

# The ‘USS Liberty’: Case Closed

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Early in the afternoon of June 8, 1967, Israeli jets and missile boats opened fire on the *USS Liberty*, an American surveillance ship operating off the coast of Gaza. Struck by rockets, cannons and torpedoes, the vessel suffered extensive damage and over 200 casualties. Israeli forces were then engaged in the fourth day of what would soon be called the Six Day War, which would result in a devastating defeat for the combined armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

At first overshadowed by Israel’s stunning victory, the attack on the *Liberty* was destined to become a recurring source of tension between Israel and the United States. Although Israel apologized for the attack and paid compensation to its victims, many American officials rejected Israel’s claim that the *Liberty* incident had been an honest mistake. Rather, they blamed Israel for what was at best inexcusable negligence, or at worst the premeditated murder of American servicemen. Such charges persisted in the face of successive inquiries by a broad range of American agencies and Congressional committees, as well as a full Israeli court of inquiry, all of which found no proof whatsoever that Israel knowingly attacked an American ship. On the contrary, the evidence produced by these investigations lent

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further support to Israel's claim that its decision to attack was, given the circumstances, a reasonable error.

These findings notwithstanding, the case of the assault on the *Liberty* has never been closed. If anything, the accusations leveled against Israel have grown sharper with time. In recent years, an impressive number of former American officials have gone on record insisting that the Israeli action was, in fact, deliberate. These include Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, who was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) at the time of the *Liberty* incident, who has labeled the episode a "cover-up," adding that he "cannot accept the claim by the Israelis that this was a case of mistaken identity."<sup>1</sup> Paul C. Warnke, then Under Secretary of the Navy, has written that

I found it hard to believe that it was, in fact, an honest mistake on the part of the Israeli air force units.... I suspect that in the heat of battle they figured that the presence of this American ship was inimical to their interests....<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, former Secretary of State Dean Rusk has called the attack "outrageous," adding in a 1990 radio interview that "the *Liberty* was flying an American flag. It was not all that difficult to identify, and my judgment was that somewhere along the line some fairly senior Israeli official gave the go-ahead for these attacks...."<sup>3</sup> David G. Nes, who at the time served as deputy head of the American mission in Cairo, puts it more bluntly: "I don't think that there's any doubt that it was deliberate.... [It is] one of the great cover-ups of our military history."<sup>4</sup> And George Ball, then Under Secretary of State, has called the American government's response to the assault an "elaborate charade.... American leaders did not have the courage to punish Israel for the blatant murder of its citizens."<sup>5</sup>

Support for these charges can be found in a wide range of publications on the *Liberty* incident. *Assault on the Liberty*, a 1979 memoir by former *Liberty* officer Jim Ennes, Jr., describes the attack as intentional and malicious, and argues that the truth has been obscured by a massive cover-up conducted by Israel and its advocates abroad. This allegation has been repeated in Richard Deacon's *The Israeli Secret Service* (1977), in John Ranelagh's *The Agency: The Rise and*

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*Decline of the CIA* (1986), and in Andrew and Leslie Cockburn's *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the U.S.-Israel Covert Relationship* (1991). The cover-up theory is also central to Stephen Green's *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (1984), one of the best-selling of all anti-Israel polemics. Nor is the charge of Israeli premeditation confined to books aimed at a popular audience. It also features prominently in academic works such as *The USS Liberty: Dissenting History vs. Official History* by historian John E. Borne (1993), as well as Donald Neff's *Warriors for Jerusalem: The Six Days that Changed the Middle East* (1984), considered by many scholars a standard text on the Six Day War.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, so powerful is the trend towards acceptance of Israeli guilt for having planned the attack that a 1995 issue of the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* was able to carry the assertion of Reverdy S. Fishel that "all serious scholarship on the subject accepts Israel's assault as having been perpetrated quite deliberately...."<sup>7</sup>

The claim that Israel's attack on the *Liberty* was premeditated has also appeared persistently in the press. In 1992, nationally syndicated columnists Roland Evans and Robert Novak dedicated a column, "Twenty-Five Years of Cover-Up,"<sup>8</sup> to this charge. Similar accusations have been aired on television programs such as ABC's *20/20* and Geraldo Rivera's *Now It Can Be Told*.<sup>9</sup> The claim is particularly widespread on the Internet, where a search for the "USS Liberty" yields dozens of sites, from those of Arab propagandists (*Birzeit.edu*, *Salam.org*, *Palestine Forever*) and anti-Semitic hate mongers (*The Tangled Web*, *Jew Watch*) to the award-winning *USS Liberty Homepage*, posted by Ennes and other veterans. But while the tenor of these pages may differ—the veterans abjure any anti-Semitism, stressing that several of their crewmates were Jewish—their conclusions are indistinguishable: Israel wantonly attacked the *Liberty* with the intention of killing every man on board, and then thwarted attempts to investigate the crime.<sup>10</sup>

Refuting this accusation was difficult if not impossible in the past, when the official records on the *Liberty* were designated top-secret and closed to the general public. With the recent declassification of these documents in the United States and Israel, however, researchers have gained access to a wealth

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of primary sources—Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and U.S. military records, Israeli diplomatic correspondence, and memoranda from both the State Department and the White House. With the aid of these materials, the attack on the *Liberty* can now be reconstructed virtually minute-by-minute and with remarkable detail. The picture that emerges is not one of crime at all, nor even of criminal negligence, but of a string of failed communications, human errors, unfortunate coincidences and equipment failures on both the American and Israeli sides—the kind of tragic, senseless mistake that is all too common in the thick of war.

**T**he *USS Liberty* was cruising from Norfolk, Virginia to Abidjan on the Ivory Coast when, in mid-May 1967, crisis erupted in the Middle East. Without warning, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser sent thousands of troops into the Sinai desert, ousted the UN peacekeeping forces stationed there and then closed the Straits of Tiran—the critical waterway leading to Israel’s southern port of Eilat—to Israeli shipping.

In weighing its response, the Israeli government consulted with President Lyndon Johnson, who, though preoccupied with the Vietnam War, was sympathetic to Israel’s plight. The President proposed to challenge the Tiran blockade with an international maritime convoy and on May 24, in preparation for this plan, he ordered the U.S. Sixth Fleet to advance into the eastern Mediterranean. Aware of the danger of becoming embroiled in an Arab-Israeli war, however, Washington cautioned the fleet to remain, until further notice, “outside an arc whose radius is 240 miles from Port Said,” on the Egyptian coast.<sup>11</sup>

At this time, the *Liberty* was formally under the command of the Sixth Fleet, although in practice its orders came directly from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, operating under the aegis of the National Security Agency (NSA). Code-named “Rockstar,” the 455-foot “Auxiliary General Technical Research Ship (AGTR),” as it was euphemistically called, was in fact a signals intelligence vessel (SIGINT) equipped with cutting-edge listening and decoding devices.

