and available for the undertaking of aiding the Liberty. Thus the Liberty continued the impossible task of self-defense while the men of the Sixth Fleet overtook the extensive endeavor of replacing bomb racks, gun pods and air-to-air missiles.<sup>60</sup> Over an hour later, four A-4 Skyhawks were launched from USS America. Four of the same, along with four F-4B Phantoms were launched from the USS Saratoga.<sup>61</sup> At 1614 hours, the American embassy in Israel

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<sup>56</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p77

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* p78

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* p92

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* p98

released the apology message of the Israeli government.<sup>62</sup> Immediately after receiving the apology, Admiral Martin of the Sixth Fleet recalled all twelve of the rescue planes.<sup>63</sup>

In summary, the first rescue flight was recalled, possibly after the Joint Chiefs of Staff learned of the nuclear weapons aboard the jets. The second and later flights were recalled after the White House and the Commander of the Sixth Fleet heard the report that the Israeli attack had occurred in error. The bungled rescue is shocking when one considers that the Sixth Fleet was only 400 miles away from the Liberty vessel, and many of the jets deployed could travel up to 900 miles an hour.<sup>64</sup> As Ennes notes, there is no explanation for “the complete failure of the United States Navy to send help to an American ship within easy range.”<sup>65</sup>

By 1530 hours it appeared to the Liberty men that the attack was over. The wounded were collected and brought to the main battle dressing station, and the rest of the crew attempted to repair the damage created from torpedo and rocket fire. With the Liberty listing at a dangerous degree, men used plywood and mattresses to keep flooding to a minimum in the chamber surrounding the forty by thirty foot torpedo hole.<sup>66</sup>

At 1725 hours, the now obsolete message for the Liberty to maintain distance from the Gaza coast was sent from the Naval Communications Station in Asmara.<sup>67</sup> Over six hours late, the message could be neither received nor decoded, as equipment and crew

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* p99

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. “Discussion of the Rescue Effort.” Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. Appendix D p240

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* p241

<sup>66</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p110

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* p111

were not functional.<sup>68</sup> Still unaware of their unnecessary vulnerability, the fragile vessel forged ahead to a meeting point with American forces.

On the morning of June 9, a helicopter from the USS America began transferring the wounded to a destroyer. By June 13 the USS America had arrived in Malta to transfer the seriously injured to the hospital. The Liberty vessel would arrive the following day for repairs.<sup>69</sup> In July, the Liberty returned home to Norfolk where she was denied funds to restore her intelligence capabilities and subsequently decommissioned.<sup>70</sup> Historian James Bamford explained that by 1973 the vessel was sold and “welders’ torches at last did what the Israeli attack hadn’t.”<sup>71</sup> The Liberty was broken down and then sold for scrap.

The cover up effort regarding the Liberty affair began almost immediately. The Liberty Assault was a public relations disaster for a number of reasons. The most basic of these problems was explaining why Israel, an ally, would attack an American ship. Perhaps even more disturbing was the U.S. Government’s visible abandonment of an American ship under attack. Even seemingly simple questions, such as the Liberty’s mission, the U.S. Government found it difficult to address. The Liberty was a spy ship, on a somewhat dubious assignment of collecting information about the Israeli and Egyptian involvement in the Six Day War.<sup>72</sup> The first report on the attack available to the press falsely explained the ship’s mission in a paragraph that preceded, and was nearly twice the size of, the paragraph actually identifying Israel as the nation responsible for the attacks. The Liberty was described as a “technical research ship” on an assignment to

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p135-136

<sup>70</sup> Bamford, James. Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra Secret National Security Agency. New York: Anchor Books Random House, 2002. p228

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Cover- Up: USS Liberty. History Channel: 9 August 2001.



relay “information concerning the evacuation of American dependents and other American citizens from the countries of the Middle East.”<sup>73</sup> Lying about the Liberty’s assignment was the first of many measures taken by the U.S. Government to minimize the attention given to this significant event in history.

