



## **WASHINGTON REPORT ON MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS**

Washington Report, August 2005, pages 16, 18

Special Report

### **Washington's Fateful Cover-Up of Israel's Attack on the USS Liberty**

*By Paul Findley*

Israel's war crimes against the USS *Liberty* and its crew on June 8, 1967—midway in the Six-Day War Israel launched against its Arab neighbors—provoked a startling, profound U.S. response, a cover-up that signaled the beginning of America's 38 years of Israel-centric foreign policies. It marked a costly, radical turn for the worse that sent America's prestige and credibility plunging and imposed on the American people ever-growing new burdens—even war—with no end in sight.

Perplexing as the assault remains to the few Americans aware of its details, it is no less so than the strange behavior of President Lyndon B. Johnson while the attack was still underway.

When attacked, the *Liberty*, an unarmed reconnaissance ship of the U.S. Navy, was moving slowly in international waters off the coast of Gaza and the Sinai. The day's horrors are detailed in a report filed on behalf of the ship's survivors by James R. Gotcher, general legal counsel for the USS *Liberty* Veterans Association, with the Secretary of Defense on June 8, 2005, the 38th anniversary of the assault. Among the Israeli crimes cited in the report are the following:

- sustained rocket, cannon and torpedo fire from air and sea that killed 34 U.S. sailors, wounded 173 others, and riddled the defenseless ship with holes, one of them 40 feet wide;
- gunfire that destroyed rubber lifeboats that were put in the water when the ship's captain ordered preparations to abandon ship; and
- the firing of napalm on the open deck where defenseless sailors were attempting to protect the ship.

The assault was deliberate. It was committed in broad daylight during a two-hour span in the afternoon, following a series of close-in aerial surveillance flights by Israeli aircraft hours earlier. The attack began three hours after Israel's naval command precisely identified the target as an unarmed U.S. Navy reconnaissance vessel. The American flag flew in a brisk breeze at the ship's stern. The large U.S. Navy insignia was clearly visible on the ship's hull.

When General Moshe Dayan issued the order to destroy the *Liberty*, one of the generals on his staff remonstrated: "This is pure murder." Several Israeli pilots, knowing the target was American, refused to take part. Testimony of survivors leaves no doubt that Israel's military high command intended to sink the ship and kill all personnel aboard, leaving no trace of Israel's responsibility.

*The scheme would work only if Israel could destroy all evidence of its own guilt.*

It was a monstrous example of ingratitude, let alone murder. At the very moment Israeli forces were killing U.S. sailors, President Lyndon B. Johnson was secretly providing unmarked U.S. military aircraft and personnel to aid Israel in its war against neighboring Arab states.

It is difficult to imagine a goal that would lead the government of Israel, a beleaguered nation whose only substantial international support came from the United States, to attempt to destroy a military vessel and crew of its only benefactor.

*Liberty* survivors believe Israel's most likely goal was to lure the United States into joining the Jewish state as a fighting partner in its war against Arab states. The goal would be tempting. With America's mighty military forces battling at its side, Israel could reasonably expect that its nation's security would be guaranteed far into the future. Another motivation might have been the concern that the *Liberty* crew would learn that Israel planned to invade Syria the next day, and transmit that information to Washington.

Whatever the motive, the scheme would work only if Israel could make Egypt, the leading Arab combatant, appear to be responsible for obliterating the *Liberty* and its crew. That, of course, would require that Israel succeed in destroying all evidence of its own guilt.

Clearly, the risk of disclosure was immense. If only one U.S. sailor survived to tell the true story, or if just one outraged Israeli officer spoke out, the American people would demand severe retribution against Israel. Or so one would think.

The scheme might have worked, except for the ingenuity of *Liberty* radiomen. It failed because, despite Israel's intense jamming of airwaves and bombardment that wrecked the ship's radio equipment, the crew managed to transmit one lone message—a call for help that was received by a nearby U.S. aircraft carrier, as well as by Israeli intelligence.