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Among its 294-man crew were several dozen members of the Naval Security Group, who worked below the starboard deck in an area strictly off-limits even to the *Liberty's* skipper, Cmdr. William L. McGonagle. The ship sported large antennas and radar discs, but apart from four .50-caliber machine-gun mounts, it had no visible armaments. The markings "GTR-5" were freshly painted on its bow, and from its mast flew a standard, navy-issue American flag.

As the Sixth Fleet steamed toward the eastern Mediterranean, the *Liberty* headed for Rota, Spain. There, in addition to supplies, it took on three Marine Corps Arabic translators, augmenting the three NSA Russian-language experts already on board. Then, on May 30, McGonagle received new instructions to sail "at best speed" to a point just half a mile outside Egyptian and Israeli territorial waters, which extended twelve and six nautical miles, respectively, from the coast. The order, originating with the JCS, superseded a request by the U.S. Naval Command in Europe (CINCEUR) to hold the *Liberty* in Rota "until directed otherwise." Neither CINCEUR nor McGonagle was aware of the *Liberty's* objective, later described by the Defense Department as "assuring communications between U.S. government posts... and assisting in... the evacuation of American citizens." Though the exact nature of its mission remains classified, the *Liberty* was most likely sent to track the movements of Egyptian troops and their Soviet advisors in Sinai—hence the need for Arabic and Russian translators.<sup>12</sup>

Johnson's idea of a convoy aimed at breaking the blockade came to nothing, and Nasser's troops remained mobilized in the Sinai. Syrian and Jordanian forces were also poised to attack. On the morning of June 5, with diplomatic options exhausted, the Israeli government went to war.<sup>13</sup> The IDF launched lightning air and ground strikes against Egypt, quickly gaining the initiative, and repulsed attacks from Syria and Jordan. Yet the Israelis remained highly concerned about threats to their coastline, along which most of the country's major industrial and population centers were situated. The Egyptian navy outnumbered Israel's by more than five to one in warships and, in a crisis, could call on the support of some seventy Soviet vessels in the

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vicinity.<sup>14</sup> The failure of the Israeli navy's attacks on Egyptian and Syrian ports early in the war did little to assuage Israel's fears. Consequently, the IDF Chief of Staff, Gen. Yitzhak Rabin, informed the U.S. Naval Attaché in Tel Aviv, Cmdr. Ernest Carl Castle, that Israel would defend its coast with every means at its disposal. Unidentified vessels would be sunk, Rabin advised; the United States should either acknowledge its ships in the area or remove them.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the Americans provided Israel with no information on the *Liberty*. The United States had also rejected Israel's request for a formal naval liaison. On May 31, Avraham Harman, Israel's ambassador to Washington, had warned Under Secretary of State Eugene V. Rostow that "if war breaks out, we would have no telephone number to call, no code for plane recognition, and no way to get in touch with the U.S. Sixth Fleet."<sup>16</sup>

Before dawn on June 8, three days into the war, the *Liberty* finally reached its destination, barely within international waters north of the Sinai coast. Plying at a speed of five knots between Port Said and Gaza, the *Liberty* entered a lane rarely used by commercial freighters, which Egypt had declared closed to neutral vessels. Anxious about his proximity to the fighting, McGonagle asked the Sixth Fleet commander, Vice-Adm. William Martin, for permission to pull back from the shore, or else to be provided with a destroyer escort. Martin rejected these requests, noting that the *Liberty* "is a clearly marked United States ship in international waters and not a reasonable subject for attack by any nation."

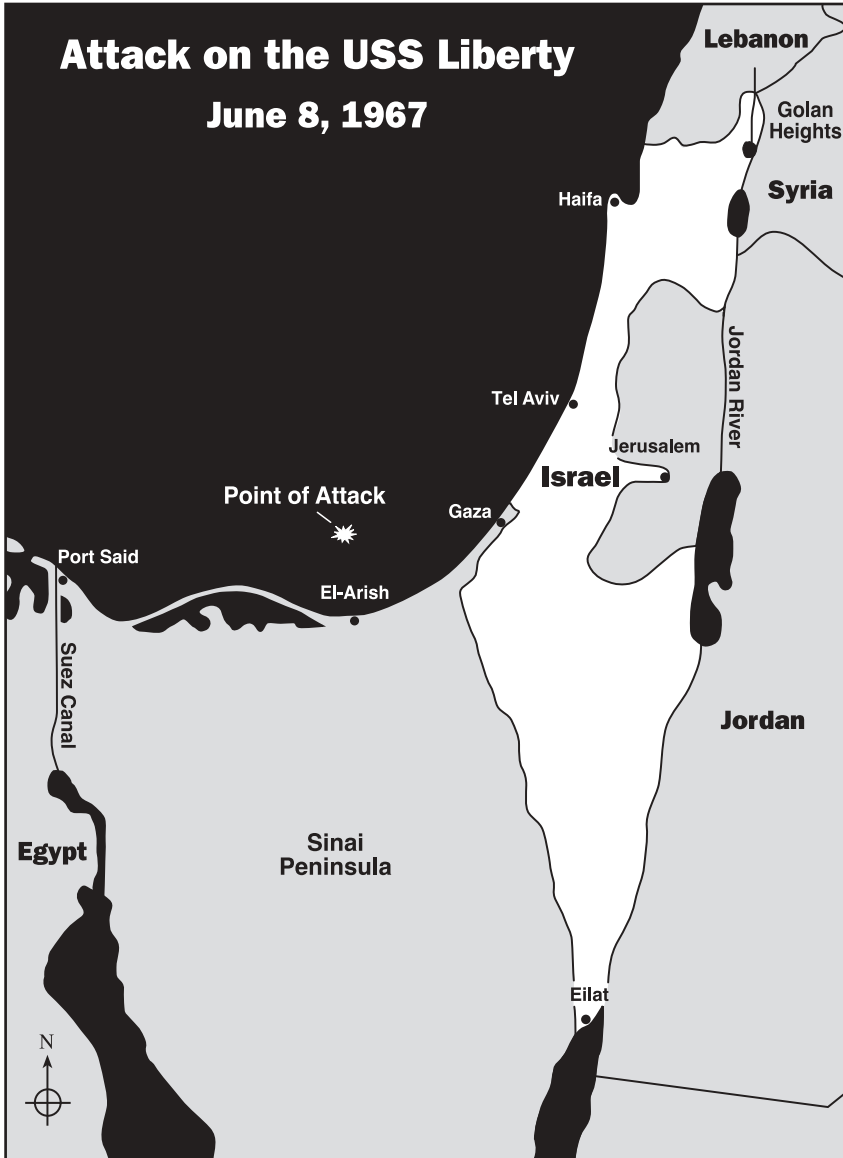
Unbeknownst to both Martin and McGonagle, however, the JCS had repeatedly cabled the *Liberty* the previous night with instructions to withdraw to a distance of one hundred miles from the Egyptian and Israeli coasts. The transmission was delayed, however, by the navy's overloaded, overly complex communication system, which routed messages as far east as the Philippines before relaying them to their destinations. The JCS' orders would not be received by the *Liberty* until the following day, June 9, by which time they would no longer be relevant.<sup>17</sup>

