

NEW ORLEANS STATES-ITEM

Wednesday, February 7, 1968 TWENTY-THREE

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U.S. Unprepared To Rescue Pueblo

(Editor's Note: Jack Anderson is now in Korea to report on the seizure of the USS Pueblo and other war tensions in the Far East.)

SEOUL—Over here where it happened, grim U.S. officers give a different version of the Pueblo incident than the Pentagon has peddled to the public. Those who dare to talk declare bitterly that the spy ship, with its supersecret electronic gear, could have been rescued if our Air Force squadrons in Korea had not been stripped of planes and weapons.

Only a few token fighter planes—F-104 Starfighters and F-105 Thunderchiefs — were ready for action when the Pueblo called for help. But, unfortunately, these were armed with nuclear weapons to defend our forces against an invasion. They were not equipped merely to intercept a couple of Communist patrol boats off the Korean coast.



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The nuclear armaments, of course, give these few fighters tremendous firepower. In theory, this is supposed to provide our 50,000 ground troops in Korea with adequate air protection and still free a maximum number of planes to fight in Vietnam.

IT WOULD also seem to commit the United States to a nuclear response in case full-scale fighting should be resumed in this bleak country. What many Americans don't realize is that the Korean war isn't really over. A truce was declared 15 years ago, but the negotiators at Panmunjom still haven't been able to agree upon peace terms.

The reliance on nuclear retaliation has left a critical shortage here of conventional weapons, which have been taken out of the Korean arsenals to supply the desperate needs in Vietnam. As a result, conventional arms couldn't be collected and loaded aboard the available fighter planes in time to stop the seizure of the Pueblo.

Other supplies, including arms, ammunition, vehicles, helicopters and spare parts, have also been diverted to Vietnam. At one time, the two U.S. divisions in Korea had barely enough helicopters between them for minimum peacetime needs. Planes and helicopters frequently are grounded and other equipment is laid up for lack of spare parts.

Vietnam also gets first call on men as well as materiel. The best-trained soldiers and most experienced pilots usually are sent to Saigon, not Seoul.

Thus it happened that the Pueblo's alarm brought no help, and North Korea's challenge caught the United States unprepared. The real lesson of the Pueblo incident, therefore, is that American might is stretched dangerously thin.

To cover up its unpreparedness, the Pentagon has put out the word that the Pueblo was caught by surprise. The approach of North Korean patrol boats, according to the Pentagon version, was mistaken as routine harassment. By the time the crew realized that the North Koreans intended to seize the ship, so the story goes, it was too late to summon military help.

THIS IS disputed by a confidential report which was sent to the White House, detailing the incident. The report, made available to this column, states that two fishing trawlers silently circled the Pueblo about noon on Jan. 22, then departed without incident for Wonsan.

The following noon, a North Korean subchaser circled the Pueblo three times, and on the last circle, signaled the spy ship to heave to or be fired upon. Three patrol boats joined the subchaser an hour later, and two circling MIG fighters appeared overhead.

The confidential report then relates: "One attempt to board the Pueblo by armed personnel was rebuffed. We believe the North Koreans were prepared to fire and that they later did so, but with what effect we do not know. We also think that within a few minutes they again tried unsuccessfully to board the Pueblo. At about 1:30 p.m.,

the Pueblo was again directed to stop, and at 1:45 an attempt to board was apparently successful."

Clearly, this strange drama at sea lasted long enough for the nearest U.S. jets, less than 20 minutes away, to have flown to the rescue. But they simply weren't equipped to cope with the emergency.

There was also some hesitation over whether U.S. planes had authority to attack the North Korean marauders without direct orders from Washington — which, incidentally, never arrived. U.S. forces can return the fire of any hostile force which shoots first. But planes loaded with nuclear weapons cannot attack without direct orders from the President. Apparently the question arose as to whether the planes could fire substitute conventional armaments without White House approval.

WHEN THE United States belatedly reacted, a naval task force was rushed into Korean waters. Yet the only reason the nuclear carrier Enterprise, frigate Truxton, and two escort ships were available is that they happened to be in the Sea of Japan en route to Vietnam.

In contrast, Russia had several naval vessels in the area, part of a powerful surface and submarine force that is guarding the shipping lanes from Vladivostok to Haiphong. Soviet ships are reported to be carrying sophisticated new military equipment to the North Vietnamese over the sea routes.

Indeed, the Pueblo's principal mission was to monitor this Soviet sea traffic, particularly Russian submarines. Aerial reconnaissance can keep count of the surface ships. But the Pueblo was equipped with secret, sensitive devices, which could identify and track Soviet subs under the sea.

The Pueblo affront, coming at the same time that the British are planning to withdraw their forces east of Suez, is another sober reminder that the West can no longer police the world. The demands of the Vietnam war, for example, have compelled the U.S. to cancel planned fleet visits to Indian ports.

The blunt truth is that the U.S. doesn't have the military force today to oppose Communist so-called "wars of liberation" all around the world.