The U.S. Government’s acceptance of the Israeli explanation that the incident was a “tragic accident” was the next indicator that the American government wished to make the Liberty incident a non-issue. The first report on the Liberty released to the press on the day of the assault described the attack as an accident.<sup>74</sup> Historian John Bourne noted that by June 9, one day after the attack, President Johnson instructed members of the Department of State to convince congressmen that the attack was in fact accidental.<sup>75</sup> This is significant because an investigation of the attack had not yet occurred, and a formal investigation would not begin until June 14 when the Court of Inquiry under Vice Admiral John S. McCain began proceedings.<sup>76</sup>

Twenty-nine members of the press were aboard the USS America on another assignment before the attack of the Liberty ensued. After some open statements from Liberty crewmen to the press, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara put a media lid on the Liberty incident until the official Court of Inquiry report was released.<sup>77</sup> Stories filed by these reporters were steered not to their respective newsrooms, but rather to the

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<sup>73</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p126

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1996. p268

<sup>76</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p144-145

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* p130

Pentagon. One reporter even attempted to conceal his story as a personal letter, but the designed mail system delivered the correspondence to the Pentagon.<sup>78</sup>

According to Ennes, sailors were constantly told to give no comments to the press. Rear Admiral Isaac C. Kidd, who had come aboard the Liberty on June 11, instructed the crew, directly and through other officers, to “Refer all questions to the commanding officers or executive officer or to Admiral Kidd. Answer no questions. If somehow you are backed into a corner, then you may say that it was an accident and that Israel has apologized. You may say nothing else.”<sup>79</sup>

The themes of shallow investigations and silencing of the crew continued with the Court of Inquiry proceedings. This naval investigation formally began on June 14.<sup>80</sup> The court findings relied heavily upon the testimony of the captain of the Liberty Commander McGonagle, whose account at various points oddly contradicted the recollections of the rest of the Liberty crew. McGonagle testified, “It is estimated that the total air attack was completed in approximately five to six minutes.”<sup>81</sup> This is a clear contradiction with the accounts of other crewmembers. McGonagle’s testimony was dotted with statements that according to the rest of the Liberty crew are entirely inaccurate. McGonagle claimed there was no order given to abandon ship; he also asserted that *immediately* after the torpedo struck, the attacking boats offered assistance.<sup>82</sup> It is difficult to understand the disparity between McGonagle’s testimony and the accounts of the rest of the Liberty crew. Ennes offered an explanation, “He testified under tremendous strain, he was ill, grief-stricken and apparently worried that he might be charged with some as-yet-

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.* p127

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* p131, 143

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* p145

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.* p148

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.* p150

unidentified offense.”<sup>83</sup> Despite these circumstances the court aligned itself with McGonagle’s testimony. As Bourne explained, “The Naval Court was a rigged hearing, allowing no testimony which did not suit the Court’s purposes.”<sup>84</sup>

The Court of Inquiry completed its investigation on June 15 after interviewing just twelve additional officers and crewmen of the Liberty. The consensus among those interviewed was that the Court avoided questions that might lead to evidence of a deliberate attack or that would contradict McGonagle’s testimony.<sup>85</sup> Instead, questions were asked regarding the performance of both captain and his crew with respect to drills and the readiness of the ship.<sup>86</sup> Survivor Richard Sturman commented on the failure of the Naval Court: “They [navel investigators] did not live up to their own mandates by established by the U.S. government.” He continued, “They did not include a lot of pertinent information. That in itself was a white wash.”<sup>87</sup>

In addition to biased investigations and media lids, the Liberty vessel itself was given a new face. In Malta, the ship was patched up, the boat was reconstructed where the torpedo had hit, patches covered all marks of machine gun and rocket fire, the exterior was resurfaced, and the ship’s goods and supplies were sold.<sup>88</sup> One surviving Liberty officer, Lieutenant Lloyd Painter explained, “They sent us home like nothing had happened.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* p150