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At 5:55 A.M. on June 8, Cmdr. Uri Meretz, a naval observer aboard an Israeli Air Force (IAF) reconnaissance plane, noted what he believed to be an American supply vessel, designated GTR-5, seventy miles west of the Gaza coast. At Israeli naval headquarters in Haifa, staff officers fixed the location of the ship with a red marker, indicating “unidentified,” on their control board. Research in *Jane’s Fighting Ships*, however, established the vessel’s identity as “the electromagnetic audio-surveillance ship of the United States, the *Liberty*.” The marker was changed to green, for “neutral.” Another sighting of the ship—“gray, bulky, with its bridge amidships”—was made by an Israeli fighter aircraft at 9:00 A.M., twenty miles north of El-Arish, on the Sinai coast, which had fallen to Israeli forces the day before.<sup>18</sup> Neither of these reports made mention of the 5-by-8-foot American flag which, according to the ship’s crewmen, was flying from the *Liberty*’s starboard halyard.

The crew would also testify later that six IAF aircraft subsequently flew over the ship, giving them ample opportunity to identify its nationality. Israel Air Force reports, however, make no further mention of the *Liberty*.<sup>19</sup> There may indeed have been additional Israeli overflights, but the IAF pilots were not looking for the *Liberty*. Their target was Egyptian submarines, which had been spotted off the coast. At 11:00 A.M., while the hunt for Egyptian submarines was on, the officer on duty at Israel’s naval headquarters, Capt. Avraham Lunz, concluded his shift. In accordance with procedures, he removed the *Liberty*’s green marker on the grounds that it was already five hours old and no longer accurate.<sup>20</sup>

Then, at 11:24, a terrific explosion rocked the shores of El-Arish. The blast was clearly heard by the men on the *Liberty*’s bridge, who had been navigating according to the town’s tallest minaret, and who also noted a thick pall of smoke wafting toward them. In El-Arish itself, Israeli forces were convinced they were being bombarded from the sea, and the IDF Southern Command reported sighting two unidentified vessels close offshore. Though the explosion probably resulted from an ammunition dump fire, that fact was unknown at the time, and both Egyptian and Israeli sources had reported shelling of the



Source: A. Jay Cristol, *The Liberty Incident*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Miami, 1997.



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area by Egyptian warships the previous day. There was therefore good reason to conclude that the Egyptian navy had trained its guns on Sinai.<sup>21</sup>

Minutes after the explosion, the *Liberty* reached the eastern limit of its patrol and turned 238 degrees back in the direction of Port Said. Meanwhile, reports of a naval bombardment on El-Arish continued to reach IDF General Staff Headquarters in Tel Aviv. Rabin took them seriously, concerned that the shelling was a prelude to an amphibious landing that could outflank advancing Israeli troops. He reiterated the standing order to sink any unidentified ships in the war area, but also advised caution: Soviet vessels were reportedly operating nearby. Since no fighter planes were available, the navy was asked to intercede, with the assumption that air cover would be provided later. More than half an hour passed without any response from naval headquarters in Haifa. The General Staff finally issued a rebuke: “The coast is being shelled and you—the navy—have done nothing.”<sup>22</sup> Capt. Izzy Rahav, who had replaced Lunz in the operations room, needed no more prodding. He dispatched three torpedo boats of the 914th squadron, code-named “Pagoda,” to find the enemy vessel responsible for the bombardment and destroy it. The time was 12:05 P.M.

At 1:41 P.M., Ensign Aharon Yifrah, combat information officer aboard the flagship of these torpedo boats, T-204, informed its captain, Cmdr. Moshe Oren,<sup>23</sup> that an unidentified ship had been sighted northeast of El-Arish at a range of 22 miles. The ship was sailing toward Egypt at a speed, Yifrah estimated, of 30 knots.

Yifrah’s assessment, twice recalculated and confirmed by him, was pivotal. It meant that the ship could not be the *Liberty*, whose maximum speed was 18 knots. Moreover, the Israelis had standing orders to fire on any unknown vessel in the area sailing at over 20 knots, a speed which, at that time, could only be attained by fighting ships. This information, when added to the ship’s direction, indicated that the target was an enemy destroyer fleeing toward port after having shelled El-Arish.

The torpedo boats gave chase, but even at their maximum speed of 36 knots, they did not expect to overtake their target before it reached Egypt.

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Rahav therefore alerted the air force, and two Mirage III fighters were diverted from the Suez Canal, northeast to the sea. When they arrived, the vessel they saw was “gray with two guns in the forecandle, a mast and funnel.” Making two passes at 3,000 feet, formation commander Capt. Spector (IDF records do not provide pilots’ first names) reckoned that the ship was a “Z” or Hunt-class destroyer without the deck markings (a white cross on a red background) of the Israeli navy. Spector then spoke with air force commander Gen. Motti Hod, who asked him repeatedly whether he could see a flag. The answer was “Negative.” Nor were there any distinguishing marks other than some “black letters” painted on the hull.

IAF Intelligence Chief Col. Yeshayahu Bareket also claimed to have contacted American Naval Attaché Castle at this point in an attempt to ascertain whether the suspect ship was the *Liberty*, but the latter professed no knowledge of the *Liberty*’s schedule—a claim later denied by Castle but, strangely, confirmed by McGonagle.<sup>24</sup> One fact is clear, however: After two low sweeps by the lead plane, at 1:58 P.M., the Mirages were cleared to attack.

