

USS Liberty Attacked by Israel 47 Years Ago: The U.S. Left Soldiers Behind

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Justifying the swap of Taliban prisoners for Sgt. Bergdahl, President Obama cited a principle of never leaving U.S. soldiers behind, but that rule was violated in the shabby treatment of the USS Liberty crew, attacked 47 years ago by Israeli warplanes.

On June 8, 1967, Israeli leaders learned they could deliberately attack a U.S. Navy ship and try to send it, together with its entire crew, to the bottom of the Mediterranean - with impunity. Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats attacked the USS Liberty, a state-of-the-art intelligence collection platform sailing in international waters off the Sinai, killing 34 of the 294 crew members and wounding more than 170.

On the 47th anniversary of that unprovoked attack let's be clear about what happened: Israeli messages intercepted on June 8, 1967, leave no doubt that sinking the USS Liberty was the mission assigned to the attacking Israeli warplanes and torpedo boats as the Six-Day War raged in the Middle East. Let me repeat: there is no doubt - none - that the mission of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) was to destroy the USS Liberty and kill its entire crew.



USS Liberty (AGTR-5) receives assistance from units of the Sixth Fleet, after she was attacked and seriously damaged by Israeli forces off the Sinai Peninsula on June 8, 1967. (US Navy photo)

Referring last week to the controversy of the swap of five Taliban prisoners for Sgt. Bode Bergdahl, President Barack Obama [claimed](#), "The U.S. has always had a pretty sacred rule: We don't leave our men or women in uniform behind." The only exception, he might have added, is when Israeli forces shoot them up; then mum's the word.

Mr. President, try explaining that "pretty sacred rule" to the USS Liberty survivors. I know them well enough to sense the hollow echo that Obama's claim will leave in their ears - and

in the ears of the families of those who did not survive.

The crew of the USS Liberty has been “left behind,” in a figurative as well as a physical sense. There is no way to retrieve the bodies of those washed out to sea through the large hole made by the Israeli torpedo that hit the Liberty amidships, killing 26 of the crew.

There is a way, however, to stop throwing salt in the survivors’ wounds, as every U.S. president since Lyndon Johnson has done in acquiescing to the false narrative that it was all a terrible case of mistaken identity and confusion by Israeli command and control. That salt burns – especially on anniversaries of the tragedy, raising troubling questions about the power of the Israel Lobby and the Israeli government over U.S. politicians.

In apparent fear of the Israel Lobby and not wanting to offend the Israeli government, U.S. officials including the Navy have refused to come clean on what happened 47 years ago. The mainstream U.S. media has been a willing partner in this failure to face the facts and demand accountability.

No Accident

Here, for example, is the text of an intercepted Israeli conversation, just one of many pieces of hard, unambiguous evidence that the Israeli attack was not a mistake:

Israeli pilot to ground control: “This is an American ship. Do you still want us to attack?”

Ground control: “Yes, follow orders.” ...

Israeli pilot: “But, sir, it’s an American ship – I can see the flag!”

Ground control: “Never mind; hit it!”

The Israelis would have been able to glory in reporting “mission accomplished, ship sunk, all crew killed” save for [the bravery and surefootedness](#) of then-23 year-old Navy seaman Terry Halbardier, whose actions spelled the difference between the murder of 34 of the crew and the intended massacre of all 294.

Halbardier skated across the Liberty’s slippery deck while it was being strafed in order to connect a communications cable and enable the Liberty to send out an SOS. The Israelis intercepted that message and, out of fear of how the U.S. Sixth Fleet would respond, immediately broke off the attack, returned to their bases, and sent an “oops” message to Washington confessing to their unfortunate “mistake.”

As things turned out, the Israelis didn’t need to be so concerned. When President Johnson learned that the USS America and USS Saratoga had launched warplanes to do battle with the forces attacking the Liberty, he told Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to call Sixth Fleet commander Rear Admiral Lawrence Geiss and tell him to order the warplanes to return immediately to their carriers.

According to J.Q. “Tony” Hart, a chief petty officer who monitored these conversations from a U.S. Navy communications relay station in Morocco, Geiss shot back that one of his ships was under attack. Tellingly, McNamara responded: “President Johnson is not going to go to war or embarrass an American ally over a few sailors.”

Getting Away With Murder

For the Israelis, the tight U-turn by the U.S. warplanes over the Mediterranean was proof positive that the Israeli government can literally get away with murder, including killing U.S. servicemen, and that Official Washington and its servile media could be counted upon to cover up the deliberate nature of the attack.

John Crewdson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for the Chicago Tribune, asked McNamara about this many years later. McNamara's answer is worth reading carefully; he said he had "absolutely no recollection of what I did that day," except that "I have a memory that I didn't know at the time what was going on."

Crewdson has written the most detailed and accurate [account](#) of the Israeli attack on the Liberty; it appeared in the Chicago Tribune, and also in the Baltimore Sun, on Oct. 2, 2007. Read it and you'll understand why Crewdson got no Pulitzer for his investigative reporting on the Liberty. Instead, the Tribune laid him off in November 2008 after 24 years.

Several of the Liberty survivors have become friends of mine. I have listened to their stories, as Crewdson did. When June 8 comes around each year I remember them. And on special occasions, as when Terry Halbardier was finally awarded the Silver Star for his bravery, I write about them.

The mainstream U.S. media has avoided the USS Liberty case like the plague. I just checked the Washington Post and - surprise, surprise - it has missed the opportunity for the 46th consecutive year, to mention the Liberty anniversary.

On the few occasions when the mainstream U.S. media outlets are forced to address what happened, they blithely ignore the incredibly rich array of hard evidence and still put out the false narrative of the "mistaken" Israeli attack on the Liberty.

And they attempt to conflate fact with speculation, asking why Israel would deliberately attack a ship of the U.S. Navy. Why Tel Aviv wanted the Liberty and its entire crew on the bottom of the Mediterranean remains a matter of speculation, but there are plausible theories including Israel's determination to keep the details of its war plans secret from everyone, including the U.S. government.

But there is no doubt that destroying the Liberty and its crew was the mission assigned to Israel's warplanes and torpedo boats. One Navy Admiral with a conscience, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (and before that Chief of Naval Operations) Thomas Moorer, has "broken ranks," so to speak. Moorer helped lead an independent, blue-ribbon commission to investigate what happened to the Liberty.

The following are among the commission's [findings](#) made public in October 2003:

-That the attack, by a U.S. ally, was a "deliberate attempt to destroy an American ship and kill its entire crew"

-That the attack included the machine-gunning of stretcher-bearers and life rafts

-That "the White House deliberately prevented the U.S. Navy from coming to the defense of the [ship] ... never before in naval history has a rescue mission been cancelled when an American ship was under attack"

-That surviving crew members were later threatened with “court-martial, imprisonment, or worse” if they talked to anyone about what had happened to them; and were “abandoned by their own government.”

Doing Justice

Will the USS Liberty survivors ever enjoy the opportunity to know and to tell the real story with all its evil cruelties? Or will silence continue to reign? In a different context, Russian dissident author Alexandr Solzhenitzyn wrote this warning about what silence about evil does to the foundations of justice:

“In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations.” Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

President Obama, the crew of the USS Liberty has been “left behind” for way too many years. Do the right thing by them. Face down those who warn that you cannot risk Israel’s displeasure. And add more substance to your rhetoric about our “pretty sacred rule” that we do not leave anybody wearing the American uniform behind.

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