The *Liberty* message spoiled any Israeli plans to blame Egypt. Israeli torpedo boats returned to the scene a few hours after the attack, this time offering help to *Liberty* survivors—an offer scornfully refused by the ship's skipper, Commander William McGonagle, still on the bridge despite severe leg wounds. Israel also sent regrets to the White House, claiming that Israeli forces believed their target was Egyptian.

## **Johnson's Astounding Response**

Just as astounding as the assault itself was the reaction of President Lyndon B. Johnson during that day and those that followed. He acted as if his chief responsibility was to protect Israel from harm and criticism. When he learned that a U.S. carrier had launched fighter aircraft to defend the *Liberty*, the president ordered the aircraft back to the carrier—the only time in U.S. naval history that rescue aircraft were called back while a Navy vessel was under assault. It was stark evidence that Johnson considered Israeli sensitivities and the well-being of Israeli attack personnel, more important than the lives of the American crewmen under his command.

After the assault, Johnson continued to place Israel's interests above those of *Liberty* survivors, taking immediate steps to protect Israel from any public protest that might arise. He accepted quickly Israel's excuse of mistaken identity, which his administration knew to be false. He ordered an immediate Navy Court of Inquiry but instructed the chairman, Admiral Isaac Kidd, to absolve Israel of guilt. (In a recent sworn statement, retired Navy Captain Ward Boston, Jr., a member of the Court of Inquiry, declared that he and Kidd were convinced all along that the assault was deliberate, not a case of mistaken identity. See March 2004 *Washington Report*, p. 10.)

The president also ordered Kidd to keep survivors from talking about their ordeal. As soon as they were brought ashore, Kidd complied with the presidential order by threatening the sailors, some still bedridden, with court martial and imprisonment if they said anything publicly.

When the court completed its quick, limited inquiry and prepared a report, Kidd admitted privately to a colleague that he knew it was misleading. Before it was released to the media, however, its text was further sanitized for Israel's benefit by Department of Defense civilian attorneys. One of the items they deleted was testimony by survivor Lloyd Painter, who told the court he witnessed Israeli forces deliberately shooting lifeboats to pieces.

Medals were issued to survivors, but in quiet ceremonies far from the White House and the president.

Many public documents related to the assault remain classified. Over the years, *Liberty* survivors have pleaded repeatedly with administration officials, congressional committees, individual members of Congress and the media for full disclosure of the truth. Only a few periodicals and networks responded. Only a handful of individual members of Congress, none in a leadership position, dared to speak out.

The court's false and misleading inquiry was the only official one ever held. Johnson's thorough cover-up was maintained by all of his successors in the presidency.

## **"An Israel-Centric Foreign Policy"**

Three years ago, Condoleezza Rice, now President George W. Bush's secretary of state and then his national security adviser, unwittingly explained in a remarkable burst of candor: "We have an

Israel-centric foreign policy." Rice's statement was profound and accurate. Although she spoke nearly four decades after the assault on the *Liberty*, her words explain why the cover-up began and why it continues to this day.

Since 1967, many people in and out of government have learned the truth about the cover-up. Why were they silent? Why did reporters ignore tips that would surely lead to top news stories?

The sad and simple truth is that most Americans, especially those in public office and even those in the presidency, have a deadly fear of being labeled anti-Semitic. No matter how well documented the charges, they will neither utter nor write anything critical of Israel, for fear it will draw that unwarranted and unwelcome charge. Former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. George W. Ball once stated that the most powerful instrument of intimidation employed by Israel's U.S. lobby is the "reckless charge of anti-Semitism."

The fear is endemic, but rarely mentioned. It reaches all government offices and intimidates all levels and sections of our society—business, education, academia, preachers, publishing and other media.

Among those who know the facts about Israeli influence, almost all can supply an excuse to remain silent. The few willing to speak out get little or no attention.