**T**he first salvos caught the *Liberty*’s crew in “stand-down” mode; several officers were sunning themselves on the deck, unaware of the Israeli jets bearing down on them. Before they could take shelter, rockets and 30-mm cannon shells stitched the ship from bow to stern, severing the antennas and setting oil drums on fire. Nine men were killed in the initial assault, and several times that number wounded, among them McGonagle. Radio operators on board found most of their frequencies inoperable and barely managed to send an SOS to the Sixth Fleet. The Mirages made three strafing runs and were then joined by two additional aircraft, Israeli Super-Mysteres returning from the Mitla Pass with a payload of napalm. After fourteen minutes of action, the pilots reported having made good hits—over eight hundred holes would later be counted in the hull. The entire superstructure of the ship, from the main deck to the bridge, was aflame.

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Throughout these sorties, no one aboard the *Liberty* suspected that the planes were Israeli. Indeed, rumors spread that the attackers were Egyptian MiGs. After the first strike, the visibility that had enabled crewmen to identify IAF reconnaissance craft earlier in the day was lost to the smoke of battle. One of the Israeli pilots, curious as to why the vessel had not returned fire, made a final pass at ninety feet. “I see no flag,” he told headquarters. “But there are markings on the hull—Charlie-Tango-Romeo-five.”<sup>25</sup>

While Egyptian naval ships were known to disguise their identities with Western markings, they usually displayed Arabic letters and numbers only. The fact that the ship had Western markings led Rabin to fear that it was Soviet, and he immediately called off the jets. Two IAF Hornet helicopters were sent to look for survivors—Spector had reported seeing men overboard—while the torpedo boat squadron was ordered to hold its fire pending further attempts at identification. Though that order was recorded in the torpedo boat’s log, Oren claimed he never received it.<sup>26</sup> It was now 2:20 in the afternoon; twenty-four minutes would pass before the squadron made contact with the *Liberty*.

During that interval, the ship’s original flag, having been shredded during the attack, was replaced by a larger (7-by-13-foot) holiday ensign. As the crew labored to tend to the wounded, extinguish the fire, and burn classified papers, contact was finally made with the Sixth Fleet. “Help is on the way,” replied the carrier *America*, which quickly unleashed eight of its most readily available warplanes—F-104s armed with nuclear weapons. Before they reached their objective, however, the jets were recalled by Vice-Adm. Martin. If Rabin feared that the ship was Russian, Martin suspected that its attackers were Russian, and without authorization from the highest level, he did not want to risk starting a nuclear war.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, the Israeli torpedo boats came within range. The *Liberty* was shrouded in smoke, but even so, Oren could see that it could not be the destroyer that had supposedly shelled El-Arish. Rather, he believed, it was a slower-moving vessel that had either serviced that destroyer or evacuated enemy soldiers from the beach. At 6,000 meters, Oren’s T-204 flagship paused

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and signaled “AA”—“identify yourself.” Due to damaged equipment, McGonagle could only reply in kind, AA, with a hand-held Aldis lamp.<sup>28</sup> Oren remembered receiving a similar response from the Egyptian destroyer *Ibrahim al-Awwal*, captured by the Israeli navy in the 1956 war, and was sure that he now faced an enemy ship. Consulting his naval intelligence manual, he concluded that the vessel in front of him—its deck line, midship bridge and smokestack—resembled the Egyptian freighter *El-Quseir*. The officers of the other two boats reached the same conclusion independently, and followed Oren into battle formation.<sup>29</sup>

Any lingering doubts were soon dispelled as the Israeli boats came under sudden fire from the *Liberty*. Unaware of McGonagle’s order not to shoot at the approaching boats, a sailor had opened up with one of the Brownings. Another machine gun also fired, apparently on its own, triggered by exploding ammunition. Oren repeatedly requested permission from naval headquarters to return fire. Rahav finally approved.<sup>30</sup>

Of the five torpedoes fired at the *Liberty* only one found its mark, a direct hit on the starboard side, killing twenty-five, almost all of them from the intelligence section. The Israeli craft closed in, their cannons and machine guns raking the *Liberty*’s hull and, according to the crew’s testimony, its life rafts as well. One of those rafts, picked up by T-203, was found to bear U.S. Navy markings—the first indication that Oren had that the ship might be American. His suspicions mounted when while circling the badly listing ship, Oren confronted the designation GTR-5. But still no flag was spotted, and it would take another half an hour, until 3:30 P.M., to establish the vessel’s identity.<sup>31</sup>

“I must admit I had mixed feelings about the news—profound regret at having attacked our friends and a tremendous sense of relief [that the boat was not Soviet],” Rabin later recalled.<sup>32</sup> News of the ship’s American nationality had arrived during an emergency meeting of the General Staff to discuss possible Soviet reprisals. An apology was immediately sent to Castle, and none too soon, as eight conventionally armed warplanes had been launched from the *USS Saratoga* and sanctioned to “use whatever force required to defend the *Liberty*.”

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As the American jets returned to their carrier, the two Israeli Hornets reached the *Liberty* and offered assistance. Oren, shouting through a bullhorn, also tried to communicate with the ship. But McGonagle refused to respond. Realizing, finally, that his assailants had been Israeli, he flagged the torpedo boats away and gestured provocatively at the Hornets. Even Castle himself, arriving just before dusk in another Israeli chopper, was denied permission to land. By 5:05 P.M., the Israelis had broken off contact, and the *Liberty*, navigating virtually without systems, with 34 dead and 171 wounded aboard, staggered out to sea.<sup>33</sup>

The center of the crisis then shifted from the Mediterranean to Washington. It was only at 9:50 A.M. eastern time—nearly two hours after the first shots were fired<sup>34</sup>—that the White House received word from the JCS that the *Liberty*, “located 60-100 miles north of Egypt,” had been torpedoed by an unknown vessel. Johnson assumed that the Soviets were involved. To forestall further escalation, he hotlined the Kremlin with news of the attack and of the dispatch of jets from the *Saratoga*.

But then the Israelis informed the Americans of the “mistaken action,” and Johnson, like Rabin before him, breathed a sigh of relief.<sup>35</sup> While “strong dismay” was conveyed to Ambassador Harman, so too were the Administration’s thanks for the speed of Israel’s notification. Apologies soon came in from Prime Minister Levi Eshkol (“Please accept my profound condolences and convey my sympathy to all the bereaved families”) and Foreign Minister Abba Eban (“I am deeply mortified and grieved by the tragic accident involving the lives and safety of Americans”), as well as from the Israeli chargé d’affaires in Washington, Efraim Evron, a personal friend of Johnson’s (“I grieve with you over the lives that were lost, and share in the sorrow of the parents, wives and children of the men who died in this cruel twist of fate”). Within forty-eight hours, the Israeli government offered to compensate the victims and their families.<sup>36</sup>

At first, Israeli expressions of regret and offers of restitution seemed to satisfy the Administration, whose initial reaction was to downplay the incident.