<sup>84</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1996. p267

<sup>85</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p151

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.* p152-3

<sup>87</sup> Sturman, Richard S. Telephone interview. 3 December 2002

<sup>88</sup> Cover- Up: USS Liberty. History Channel: 9 August 2001

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

Once home, Liberty crewmembers found the concealment and mistreatment continued. The Liberty crew was broken up, given new assignments or decommissioned. Combat pay was in some cases denied and close supervision was employed to uphold the media lid.<sup>90</sup> Some members of the Sixth Fleet were faced with a similar fate as that crew was divided and given new posts.<sup>91</sup> Just over a year after the attack Captain William McGonagle was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. This was an apparent victory in so much as the Liberty attack and the fine efforts of her crew were finally being acknowledged. However, the context of the award ceremony would indicate otherwise. Ennes explained that the award ceremony was scheduled on short notice. The award, customarily presented by the president, was given by the Secretary of the Navy. The location was at the Washington Navy Yard, rather than the White House.<sup>92</sup> The attempts of the American government to conceal all matters concerning the Liberty affair from the public, in hindsight, are overt.

The idea of an intentional attack is further supported by the process of monetary payments awarded to Liberty survivors and the U.S. government for damages incurred to person and property. Death claims were paid in full in June of 1968. Damages averaged \$100,000 per death and reached a total of \$3,323,500. The award of this sum was relatively swift with each claim met with little contention.<sup>93</sup> Receiving claims of damages deserved because of injury was a more laborious process. Petty Officer Sturman explained, “they nickel-ed and dime-ed our government to pieces.” Sturman asserts that

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<sup>90</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1996. p267

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p194-195

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.* p197

damages were awarded only after Congress increased the monetary support for Israel. He continued, “here is the money now you can pay us back.”<sup>94</sup> The sums claimed for personal injury were reviewed by many lawyers and were only awarded after a pull and tug with Israel involving other issues.<sup>95</sup> The total sum awarded was \$3,566, 457, which met 100 % of every claim.<sup>96</sup> Israel continued the theme of languidly negotiating monetary damages when it came to damages incurred on the Liberty vessel itself. However, in an abrupt and noteworthy reversal, damages were awarded swiftly once the low profile of negotiation was threatened. The United States government originally spent \$30 million reconfiguring the Liberty to allow it the technical capabilities required for a spy ship.<sup>97</sup> Despite this large sum, the U.S. claim only asked for \$7,644,146 for the loss related to the ship.<sup>98</sup> However, at the time Assault on the Liberty was first published, no such damages had been awarded. Ennes explained the Israeli argument, “Payments for the dead were awarded for ‘humanitarian’ reasons, the Israelis said; damage to the ship was caused by American blunder and would not be paid for.”<sup>99</sup> However, the damages were suddenly awarded after Senator Adlai Stevenson III made efforts to conduct an official inquiry in 1980. Israel had agreed to three installments of \$2 million each, totaling \$6 million.<sup>100</sup> The complete reversal of Israel’s position is curious and supports the notion that the Israeli attack was deliberate, and therefore, at least from the perspective of the American government, must remain omitted from American history.

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<sup>94</sup> Sturman, Richard S. Telephone interview. 3 December 2002

<sup>95</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p198

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* p199

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty Addendum to the 2002 Edition. New York: Random House, 2002. p13

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

Beyond the treatment of the Liberty crew, the close scrutiny of the press remains the most significant element of the Liberty cover-up. Initially articles on the subject assumed the attack was in fact an accident. Based on the statements of the State Department, there was no reason for members of the press to think otherwise. On June 9, 1967, The New York Times published a front-page article about the attack entitled “Israel, in Error, Attacks U.S. Navy Ship.”<sup>101</sup> News writer William Beecher included limited information on the details of the attack parallel to statements released by the U.S. Department, of Defense. The subject line of the article read: “10 Navy Men Die and 100 are Hurt.”<sup>102</sup> Beecher does not mention the possibility of an intentional attack. Beecher quotes various senators to support the notion of an accidental attack. Senator Jacob K. Javits’ statement indicates the eagerness of many to believe the attack was accidental. Javits was relieved to know that neither Arab nor Soviet forces were responsible for the attack. He stated, “With Israel, we know it was a mistake.”<sup>103</sup> This New York Times article is an example of many articles that surfaced in the days immediately following the attack.<sup>104</sup>

