

How LBJ Handled the Pueblo Crisis

By Drew Pearson
and Jack Anderson

Here are the events which took place inside the White House immediately after the seizure of the USS Pueblo off the coast of North Korea.

At approximately 2:30 a.m. Jan. 24, the "Situation Room," where all "hot" information is received, notified the President that the Pueblo had been stopped and overrun by a North Korean boarding crew.

He immediately telephoned Secretary of State Rusk and Secretary of Defense McNamara and gave instructions to Walt Rostow, national security adviser, to prepare an intelligence report. Rostow arrived at the White House at 5:30 a.m. and had a comprehensive report on the President's breakfast tray at 7.

Intelligence showed that the Pueblo seizure was not an isolated incident. North Korea had staged more than 575 border raids, bombings and terrorist incidents during 1967 as compared with only 50 the year before. Three hundred people had been killed. The most daring incident was the raid, two days before, on the "Blue House," the residence of South Korean President Park in Seoul.

The Pueblo had been harassed before, but this time it was taken in as part of some definite plan. Presumably the plan was connected with the

scheduled dispatch of more South Korean troops to Vietnam.

Bomb Now, Talk Later

A series of conferences with military and civilian experts followed.

The President asked probing questions, listened intently. Ordinarily he is the one who does the talking. This time he did the listening. He asked such questions as: "Where was the ship?" "Was it outside territorial waters?" "What were the orders to the ship?" "Why didn't the commander shoot back?" "Why didn't our forces in South Korea or Japan retaliate?" "How much secret electronic equipment was aboard?"

The answers included the fact that highly secret equipment was on the Pueblo. The United States has listening devices so sensitive that we can pick up messages from Soviet submarines half around the world; can listen in on a Russian pilot's conversations with the tower below him any place in the far-flung Soviet Union. Presumably the commander of the Pueblo had time only to push one or two "self-destruct" buttons. Probably most of this electronic equipment was captured.

Proposals began to pour onto the President's desk for action. One was from the Pentagon — to bomb the Pueblo as it lay in Wansan Harbor.

The bombing would at least destroy the remainder of any secret equipment. Another was to seize a Russian electronic "trawler" off the United States coast where many are stationed to eavesdrop on American messages.

The President ruled these out — for the time being. He adopted as the primary American objective the return of the men and the ship. Bombing the ship would not effect its return, would kill any men who might still be quartered on it.

Since the Russians have the same stake as we do in the safety of eavesdropping ships, Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson was instructed to call on Deputy Foreign Minister Vasili Kuznetsov.

Kuznetsov studied at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, is generally friendly to the U.S.A. This time, however, he was cold. He was restrained, but negative. The Russians, who always hate being put in the position of dictating to the Communist world, were not ready to oblige the United States.

However, it was learned that Premier Kosygin, a moderate, was out of town.

Thompson was instructed to call on Kuznetsov a second time. He reminded the Russian that the Soviet might have problems protecting its eavesdropping ships from irresponsible countries. The impli-

cation was that the United States also had satellites which might do to a Russian trawler what the North Koreans did to the Pueblo.

LBJ and Goldberg

After a Security Council meeting at which the President asked more questions, he breakfasted the next morning with Ambassador Arthur Goldberg. They probed how far they could go through the United Nations.

Goldberg reported that the Korean problem had been the long-standing concern of the United Nations, that nations outside the Communist bloc were anxious to avert trouble. He might be able to get action — if the Russians did not veto discussion.

The President decided to take this course.

He also decided that he must be ready for eventualities. The North Korean air force is tough and well-trained. The North Korean government had followed a pattern of harassment. Its Premier had urged diversionary tactics against the United States. What did this mean?

To be prepared for eventualities the President ordered a limited call-up of Air Force reserves. Having done this, he took time off to host a formal dinner scheduled one month earlier for the Vice President, Speaker McCormack and Chief Justice Warren.

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