Pro-Israel forces long ago successfully redefined anti-Semitism to mean any criticism of the State of Israel. The new definition is false, malicious and damaging to our national interests, but the *Liberty* crew and their supporters are among the few willing to risk the anti-Semitic smear.

As a result of this silence, most citizens are unaware of the startling fact that for years our country's Middle East policy has been crafted not by seasoned experts who are committed to America's basic national interests, but by lobbies for two politically powerful religious communities whose goals are narrowly focused. One community is relatively small in number but powerful in influence. It consists mainly of zealous secular Jews, as well as radical Orthodox Jews. They are perhaps best described as extreme Zionists. The other community is very large, consisting of many millions of Christians who accept a controversial interpretation of the Bible's Book of Revelation.

Both groups believe present-day Israel is a resurrection of ancient Israel and a preeminent part of God's plan. Both believe the Jewish state must be kept strong and united until the arrival on earth of each group's messiah.

They have attained such political power that Congress dutifully appropriates billions to Israel without conditions or serious discussion, much less real debate. Because of this unrestricted aid year after year, Israeli leaders have been able to violate human rights, engage in lawless behavior, abandon the ideals of Judaism, and lure America into damning complicity in this scofflaw conduct.

The complicity reached a fateful peak in 1982, when the U.S. government supplied the arms and material that Israel used in slaughtering 18,000 Beirut civilians, then, adding insult to injury, immediately replenished Israel's supply of weapons and ammunition. Osama bin Laden recently stated publicly that he planned 9/11 as the payback for the supportive U.S. role.

The lobby's grip on our government is unhealthy for both Israel and the United States. It is also unhealthy for both Christianity and Judaism. If our nation is to emerge from today's peril, we must face openly and critically the role of these religious groups and their passionate, dangerous attachment to a single small scofflaw government. If we keep tiptoeing around reality, we risk still greater peril tomorrow.

## **An Historic Wrong Turn**

The *Liberty* cover-up will someday be recognized as an historic but wrong turning point for America. It convinced Israeli leaders that they could get by with anything—even mass murder of U.S. sailors—with only a helpful reaction from Washington, because that is what actually happened.

It proved ultimately to be a fateful blunder for both Israel and America. It was the first major example of America's Israel-centric foreign policy that has led our people into ever-deepening trouble. It inaugurated endless, ever-mounting U.S. aid to Israel, all of it unconditional and with no accountability required. For Israel, it cleared the path for more aggressive military conquest and abuse. It reinforced its contempt for legal constraints and world opinion.

Had the truth about the assault on the *Liberty* been officially disclosed in detail at any point since 1967, public outrage would have forced an immediate end to our Israel-centric foreign policy.

Unconditional aid to Israel would come to a halt. All future U.S. aid would have been tied to firm conditions and accountability procedures—as demanded of all other recipients. This, I believe, would have protected Israel from law-breaking. Years ago, I heard Moshe Dayan, then Israel's pre-eminent political and military leader, state plainly that Israel would have no choice but to obey U.S. requirements if they were conditions of eligibility for U.S. aid.

As I ponder the awful price paid by the *Liberty* survivors, I marvel—and recoil—at the grip the government of Israel, a small nation of about five million people, maintains over America, a nation of nearly 300 million. After many years in politics, I am convinced that this is America's greatest burden today. Indeed, the phenomenon reaches far broader and deeper than the fate of the *Liberty* and its crew, important as their fate is to hundreds of families and in the proud annals of the U.S. Navy. Israel's murderous assault, although an egregious example of how costly this burden can be, is not the only example, nor the most recent one.

The report filed with the Pentagon by *Liberty* survivors could become America's turn for the better.

*Former Congressman Paul Findley (R-IL) is the author of They Dare to Speak Out, Deliberate Deceptions and Silent No More, all available from the AET Book Club.*

---

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.wrmea.com/archives/August\\_2005/0508016.html](http://www.wrmea.com/archives/August_2005/0508016.html)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.