The first signal to the American public that the Israeli attack was anything other than accidental came when the press began to interview sailors aboard the USS America. By June 10, The New York Times published another article describing the events of June 8. No longer a page one topic, the article entitled, “Sailors Describe Attack on Vessel,” appeared on page twenty-seven of the Sunday edition. Reporter Neil Sheenan maintains that the attack was an accident, but provides a more extensive account including some

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<sup>101</sup> Beecher, William. “Israel in Error, Attacks U.S. Ship.” New York Times 9 June 1967. p1,

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> See also: “An Error of War—And U.S. Seamen Die.” U.S. News and World Report 19 June 1967. p10

details that hint at the dubious nature of the attack. For example Sheenan quotes a sailor who explained that the Liberty flew its flag and that torpedo boats circled the ship within 100 yards before the torpedo attack.<sup>105</sup>

Though most articles on the Liberty issue in June 1967 and thereafter maintained that the attack was a case of mistaken identity, in the weeks that followed the attack there were some important articles that explored the idea of a deliberate attack.<sup>106</sup> These later articles began to overtly broach the notion of a purposeful attack. Newsweek published a short article entitled “Sinking the Liberty: Accident or design?” The segment was less than two hundred words and appeared on page twenty-one of the June 19 edition. Without naming names, the editors explain that many officials in Washington are dissatisfied with the explanation that an American ship in international waters was accidentally attacked. The article reads, “One top level theory holds that some in the Israeli armed forces ordered the Liberty sunk because he suspected it had taken down messages showing that Israel started the fighting.”<sup>107</sup>

Another important article that questioned the circumstances of the Liberty attack was published in the Shreveport Times on July 18. This editorial contended that the U.S. government might be covering up a deliberate Israeli attack. The article reads, “Almost as shocking as the attack itself has been the manner in which Washington—especially the Defense Department—has seemed to try to absolve Israel from any guilt right from the start.”<sup>108</sup> The editorial argued further that the Israeli invasion of Syria the day after the

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<sup>105</sup> Sheenan, Neil. “Sailors Describe Attack on Vessel.” New York Times 11 June 1967. p27

<sup>106</sup> See Also: Frost, Colin The New York Times 18 June, 1967. p20; Reuters, The New York Times 18 June, 1967.

<sup>107</sup> “Sinking the Liberty: Accident or Design?” Newsweek 19 June 1967. p21

<sup>108</sup> The Shreveport Times, 18 July 1967. Reprinted: Ennes, James M. Jr. Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship. New York: Random House, 1979. p142-143

Liberty attack may be significant. It reads, “There was no normal way for the U.S. or the U.N. to learn of the military buildup at the Syrian border; except that the Liberty now was only 15 miles offshore from Egypt and Israel and only 90 miles from Tel Aviv.”<sup>109</sup>

Despite these articles that dug deeper into the issue of why the attack occurred, within a few weeks even publications that had at one point shouted conspiracy were ready to drop the issue. Newsweek, responsible for the important “Periscope” column entitled “Sinking the Liberty: Accident or Design?,” by July 3 went on to publish an article describing the attack as an error.<sup>110</sup> This position was reaffirmed several weeks later with “The U.S.S. *Liberty*: Tragedy of Errors.” Like the article on July 3, this Newsweek article explained that government officials, particularly Defense Secretary McNamara, are “satisfied that the strafing the U.S. ship *Liberty* by pilots during the Mideast war was unintentional.”<sup>111</sup>