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Of particular concern was the danger that the *Liberty's* presence in the area might reinforce Nasser's charge that the Sixth Fleet had aided Israel in the war—what Washington called “The Big Lie.”<sup>37</sup> These reservations soon faded, however, as senior officials began to ask pointed questions: Why did the Israelis attack a neutral ship on the high seas, without the slightest provocation? How had they failed to see the *Liberty's* flag or the freshly painted markings on its hull? How could they confuse the *Liberty* with the *El-Quseir*, a far slower, smaller boat, with no distinctive antennas? And finally, how could a ship sailing at 5 knots, whose maximum speed was 18, be gauged at 30?

“Beyond comprehension,” fumed Secretary of State Dean Rusk. “We cannot accept such a situation.” Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board chief Clark Clifford, known for his pro-Israeli views, reported to Johnson that the attack was “inexcusable... a flagrant act of gross negligence for which the Israeli government should be held completely responsible.” While no official could explain what motivation Israel might have had for assaulting an American vessel, neither did the facts seem to square. Either the Israelis had exhibited rank incompetence—in the midst of a victory that was nothing short of brilliant—or they had struck the *Liberty* on purpose. Indeed, many in the Administration had already concluded that the attack was intentional and that Israel's explanations were entirely disingenuous. Increasingly, the charge of negligence gave way to one of cold-blooded murder.<sup>38</sup>

The Israelis moved to dispel these accusations with two preliminary reports on the incident. These admitted the IDF's culpability in erroneously reporting a naval barrage on El-Arish, miscalculating the *Liberty's* speed, and confusing the ship with the *El-Quseir*. Yet both studies insisted that the attack was an “innocent mistake,” with no malice or gross negligence involved.<sup>39</sup>

“This makes no goddamned sense at all,” remarked Under Secretary of State Eugene Rostow when presented with these findings on June 10. The attack, wrote Rusk, was “quite literally incomprehensible... an act of military recklessness reflecting wanton disregard for human life.” Further umbrage was taken at the Israeli reports' suggestion that the *Liberty* had no business being where it was, had failed to inform Israel of its presence, and had failed

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to use all means (semaphores, flares, flags) to identify itself to the torpedo boats. The United States now demanded that Israel not only pay compensation but admit wrongdoing and court-martial those responsible for the attack “in accordance with international law.”<sup>40</sup>

Israel rebuffed these demands, but at the same time it launched a third and even more comprehensive investigation. Headed by military jurist Col. Yeshayahu Yerushalmi, the commission delved into the question of the control-board markers, the pilots’ testimonies and the orders given to the torpedo boats. Yet, while critical of the same intelligence failures noted in the earlier reports, as well as the awkward command relationship between the air force and the navy, Yerushalmi’s findings were identical to those of his predecessors. “For all my regret that our forces were involved in an incident with a vessel belonging to a friendly state,” he wrote, “I have not discovered any deviation from the standard of reasonable conduct which would justify a court-martial.”<sup>41</sup>

The top-secret Yerushalmi report was conveyed to the Americans, who rejected it with the same mix of incredulity and indignation that had marked their responses to the previous reports. But the United States was holding its own investigations into the affair, beginning with the Navy Court of Inquiry held in Malta shortly after the attack. The hearings revealed basic contradictions in the testimonies of McGonagle and other officers regarding the length and sequence of the attack, and raised the possibility that, due to light winds, the flag might well not have been visible to Israeli pilots. Furthermore, Rear-Adm. Isaac C. Kidd, Jr., the presiding officer, found no evidence that the attack was in any way intentional, calling it “a case of mistaken identity.” Subsequent closed-door inquiries were conducted by the CIA, the NSA, the JCS, as well as by both houses of Congress. All reached the same conclusion: That the Israeli attack upon the *USS Liberty* had been the result of error, and nothing more.

Yet suspicions of Israel’s duplicity in the incident, even among high officials, lingered. As Rusk asserted many years later in his memoirs, “I didn’t believe them then, and I don’t believe them to this day.”<sup>42</sup>

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The American and Israeli investigative reports go a long way toward disproving the charge that the Israelis maliciously opened fire on a ship they knew to be American. In the three decades prior to their declassification, however, numerous theories were posited to explain why Israel, engaged in war and internationally isolated, would willingly attack its only superpower ally. Now, with the aid of the recently released documents, it is possible to determine whether any of these hypotheses had a basis in fact. Among the more far-fetched theories that have been suggested is the possibility that the *Liberty* was attacked because it had learned of the Israeli execution of Egyptian POWs; or that it had picked up Israeli attempts to draw Jordan into the war so that Jerusalem might be brought under Israeli control.<sup>43</sup> But no document, American or Israeli, contains any reference to prisoner executions; neither are they mentioned in any Arabic source that has come to light to date.<sup>44</sup> By the same token, the Jordanian attack on Israel on June 5 and the fall of Jerusalem to Israeli forces on June 7 took place well before the *Liberty's* arrival off the Gaza coast, and none of the documents now available in any way link the *Liberty* incident on June 8 to these events.

Far more serious has been the claim that the Israelis attacked the *Liberty* because it had been eavesdropping on Israel's plans for capturing the Golan Heights. Thus Adm. Thomas Moorer, writing in the July-August 1997 issue of *The Link* magazine, has speculated that

Israel was preparing to seize the Golan Heights from Syria despite President Johnson's known opposition to such a move.... And I believe [Israeli Defense Minister] Moshe Dayan concluded that he could prevent Washington from becoming aware of what Israel was up to by destroying the primary source of acquiring that information—the *USS Liberty*.<sup>45</sup>

Historian Donald Neff takes the supposition a step further, presenting it as fact:

If the ship could listen in on Israeli military communications, as it could, then the United States could discover Israel's plans to attack Syria. Foreknowledge



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of the attack might bring an ultimatum from the United States, an ultimatum that could not be ignored because Israel desperately still needed Washington's support both in the United Nations and to fend off any threats from the Soviet Union. Without the United States, the Soviet Union might directly intervene if Israel took on its last, comparatively unscathed, client, Syria.

