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Surveillance Ships: Worth the Effort?

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HIS UNFAILING HABIT of mentioning the unmentionable sends Sen. J. William Fulbright's critics into spasms of rage. He outdid himself the other day in a television interview by mentioning a subject buried deep as though by the common consent of all concerned.

This was after the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in an investigation of the Tonkin Gulf Incident had developed new facts casting doubt on the report presented by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in August, 1963. The initial report led to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution which the State Department has since said was equivalent to a declaration of war.

The destroyers Maddox and Turner Joy were not, as McNamara had originally testified, on a "routine patrol" in international waters. They were engaged in "visual and electronic surveillance" with part of the assignment to "stimulate" the radars and radio circuits of North Vietnam and Red China. This was, in short, espionage which may or may not have been—the record is blurred—tied up with the South Vietnamese patrol boat attacks on North Vietnamese points.

THE UNHAPPY RECORD of the American spy ships now includes the Pueblo, seized by North Korea while engaged in "surveillance" off the Korean coast. So far as can be judged from news reports, release of the crew and the ship is no nearer today than when it was taken in what the Pentagon has steadfastly maintained was international waters.

It was the third spy ship tragedy—the attack on the Liberty by Israeli planes and motor torpedo boats during the Arab-Israeli war in June—that Fulbright mentioned. Nothing was done, Fulbright said in the interview, when the Liberty was attacked, 34 men aboard killed outright, 78 injured and the ship all but destroyed. Yet, he went on, when the Maddox and the Turner Joy suffered no damage from an attack obscured by uncertainties the United States responded by ordering 64 air sorties with an enormous tonnage of bombs flown

against North Vietnam.

Although it was hardly noticed at the time, Fulbright thereby opened up one of the touchiest and most sensitive subjects in this town. While there was no American response in the middle of a war in which American sympathies, both official and unofficial, were overwhelmingly on the Israeli side, developments since have given details of the circumstances but have not resolved the doubts within the Navy about the attack. Navy Court of Inquiry determined that the Liberty was "in international waters, properly marked as to her identity and nationality and in calm, clear weather when she suffered an unprovoked attack by Israeli aircraft and motor torpedo boats June 8 in the Eastern Mediterranean."

A summary of the proceedings noted that the court was not called "to rule on the culpability of the attackers and no evidence was heard from the attacking nation." Witnesses testified that the American flag may have been hard to identify because of the slow speed of the ship and the smoke rising from the first five or six air attacks.

The Israeli government immediately apologized and offered to pay compensation for the damage done. An Israeli military-judicial court conducted an inquiry. In accord with Israeli custom the findings have never been made public.

The United States in December put in a claim for \$3,300,000 as compensation for the families of the 34 dead. This is still under negotiation between Washington and Tel Aviv. A later claim will be filed in behalf of the injured and for the property damage.

WITHIN THE NAVY there is widespread feeling that the attack was not an accident. This is related to a smoldering resentment that the dead and wounded on the Liberty were not given just tribute for their heroism nor was there proper recognition for the bravery of the survivors in keeping the ship afloat and helping to get her into port at Malta. No evidence has been developed to show that the attack was anything but an error.

Fulbright obviously believes that the issue is not blame or lack of it, but the whole question of the operation of the espionage ships. They now have three strikes against them. The first instance, the Maddox and the Turner Joy, triggered a war against North Vietnam. The second, the Liberty, opened a wound and clouded a close relationship. The third, the Pueblo, precipitated a crisis with demands for still another war. The question is: What do they contribute to write off against this large debit?