A Liberty survivor, Petty Officer Joseph C. Lentini, noted the sparse media coverage of the Liberty attack. He stated, “We were on the front page, then we were on the third page, then we were on the eighth page, and then we were on the back page, and it was almost that fast.” Joseph Lentini continued, “In this country, it was a non-issue very quickly.”<sup>112</sup> John Bourne commented further on the odd role of the press. He stated, “The *Liberty* issue is unique in this sense; there is no other political issue where fervent protest is followed by complete and permanent silence.”<sup>113</sup> Borne attributes this silence in

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Newsweek 3 July 1967. Reprinted: Cristol, Jay. The Liberty Incident: The 1967 Attack on the U.S. Navy Ship. Washington: Brassey’s Inc., 2002. p 69

<sup>111</sup> “The U.S.S. *Liberty*: Tragedy of Errors.” Newsweek 28 August 1967. Reprinted: Cristol, Jay. The Liberty Incident: The 1967 Attack on the U.S. Navy Ship. Washington: Brassey’s Inc., 2002. p 69

<sup>112</sup> Cover- Up: USS Liberty. History Channel: 9 August 2001

<sup>113</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1996. p273



part to limited information available on the issue due to the efforts of the government to cover-up the incident.

The cultural context of the Liberty attack is crucial to understanding the aftermath of this affair. Public opinion plays an important role in how the media reports an event. In the 1960s several events affected the mindset of the public on the issue of the Liberty. The most vivid of these public opinion phenomena are American attitudes towards Israel, the Vietnam War, and the racial tension of the 1960s.

Americans had very favorable perceptions of Israel in 1967. Israel was the underdog in its conflict with Arab states. Because of Israel's status as a long-time ally with the U.S., and its position as the least powerful nation of the emerging war, Israel's swift victory was awe inspiring to the American public. Journalist Robert Alter wrote in October 1967:

We proverbially admire the underdog, but especially when he proves in the outcome to be spectacularly successful, and the perfect match of sure conception and swift execution in the Israeli campaign against the poised armies of three surrounding nations captured imaginations everywhere.<sup>114</sup>

The Six Days War began just four days before the Liberty attack. But because of the overwhelming triumph, the perception of Israelis as victors had already been instilled in the minds of the American public. The notion that Israel would deliberately harm a U.S. ship could not be incorporated into the popular conception of Israeli success. News reporters are influenced to some extent by what the American public wants to read, but as Americans themselves, reporters are also affected by the same cultural circumstances as

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<sup>114</sup> Alter, Robert "Israel & the Intellectuals." Commentary. October 1967. p46

the rest of the public. John Bourne explained, “Public approval of the Israelis was almost universal, and there was a kind of vicarious satisfaction in their achievements.”<sup>115</sup>

The success of Israeli forces, which is described as a “legend” by some, came about through air force tactics.<sup>116</sup> Israeli forces were better prepared for the conflict and had secretly trained for such an event for years.<sup>117</sup> By the end of the first air strike wave against the Arabs, it was clear that this war would be different. Historian Michael Oren explained, “The Israelis were stunned.” He continued, “No one had ever imagined that a single squadron could neutralize an entire air base.”<sup>118</sup> The one hundred and fifty-two hour conflict continued in much the same vain as that first air strike. Egyptians lost over ten thousand men; Jordan lost over seven hundred soldiers; Syria lost four hundred and fifty men, while Israel lost less than seven hundred citizens.<sup>119</sup> An article in the June 12 edition of Der Spiegel summarized the transformation created by the war. It read, “the Israelis have conquered.... With a single exemplary display of tough soldierly skill...they have entered into the hearts of the people in whose name once all Jews were to be exterminated.”<sup>120</sup>

The popular applause for Israel and Israelis in 1967 is apparent in the print journalism of the period. A Newsweek article published July 11, 1967, pointed out that Israel often elicited overwhelming support from the U.S. while efforts to help other nations in need of aid have rarely rallied such support. The editors, in an article entitled “Doves, Hawks and Morality,” commented on the strong views of Israel’s supporters:

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<sup>115</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1996. p273

<sup>116</sup> Laquer, Walter. “Israel, the Arabs, and World Opinion.” Commentary. August 1967. p49

<sup>117</sup> Oren, Michael B. Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. p171