Indeed, Neff goes so far as to posit that Israel actually delayed its attack on Syria until after the *Liberty* was neutralized.<sup>46</sup>

The theory that the attack on the *Liberty* was motivated by a desire to conceal the impending Israeli attack on the Golan Heights is not, then, confined to the extremist fringe, but has made headway in important political and academic circles. In the past, refuting it was dependent largely on appeals to common sense, such as that made by Ernest Castle, the former U.S. naval attaché, in an interview with British television:

Let us presume the Israeli high command was... fearful that the United States would learn of what was an evident Israeli plan to take the Golan, or any other plan on the part of the Israelis. Would they say, "my golly, that will irritate the United States, our great friend. We'd better not... let that happen—so let's sink their ship instead"?<sup>47</sup>

Common sense would also dictate that the Israelis, in the process of handily defeating three Arab armies, could have easily sunk a single, lightly armed ship if they had wanted to. In such a case, they would not have attacked the *Liberty* in broad daylight with clearly marked boats and planes—submarines could have done the job—nor would they have ultimately halted their fire and offered the ship assistance.

But it is no longer necessary to decide the argument on the basis of common sense alone. Like the other claims for Israel's alleged motive in attacking the *Liberty*, the one linking the assault to the Golan Heights campaign cannot withstand the scrutiny of the newly declassified documents. These confirm that Israel made no attempt to hide its preparations for an offensive against Syria, and that the United States government, relying on regular diplomatic channels,

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remained fully apprised of them. Thus, on June 8, the American consulate in Jerusalem reported that Israel was retaliating for Syria's bombardment of Israeli villages "in an apparent prelude to large-scale attack in effort to seize Heights overlooking border kibbutzim." That same day, U.S. Ambassador Walworth Barbour in Tel Aviv reported that "I would not, repeat not, be surprised if the reported Israeli attack [on the Golan] does take place or has already done so," and IDF Intelligence Chief Aharon Yariv told Harry McPherson, a senior White House aide who was visiting Israel at the time, that "there still remained the Syria problem and perhaps it would be necessary to give Syria a blow."<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, the United States National Archives contain no evidence to suggest that information obtained by the *Liberty* augmented Washington's already detailed picture of events on the Golan front and of Israel's intentions there. The Israeli records, for their part, reveal no fear whatsoever of American opposition to punishing Syria, but only of possible Soviet military intervention. (It was this fear that led Israel to delay its decision to capture the Golan until the morning of June 9.) Nor do they suggest that there was any danger of an American ultimatum. On the contrary, from his conversations with presidential advisor McGeorge Bundy and other administration officials, Foreign Minister Abba Eban understood that "official Washington would not be too aggrieved if Syria suffered some painful effects from the war that it had started...."<sup>49</sup>

Once again, there is no indication in the archives that the Israelis were troubled by the *Liberty*, much less considered it worthy of attack. Indeed, there is no evidence that anyone in the Israeli government, or the IDF Chief of Staff, knew of the ship's presence at all.<sup>50</sup>

**T**he *USS Liberty* was decommissioned in 1968 and later sold for scrap. That same year, William McGonagle received the Congressional Medal of Honor for gallantry displayed during the attack, and Israel paid over \$6 million in restitution to the families of those wounded and killed. An additional \$6 million in damages was paid under a 1980 agreement in which

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Israel and the United States consented “not to address the issue or motive or reopen the case for any reason.”<sup>51</sup> But the case remained open nonetheless. While the controversy surrounding similar incidents would subside—the Iraqi missile attack on the *USS Stark* in 1987 and the downing of an Iranian jetliner by the *USS Vincennes* in 1988 come to mind—the bitterness over the *Liberty* incident endured. The release of hitherto classified papers on the incident, however, now enables us to dispel spurious theories about the incident, and to conclude that Israel’s assault upon the *USS Liberty* was a tragic error, and nothing more. In light of the new documents, it is now possible to reconstruct the chain of mishaps on the part of both sides that led to the unintended Israeli attack.

The incident began with the ill-conceived decision to send the *Liberty* to the crisis-torn Middle East, a mere half-mile beyond Egyptian waters, in an area not used by commercial shipping and which Nasser had declared off-limits to neutral vessels. The Americans did not accede to Chief of Staff Rabin’s request for the identification of all U.S. ships in the area or Ambassador Harman’s request for a strategic liaison between Israel and the Sixth Fleet. The *Liberty*’s dispatchers, meanwhile, overrode naval orders to keep the ship in Spain, and then failed to inform the U.S. attaché in Tel Aviv of its presence near the war zone. These mistakes were compounded by the navy’s communications system, which delayed by as much as two days orders to the *Liberty* to withdraw 100 miles from the coast.<sup>52</sup> Even after it was hit, the Americans had difficulty locating the *Liberty*, the JCS placing it at “60-100 miles north of Egypt.” If neither Castle, nor CINCEUR, nor even the President of the United States could know where the *Liberty* was, it seems unreasonable to expect that the Israelis, in the thick of battle, should have been able to locate it.

The Israelis, too, committed their own share of fateful errors, as the Yerushalmi report points out: The erroneous reports of bombardment at El-Arish, the failure to replace the *Liberty*’s marker on the board after it had been cleared, the over-eagerness of naval commanders, and worst of all, Ensign Yifrah’s miscalculation of the ship’s speed. Though Yerushalmi’s report suggested reasons for these errors—inflexible naval procedures, the inaccuracy of

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speed-measuring devices—one is still left with a sense of poor organization and sloppy execution. Moreover, there were breakdowns in communications between the Israeli navy and air force stemming from inadequate command structure and the immense pressures of a multi-front war. To these factors must be added Israel's general sensitivity about its coastal defenses, and the exhaustion of its pilots after four days of uninterrupted combat. Yet none of these amount to the kind of gross negligence of which the Israelis have been accused.

And then there were “bad breaks” that are unfortunately commonplace in war: The U.S. planes that were called back because of their nuclear payload (their mere presence might have warded off the torpedo boats); the *Liberty's* inability to signal the approaching Israeli boats, and the machine gunner who fired on them; and the smoke that hid the identities of both the attackers and the attacked.

All of these elements combined to create a tragic “friendly fire” incident of the kind that claimed the lives of at least fifty Israeli soldiers in the Six Day War, and caused 5,373 American casualties in Vietnam in 1967 alone.<sup>53</sup> Obviously, these findings can do little to lessen the suffering of those American servicemen who were wounded in the incident, nor can they be expected to offer comfort to the families of the dead. But they should at least permit us to bring to a close what has for a generation remained one of the most painful chapters in the history of America's relationship with the State of Israel.

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## Notes

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1. Thomas H. Moorer's foreword to James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship* (New York: Ivy, 1979), p. ix.

2. Cited in *USS Liberty* Internet site ([www.halcyon.com/jim/ussliberty/liberty.htm](http://www.halcyon.com/jim/ussliberty/liberty.htm)).

3. Wisconsin Public Radio station WLFM interview of Dean Rusk by Tom Clark, February 1999, cited in *USS Liberty* Internet site.

4. Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter "LBJ"), Oral History of David G. Nes, p. 31.

5. Cited in *USS Liberty* Internet site.

6. Donald Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem: The Six Days that Changed the Middle East* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Amana Books, 1984).

7. Reverdy S. Fishel, "The Attack on the Liberty: An 'Accident'?" in *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 8, no. 3, 1995.

8. June 1992. See also Evans and Novak's "Remembering the Liberty," in *The Washington Post*, November 6, 1991; "The Liberty Quotes," in *The Washington Post*, November 11, 1991; Mark Genrich, editorial page column, *The Phoenix Gazette*, June 5, 1996.

9. ABC's *20/20*, May 21, 1987, and NBC's *The Story Behind the Story*, January 27, 1992, cited in A. Jay Cristol, *The Liberty Incident*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Miami, 1997, pp. 145-148. Cristol, a federal judge in Miami, is the leading expert on the *Liberty* incident, having devoted years to its study.

10. Anyone in doubt about the nature of the *USS Liberty* Internet site can follow its links to any number of rabidly anti-Israel sites, among them *Palestinian Geocities* and Paul Findley's *Council for the National Interest*.

11. LBJ, National Security File, History of the Middle East Crisis, Box 18, Joint Chiefs of Staff: Military Actions—Straits of Tiran, May 24, 1967.

12. LBJ, Box 1-10, The *USS Liberty*: Department of Defense Press Release, June 8, 1967; Box 19: CINCUSNAVEUR Order, May 30, 1967; Box 18, Joint Chiefs of Staff: Military Actions—Straits of Tiran, May 25, 1967; Box 104/107, The National Military Command Center: Attack on the *USS Liberty*, June 9, 1967.

13. For a discussion of Israel's considerations in going to war, see Michael B. Oren, "Did Israel Want the Six Day War?" *AZURE* 7, Spring 1999, pp. 47-86.

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14. United States National Archives, Middle East Crisis Files, 1967, Record Group 59 (hereafter "USNA"), USUN, Box 6: CINSTRIKE to AIG, June 2, 1967. Ben-Gurion Archive, Diary, Entry for May 26, 1967. See also Cristol, *Liberty Incident*, pp. 25-26.

15. British Public Record Office, FCO17/498, Israel—Political Affairs: Tel Aviv to Foreign Office, June 5, 1967. See also Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), pp. 100, 110; Hirsh Goodman and Ze'ev Schiff, "The Attack on the *Liberty*," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1984, p. 81.

16. LBJ, National Security File, History of the Middle East Crisis, Box 20: United States Policy and Diplomacy in the Middle East Crisis, May 15-June 10, 1967, pp. 87-88.

17. LBJ, National Security File, History of the Middle East Crisis, Box 19: JCS to USCINCEUR, June 8, 1967; Box 104/107, The National Military Command Center: Attack on the *USS Liberty*, June 9, 1967; Department of Defense: *USS Liberty Incident*, June 15, 1967. USNA, Chairman Wheeler Files, Box 27: The Court of Inquiry Findings, June 22, 1967.

18. Israel Defense Forces Archive, 2104/92/47: "Attack on the *Liberty*," IDF Historical Department, Research and Instruction Branch, June 1982 (hereafter "IDF, Attack on the *Liberty*"). The Israeli fighter pilot originally thought that the ship had fired at him, and Israeli destroyers were ordered to find it. The orders were rescinded, however, following further debriefing of the pilot.

19. Israel State Archives (hereafter "ISA"), 4079/26 Foreign Ministry Files, The *Liberty Incident*; IDF Preliminary Inquiry File 1/67 Col. Y. Yerushalmi (hereafter "ISA, The Yerushalmi Report"). Report by Carl F. Salans, Department of State Legal Advisor, September 21, 1967, to the Under Secretary of State. (Document available on the *USS Liberty* site.)

20. ISA, The Yerushalmi Report. The *Liberty* was also sailing near 'Point Boaz,' the location at which Israeli aircraft entered and exited Sinai—another reason for the heavy air traffic that morning. See IDF, Attack on the *Liberty*, p. 39, note 14.

21. Muhammad Fawzi, *The Three Years War* (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, 1980), p. 149 [Arabic]; Cristol, *Liberty Incident*, p. 30.

22. ISA, The Yerushalmi Report. See also Rabin, *Memoirs*, pp. 108-109.

23. No relation to the author.

24. Interview with Gen. (ret.) Mordechai Hod, March 9, 1999. Ehud Yanay, *No Margin for Error: The Making of the Israeli Air Force* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p. 257. Castle's denial and McGonagle's confirmation of Bareket's claim both appear on the *USS Liberty* site.

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25. The Israeli pilot mistook the “G” on the *Liberty*’s hull for a “C.” IDF, Attack on the *Liberty*. ISA, The Yerushalmi Report.

26. Rabin, *Memoirs*, p. 108. ISA, The Yerushalmi Report.

27. LBJ, Country Files, Box 104/107, The National Military Command Center: Attack on the *USS Liberty*, June 9, 1967. See also Cristol, *Liberty Incident*, p. 55.

28. IDF, Attack on the *Liberty*. ISA, The Yerushalmi Report. USNA, Chairman Wheeler Files, Box 27: The Court of Inquiry Findings, June 22, 1967.

29. IDF, Attack on the *Liberty*. ISA, The Yerushalmi Report.

30. IDF, Attack on the *Liberty*. ISA, The Yerushalmi Report.

31. IDF, Attack on the *Liberty*. ISA, The Yerushalmi Report.

32. Rabin, *Memoirs*, p. 109.

33. USNA, Box 16: “*Liberty* Hit by Torpedo,” June 8, 1967; “Inventory of Submarines,” June 8, 1967; W. Rostow to the President, June 8, 1967; Box 15: DOS to CINSTRIFE, June 9, 1967. LBJ, Country Files, Box 1-10, The National Military Command Center: Memorandum for the Record of Preliminary Information—*USS Liberty* Struck by Torpedo, June 8, 1967; Box 104/107, The National Military Command Center: Attack on the *USS Liberty*, June 9, 1967; History of the Middle East Crisis, Box 19: JCS to USCINCEUR, June 8, 1967.

34. The United States had gone over to daylight savings time, while Israel had not, and the result was a six-hour time difference between Washington and Israel.

35. LBJ, Country Files, Box 104/107, Middle East Crisis: Rostow to the President, June 8, 1967; Note to the President, June 8, 1967; Message to Kosygin, June 8, 1967. See also Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 301-303; Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 388.

