

The Pueblo Inquiry

The Navy court of inquiry into the seizure of the Pueblo off North Korea a year ago has now degenerated into a personalized inquiry into the conduct of Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, the skipper who gave up his ship.

We may never know all the facts from the Navy Department because of security and service reasons. Nor can we expect to find out what occurred in detail when the skipper and crew were the tortured captives of cruel North Koreans. But what is shockingly clear is that, only weeks after being freed from this harrowing experience, Commander Bucher is being forced to undergo the excruciating emotional agony of an inquiry that is almost a trial.

This must be underscored because neither the Navy nor the Department of Defense has made it fully clear: The Pueblo was an instrument of American military policy; it was on an intelligence mission or, to put it bluntly, it was a "spy ship"; it was—incontestably—in dangerous waters, alone without escort, without significant defensive capability if attacked, without adequate destruct equipment if captured. All of this was not the skipper's doing, but on orders of Navy superiors.

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The inquiry raises two major questions: Did Commander Bucher resist capture sufficiently and destroy classified material to the maximum of his ability? Once imprisoned, did Commander Bucher behave properly by signing a North Korean confession saying that the Pueblo was spying?

Navy Regulations are clear: "The commanding officer shall not permit his command to be searched by any person representing a foreign state nor permit any of the personnel under his command to be removed

from the command by such person, so long as he has the power to resist."

Here unknown facts collide with known traditions. The tradition since the War of 1812 comes down from James Lawrence, the mortally wounded commander of the frigate Chesapeake, who coined the immortal words, "Don't give up the ship." This is sacred to Annapolis men as well as to "mustangs"—officers who, like Commander Bucher, have come up through the ranks. But the slogan's applicability to a spy ship operating under remote orders presents moral problems undreamed of in the age of sail.

As for Commander Bucher's confession in captivity, presumably to save his crew from torture and possible death, high United States Government officials themselves authorized a false "confession" of national guilt—which they simultaneously repudiated—in order to obtain freedom for these men. It would be ironic if a personal confession under the conditions that confronted Commander Bucher were considered blameworthy by the very officials who authorized a bogus confession in behalf of the nation.

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We live in strange times, with strange enemies, in undeclared wars. Espionage has become sophisticated, with U-2's and satellites in the skies. There is accepted sham on both sides; it is no secret, for example, that the Soviet fishing trawlers trailing our ships are fishing for information, not herring.

The real problem in the Pueblo inquiry is to bring up to date the rules that govern command and intelligence in vessels operating under Pentagon orders. Then their officers and crews will have a clear idea of their obligations under attack. Certainly now there is neither need nor excuse for subjecting Commander Bucher to the emotional trial he is being forced to endure.