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.* p175

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.* p305

<sup>120</sup> Alter, Robert “Israel & the Intellectuals.” Commentary. October 1967. p46

They did not wait to reason out exactly why the U.S. Government should be willing to fight for Israel in these suddenly developed conditions nor exactly how they were going to reconcile eagerness for military measures against the Arabs with the negative view not a few of them have taken toward military measures against the communists in Southeast Asia.<sup>121</sup>

Indeed the most ardent and extreme support for Israel came in the 1960s from the American Left and the Jewish-American population. This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated by the statement by one professor at Brandeis University in 1971: “In dealing with those who oppose Israel, we are not reasonable and we are not rational. Nor should we be.”<sup>122</sup>

Commentary, a Jewish-American journal, explains and justifies ardent support for Israel from the perspective of Jewish-Americans. Robert Alter explained, “Without the Land of Israel—land in the plain meaning of the word—there is neither hope nor promise for a Jewish future in any place, at any time.”<sup>123</sup>

With the overwhelming popularity of Israel in the minds of the American public, and particularly among the vocal Left, the Liberty attack could not be understood in the United States. John Bourne explained, “The contrary view of Israel as a nation which might deliberately harm the United States simply did not fit in this overall picture.”<sup>124</sup> Understanding American attitudes towards the Israelis reveals that the ignorance of this issue was not only a result of government manipulation, but also an outcome of the willingness of the American public to overlook the issue.

The popularity of the Israelis was based not only on their success in warfare, but also in the unproductiveness of the U.S. in its warring endeavors. Bourne explained, “The

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<sup>121</sup> “Doves, Hawks and Morality.” National Review 11 July 1963. p723

<sup>122</sup> Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p 253

<sup>123</sup> Alter, Robert “Israel & the Intellectuals.” Commentary. October 1967. p46-52.

<sup>124</sup> Bourne, John E. The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History. New York: Reconsideration Press, 1996. p277

Israelis were the heroes of the hour to an American public weary of endless war in Vietnam and transfixed by the swift and dramatic Israeli victory.”<sup>125</sup> The conflict in Vietnam was the longest war in American history. Vietnam was an ambiguous war in that there was neither a concrete reason for the fighting nor was there a tangible beginning to the war. Historians Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin explained, “The most consistent explanation for why Americans needed to fight in Vietnam was the defense of the ‘credibility’ of the United States—in itself a murky ambiguous goal.”<sup>126</sup> At the beginning of the war, America entered Vietnam as the heroic veterans of World War II.<sup>127</sup> However as the war dragged on, the opaque goals of American involvement created much dissent among the American public regarding American involvement. In September of 1967 U.S. News and World Report commented, “More and more there is questioning of just what the U.S. is accomplishing in Vietnam, and growing irritation and frustration over the stalemate.”<sup>128</sup> Later in this article entitled, “An Uneasy America—Why?,” U.S. News and World Report included the results of a nationwide survey on the state of American politics. American involvement in Vietnam was frequently commented on. One Massachusetts resident stated, “I thought the war was justified, but now I’m not so sure that what we want for them is what they want for themselves. We can’t impose democracy on a country that never had it and doesn’t want it.”<sup>129</sup> The opinions of Americans who justified American involvement in Vietnam were also included. One man from Michigan stated, “It’s disgusting—American fellows dying over there without an

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<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p67

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.* p73

<sup>128</sup> “An Uneasy America.” U.S. News and World Report. 18 September 1967. p42

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

all-out effort on our part to win. I favor escalation and more South Vietnamese participation.”<sup>130</sup>

Vietnam was a political issue about which nearly every American had an opinion. U.S. News and World Report explained in 1967, “The war in Vietnam is the No. 1 topic on people’s minds.”<sup>131</sup> Given this American interest, the subject of the War in Vietnam was given more media attention than any other issue during the mid 1960s. More than a political event, Vietnam had dramatic effects on American society, making it one of the most significant cultural events of the 1960s. Historians Isserman and Kazin articulated the influence of the Vietnam War on American civilization. They wrote, “Americans would get used to thinking of each other as divided into polarized enemy camps: pro-war and antiwar, hawks and doves, and on from there to ever more scurrilous epithets.”<sup>132</sup>