36. USNA, Box 16: Diplomatic Activity in Connection with the *USS Liberty* Incident, June 14, 1967. LBJ, Country Files, Box 104/107, Middle East Crisis: Eshkol to Johnson; Memos to the President (W. Rostow), Box 17: Barbour to Department of State, June 8, 1967. ISA, 4079/26 Foreign Ministry Files, The *Liberty* Incident: Harman to Foreign Ministry, June 10, 1967; Eban to Johnson, June 9, 1967; Evron to Johnson, June 8, 1967.

37. Upon learning of the attack, the U.S. Ambassador in Tel Aviv, Walworth Barbour, warned the State Department that “its [the *Liberty*’s] proximity to the scene of the conflict could feed Arab suspicions of U.S.-Israeli collusion.” Similarly, Ambassador-Designate Richard H. Nolte in Egypt wrote, “We had better get our story on the torpedoing of *USS Liberty* out fast and it had better be good.” See LBJ,

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National Security File, Box 20: United States Policy and Diplomacy in the Middle East Crisis, May 15-June 10, 1967, pp. 143-144; Box 104/107, Middle East Crisis: Cairo to Department, June 9, 1967.

38. ISA, 4079/26 Foreign Ministry Files, The *Liberty* Incident, Harman to Foreign Ministry. LBJ, Country Files, Box 104/107, Middle East Crisis: Diplomatic Activity in Connection with the *USS Liberty* Incident, June 14, 1967. See also Clark Clifford (with Richard Holbrooke), *Counsel to the President* (New York: Random House, 1991), pp. 446-447; Phil G. Goulding, *Confirm or Deny: Informing the People on National Security* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 123-130; Cristol, *Liberty Incident*, pp. 93-94.

39. ISA, 4079/26 The *Liberty* Incident: Bitan to Harman, June 18, 1967.

40. ISA, 4079/26 The *Liberty* Incident: Bitan to Harman, June 18, 1967; Evron to Eban (Rostow quote), June 19, 1967. LBJ, National Security File, Country Files, Box 104/107, Middle East Crisis: Rusk to Harman, June 10, 1967.

41. ISA, The Yerushalmi Report. LBJ, National Security File, Country Files, Box 104/107: Middle East Crisis: Diplomatic Activity in Connection with the *USS Liberty* Incident, June 14, 1967. Though none of the Israeli officers involved in the incident stood trial, Capt. Rahav, who dispatched the torpedo boats and called on the air force to attack the *Liberty*, was forced to resign his commission. See Shlomo Erell, *Facing the Sea: The Story of a Fighting Sailor and Commander* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1998). [Hebrew]

42. USNA, Chairman Wheeler Files, Box 27: The Court of Inquiry Findings, June 22, 1967. LBJ, National Security File, Special Committee, Box 1-10: Why the *USS Liberty* Was Where It Was. Cristol, *Liberty Incident*, pp. 86-105. Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 388.

43. See, for example, Anthony Pearson, *Conspiracy of Silence: The Attack on the U.S.S. Liberty* (London: Quartet Books, 1978).

44. Though Arab archives remain closed, the Six Day (or June) War has yielded numerous memoirs by the civilian and military leaders of Egypt and Jordan. Examples can be found in Mahmud Riad, *Mahmud Riad's Memoirs* (Beirut: Al-Muwasasah al-'Arabiyya Lil'Dirasat al-Nashr, 1987), vol. 2 [Arabic]; Muhammad Hassanayn Heikal, *1967: The Explosion* (Cairo: Markaz al-Ahram, 1990) [Arabic]; Abdel-Latif Al-Baghdadi, *Memoirs* (Cairo: al-Maktab al-Misri al-Hadith, 1977) [Arabic]; Abdel Muhsin Kamil Murtagi, *Major-General Murtagi Attests to the Truth* (Cairo: Dar al-Watan al-Arabi, 1976). [Arabic]

45. *The Link*, July-August 1997.

46. Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, p. 253. Further exposition of the theory appears in Richard K. Smith, "The Violation of the *Liberty*," in the *Institute for Naval Proceedings*, June 1978.



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47. Thames TV documentary, *Attack on the Liberty*, cited in Cristol, *Liberty Incident*, p. 204.

48. LBJ, National Security File, Box 104/107, Middle East Crisis: Jerusalem to the Secretary of State, June 8, 1967; Barbour to Department, June 8, 1967; Joint Embassy Memorandum, June 8, 1967.

49. Abba Eban, *Personal Witness: Israel Through My Eyes* (New York: Putnam, 1992), p. 423. On Israeli decisionmaking on the Golan, see Hanoch Bartov, *Dado: 48 Years and 20 Days* (Tel Aviv: Ma'ariv, 1978), pp. 100-102 [Hebrew]; Eitan Haber, *Today War Will Break Out* (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot Aharonot, 1987), pp. 244-246 [Hebrew]; Zerah Verhaftig, *Fifty Years and One* (Jerusalem: Yad Shapira, 1998), pp. 190-191 [Hebrew]; Rabin, *Memoirs*, pp. 113-116.

50. It is ironic, perhaps, that the force of this logic was upheld not only by Israelis but also by Arab writers who, sticking to the "Big Lie," alleged that the *Liberty* had been directing IAF strikes in Sinai and was only inadvertently attacked. Suleiman Mathhar, *Annals of the June War Issue: Transcript of the Testimony before the Revolutionary Historical Commission* (Cairo: Kitab al-Huriyya, 1990), pp. 86-88 [Arabic]; Muhammad El-Farra, *Years of No Decision* (London: KPI, 1987), pp. 58-68; Riad, *Memoirs*, p. 312; Heikal, *The Explosion*, pp. 731-732; Fawzi, *The Three Years War*, pp. 135-136. The claim also featured prominently in Egyptian radio broadcasts; see BBC World Service, Daily Report, Middle East, Africa and Western Europe B 8, June 16, 1967.

51. Details of the Israeli compensation payments can be found in U.S. Department of State Bulletin, vol. lviii, no. 1512, June 17, 1968, and vol. lx, no. 1562, June 2, 1969, and U.S. Department of State Daily News Briefing, DPC 2451, December 18, 1980.

52. Congressman John Rhodes, a member of the House Appropriations Committee which investigated the Navy's communications network in 1971, called the events surrounding the *Liberty* incident a "comedy of errors," and then added: "Here we are, with the most sophisticated communications system ever known to mankind, and maybe it is so sophisticated we do not know how to operate it." John J. Rhodes, *Committee Hearing Report*, p. 394, cited in Cristol, *Liberty Incident*, p. 98.

53. *Friendly Fire Casualty Statistics on Southeast Asia, by Month* at the American War Library Internet site.