

DREW PEARSON

Pueblo Capture Blow to Security

WASHINGTON—President Johnson called a group of congressmen to the White House recently for a secret briefing on the seizure of the USS Pueblo off the North Korean coast. Invited were Democratic members of the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House and Senate Armed Services committees.

The President presented Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the latter's successor, Clark Clifford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Earle Wheeler and Gen. Maxwell Taylor. Strangely, no Navy man spoke at the briefing though the seizure of the Pueblo obviously involved naval problems.

The President revealed that the loss of the Pueblo had dealt U. S. security a "severely damaging blow," since the ship had the most sophisticated and modern intelligence mechanism on board. The equipment was 15 years ahead of anything Soviet Russia possesses.

"NOW THAT the Russians have the model," the President remarked grimly, "they may be able to catch up with us within a year."

"I've got all my top people here," he told the senators and congressmen. "We want your questions, but it will be more orderly if you ask the questions after you've heard the briefings. If anyone feels compelled to interrupt with a question which makes a contribution, okay."

The briefings went smoothly until Gen. Wheeler got up to explain why Air Force planes in Japan did not go to the Pueblo's rescue.

Suddenly Sen. Tom Dodd of Connecticut began to pepper Wheeler with antagonistic questions.

"Why didn't you have some protection for the ship?" Dodd asked.

Wheeler explained that the presence of a destroyer would have revealed to the North Koreans what the vessel was and ruined its mission.

DODD CONTINUED peppering the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff about air cover, failure to send rescue planes, and so on. He was quite belligerent.



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The President, who was sitting on the other side of the room, craned his neck to see who was talking. He couldn't see and asked someone who it was. By this time it was obvious that Dodd had lifted a couple of drinks before the briefing. The President moved in firmly.

"That's enough," he said. "We have to proceed."

"I thought you said we could ask questions if they were important," remonstrated Dodd.

"I said if they made a contribution, and yours are not making a contribution. We'll stay here as long as you want to ask the questions — but later," the President said.

Dodd subsided.

Gen. Wheeler then went on to explain that it was impossible to have planes constantly hovering over the Pueblo since that would ruin its mission; also that the Air Force commander in Japan decided there wasn't much he could do because his planes could not stay in the air very long and there were 75 MIGs stationed at Wonsan which could get there quicker. The Pueblo was also surrounded by small ships that would sink it, Wheeler said, or if the commander sank his own ship, it would have taken two or three hours for the vessel to settle in the water and the enemy could have boarded it during that period.

THE CONGRESSMEN and senators were informed that the Pueblo was on a highly delicate mission to ascertain whether North Korea planned to launch a second front.

Premier Kim had been talking publicly about a diversionary effort to weaken American strength in South Vietnam and it was suspected Kim might be planning an attack across the 38th parallel. The Pueblo was hovering off the coast to pick up any messages regarding such an attack.

Twenty-seven men in the Pueblo's crew, incidentally, were the most highly trained and skilled experts in the cryptographic and intelligence fields.

The briefing went smoothly after Dodd subsided. Presi-

dent Johnson said that the United States had a number of alternatives to secure the return to the crew and ship if diplomacy did not work.

One would be to destroy the ship, though he quickly added that this would preclude the chance of getting it back. He also talked of strengthening the entire American operation in South Korea to prepare for any showdown.

Several of the congressmen present expressed sympathy for the President. They felt that he was surrounded by what they called "mediocrities."

During the briefing, pictures were shown of Russian vessels also equipped with electronic listening devices stationed off San Francisco, Guam, Catalina Island and the East Coast.

REP. MENDEL Rivers, the silver-haired solon from South Carolina, was discussing a certain newspaperman in the House Democratic cloakroom recently.

"I never had any trouble with Drew Pearson till I became chairman of the Armed Services Committee," said Rivers. "Even then I didn't have any real trouble with him until I ran afoul of McNamara."

"Now, whenever I tangle with Secretary McNamara, two days later I get a blast from Pearson. It's Secretary McNamara," concluded Rivers, "who's putting him up to these articles criticizing me."