Around the time of the Liberty attack, 892 Americans died in the Vietnam conflict during the period of May 1967 to June 1967.<sup>133</sup> As the death toll rose in Vietnam, domestic violence became a greater issue. Anti-war protest grew larger and more militant as the War continued. Historian Thomas Powers noted that during this period “people felt that history was accelerating, time was running out, great issues were reaching a point of final decision.”<sup>134</sup> The American palate was full. The Liberty attack, responsible for the loss of only 34 lives, could not be conceived of as one of the “great issues” of the time. Though in actuality, if Americans had had the energy to consider the broader

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<sup>130</sup> *ibid.* p43

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p67

<sup>133</sup> “Vietnam War Deaths by Month, 1966-1971.” <http://members.aol.com/forcountry/kiamonth.htm>

<sup>134</sup> Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p181

ramifications of an unprovoked Israeli attack on America, repercussions for American-Israeli relations might have been paramount.

In 1967 U.S. News and World Report stated, “Growing uneasiness and bafflement are the words that sum up the mood of America.”<sup>135</sup> Issues surrounding the war in Vietnam were not the only concerns of Americans during the period of the Liberty attack. Racial tension during this period was pronounced, thus creating an uneasy America. By 1967, the United States was undergoing what some have dubbed “The Civil War of the 1960s.”<sup>136</sup> Isserman and Kazin explained that during the 1960s America was divided into competing faction that “differed sharply and, at times, violently about how to build a society of individuals at peace with themselves and with the rest of the world.”<sup>137</sup> Race riots were dotted all over the United States in the mid 1960s. Every major city recognized their position as a tinderbox. In 1967, there were two major race riots that served to further divert the attention of Americans from the seemingly marginal attack on the Liberty. On July 13, 1967, just over a month after the Liberty attack, an immense riot broke out in Newark. This conflict began with the arrest of a young black man for drunken driving.<sup>138</sup> To on-lookers, it seemed the police officer, a white male, used more force than necessary. Anger developed among the crowd. Efforts of the police to end the violence only served to instigate the riot. By the time order was restored 23 had died and 725 were injured.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> “An Uneasy America.” U.S. News and World Report. 18 September 1967. p42

<sup>136</sup> Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p293

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> “1967 Riots.” <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~wadhvani/afam01/1967.htm>

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*

In Detroit on July 23, not two weeks after the incident in Newark, another massive riot took place. The incident began when police arrested the owners of an illegal African American liquor establishment.<sup>140</sup> Bystanders gathered and began burning neighboring white-owned stores. Eventually the disorder was so widespread that some black owned stores were raided and burned. The two-day riot eventually took the lives of 43 people, injured 1,199, and was responsible for the arrest of 7,200 people.<sup>141</sup> The riots in Newark and Detroit were among 23 other major riots and 30 less severe riots that same summer.<sup>142</sup> According to an NBC Nightly News report made on March 1, 1998 “From 1964 through 1968, more than 250 American cities erupted in violence. They were the worst riots in US history, nearly 300 people died, 8,000 were injured, property damage went into the hundreds of millions of dollars.”<sup>143</sup> Though the Liberty attack was a significant event, it was an isolated event causing 34 American deaths, a relatively small number in comparison to the deaths from rioting during this period.

Though Vietnam was at the forefront of American thoughts, much attention was also given to this worsening of racial relations within the U.S. borders. The Kerner Commission articulated the tension of 1967. It stated that the United States was fast becoming, “two societies, one black and one white—separate and unequal.”<sup>144</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. noted in 1967 the irony of black men fighting for the civil liberties of unknown men abroad when those same rights are not enjoyed at home.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p199

<sup>143</sup> “NBC Nightly News with Jack Ford.” 1 March 1998.

