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The Pueblo Affair—Finis

Lawyers have a saying that hard cases make bad law. Secretary of the Navy John H. Chafee may have had this maxim in mind when he wisely decided against a general court-martial for Comdr. Lloyd Bucher and Lieut. Stephen R. Harris, the intelligence officer of the Pueblo.

The Pueblo incident was a most inglorious chapter in the history of the Navy, but the circumstances of its capture were so unusual that it is not easy to apply traditional naval standards of behavior to those involved. While surrender of the vessel without resistance can hardly be condoned, it is still true that the ship was not armed for adequate defense. While failure to destroy the secret code machines and other classified materials violated the most elementary rules of naval security, the captain never had direct control over the intelligence equipment.

Higher officers in the Navy's chain of command in the Pacific had failed to foresee or properly prepare against the dangers lurking for the Pueblo. Moreover, the Court of Inquiry concluded that once the Pueblo's crew had been captured, Commander Bucher "upheld morale in a superior manner" and helped his men to resist the worst effects of Communist brainwashing.

In tempering justice with compassion, Secretary Chafee probably reflects the view of most Americans, summed up in his comment that the principals in the Pueblo case "have suffered enough."

But the lessons of this episode for the Navy must not be ignored. The first lesson is that if the United States is going to conduct intelligence-gathering missions near unfriendly borders—on sea, air or land—the military authorities have a primary obligation to protect the men thus engaged and to foresee and plan for the consequences that may follow from the failure of such missions.

Even larger questions must be answered at the highest levels of government. These relate to the necessity for conducting such risky excursions, with all the provocations embodied in the espionage function they fulfill. Even now it is still unclear whether the information the Pueblo and the downed EC-121 were sent to gather justified the national humiliation that has resulted from both incidents—or the lost lives.