<http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/aboutus/media/NBCmar1.html>

<sup>144</sup> “1967 Riots.” <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~wadhvani/afam01/1967.htm>

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*

In the midst of social movements that would redefine America, the Liberty had no following. America was becoming more than ever before, a nation of factions. The foreign relations issues intrinsically connected to an Israeli attack on an American naval ship were lost among a country saturated with anti-war propaganda. The silent majority that may have approved of the war in Vietnam was certainly not about to take up a controversial campaign against Israel. The Liberty was unrelated to the racial tension within the U.S. There is no mention of the racial composition of the Liberty crewmen killed in the attack on June 8, 1967. Race was not an issue in this attack because there was a diverse group of Americans from different racial backgrounds who were lost. If the majority of crewmembers killed were of African American lineage, the U.S. government abandonment would likely have been regarded as another example of blacks denied their rights even in the context of defending their country. As it was, the Liberty men had no constituency, their anguish and loss was unrelated to that of factions within larger America and thus they were forgotten.

The attack on the USS Liberty was unnecessary and preventable. The disorder of the U.S. military communication system is at one level responsible for the attack. The Liberty was stationed in international waters, but very near to a war zone. It was irresponsible of the military to leave the Liberty in such a vulnerable position. But in assigning blame for the Liberty attack, Israeli forces must not be excused. The Liberty, though engaged in clandestine endeavors, was acting in accordance with international law. Israeli forces deliberately attacked the vessel. This was a clearly marked vessel that flew a flag. The attack continued for over an hour. There was a delay in Israeli assistance after the identity of the ship was obvious. The Israeli intent is clear. The ambiguous



motivation for an Israeli attack and the unlikelihood of an attack that was planned and approved by every facet of the Israeli government must not discount the reality of the attack. However, the fact that the attack occurred does automatically include the event in American history. After consideration of the cultural context of the Liberty attack, it seems that reality is defined not by what is, but by what is perceived. The Liberty attack was an embarrassment to the American government on a number of levels. It was irresponsible and dubious for the Liberty to be assigned to the Gaza coast. It was embarrassing for America to be attacked by a nation the U.S. worked so hard to support. Most embarrassing were the incompetent efforts to recall the Liberty from the war zone followed by the recalled rescue flights and subsequent abandonment of a wounded American naval vessel. As a result, American perception of the Liberty affair was skewed by the cover-up efforts of the U.S. government. However, American perceptions are not solely dependant on allowances of the government. Americans live in a nation where the public has substantial liberties and capabilities to gain knowledge. The press is a significant tool available to the American community. Like so many authoritative institutions, the U.S. government has, at times, attempted to conceal information from larger America. However, Americans must recognize their unique position to control their own knowledge. In the case of the Liberty, the U.S. government worked to nullify the affair. But the success of this cover up was made possible by three elements of American consciousness. First, Americans were blind in that most could not recognize an event contrary to their beliefs concerning Israel. Second, there was the saturating effect Vietnam had with respect to Americans' appetite for international conflict. The third significant element of American consciousness during the 1960s was the inability of

Americans to look beyond their national identity fractured by racial tension to consider an event that is an affront to American foreign policy on the subject of Israel. The Liberty incident is thus a shadow in American history, forgotten because of the unusual accordance of American government and American public to disregard. Its occurrence reveals the subjective nature of American reality and the vulnerability of tension filled America to omit events with significant international ramifications.

American treatment of this incident reveals the towering strength of a nation that can send its men, such as those on the Liberty, in harm's way and then know that it has so many men it can afford to forget these few—although such a nation is forgetting, to borrow a phrase historian John Lukacs used in 1965, “the transitory malleability of this comfort.” The Liberty is a shadow of American history that may become illuminated at any time. American democracy is threatened with every negligent act of its government. The position of the Liberty in American history is perhaps best described by the author J.R.R. Tolkien’s statement that “The future is impenetrable, especially to the wise; for what is really important is always hid from contemporaries, and the seeds of what is to be are quietly germinating in some dark corner.”

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