

DREW PEARSON

Probe of Assault On Ship Needed

WASHINGTON—The great majority of the American people, 97 per cent non-Jewish, thrilled at the victory of little Israel over the lopsided might of the Arab world.

And, after victory, those who heard Israeli Ambassador Avraham Harmon were impressed with his words of conciliation urging that Israel and Arabs must "together find a way to lift our part of the world back to what it was in ancient times when it was the center of civilization."

But victory brings obligation, and the Israelis owe it to themselves and the world to explain some of the behavior of their armed services.

Perhaps also the Senate or House Armed Services Committee should investigate the puzzling circumstances under which the Israeli air force, plus the Israeli navy, took coordinated action against an American vessel flying the American flag, 15 miles off the Egyptian coast in broad daylight at a time when Israel was winning and didn't have to act in a hurry. Furthermore, a coordinated attack by both torpedo boats and airplanes means that the action was planned in advance.

This column has checked facts regarding the disaster which killed 31 men, and either the American commander of the Liberty was negligent or the Israeli military got headstrong and attacked the ship regardless of its flag—or both.

The facts are that the Liberty was seen by the Israelis off the Egyptian coast at dawn. They did not attack until 2:30 p.m. This gave them ample time to ascertain the identity of the ship.

THE LIBERTY was monitoring messages exchanged both between the Arabs in Cairo and Arab troops in the field and between Israeli troops in the field and Israeli headquarters in Tel Aviv. Since the Israelis were also monitoring messages they in-



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tercepted between President Nasser and King Hussein, they must have picked up the Liberty's messages and known what she was doing.

And since the Israeli military have been quite independent of Israeli civilian leaders, it is entirely possible that they attacked the ship because they resented any monitoring of their battle plans even by the United States. At that time, it should be noted, the Israelis were indignant over President Lyndon B. Johnson's delay in opening the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping.

It was obvious that no merchant ships would be using these waters unless they were American, British, Italian, Greek or Russian. No Egyptian or Arab vessel would be off the coast so close to the fighting at a time when the Israeli air force was making mincemeat of Egyptian tanks, airplanes and air bases.

This is one explanation for the tragic loss of 31 men aboard the Liberty.

Another explanation is that the CIA, which commanded the Liberty, failed to notify Israeli authorities of the Liberty's location.

It was U.S. 6th Fleet policy to notify local naval authorities of the location of its ships, but the CIA, which controlled the Liberty, did not follow this practice. A Navy crew was aboard but the CIA gave general orders.

All these are points which a congressional committee should investigate.

Once the Liberty was attacked, it appears that Israeli authorities in Tel Aviv acted forthrightly to confess error and avert a major catastrophe. What happened was this:

The Liberty immediately signaled the 6th Fleet, "May-day" (the international distress signal) "we have been attacked."

It was not then known who were the attackers. They could have been Russian.

Planes shot up from 6th Fleet carriers to go to the Liberty's rescue.

At this point Israeli authorities, picking up the Liberty's distress signal, sent an urgent message to the 6th Fleet that Israeli planes had attacked the Liberty by mistake.

Israeli officials cite this as evidence that the attack on the Liberty was a bona fide error. Some navy men, however, wonder how Tel Aviv knew so quickly that they had been in error.

At any rate, thanks to the message from Tel Aviv, the 6th Fleet flashed word of the incident to Washington and President Johnson got on the hot line to notify Premier Kosygin that the sudden flight of U.S. planes from U.S. carriers was to rescue the Liberty, not to attack either the Arabs or Russian ships.

Thus was a threat of World War III possibly averted.

WHEN ASSISTANT SECRETARY of State Lucius Battle appeared before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on the Near East, Chairman Thomas E. Morgan, D-Pa., started to reprimand colleagues for leaking details of a previous closed-door session with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.

"Let's have an understanding that the same thing won't happen after today's executive session," announced Morgan. "Is everyone agreed?"

"Now, wait a minute," said Rep. Wayne Hays, D-Ohio. "I didn't hear anything at the meeting you're complaining about that was classified or I didn't know already. The meeting could have been conducted openly without any harm."

"So, if you're going to waste my time by binding me to silly secrecy here today on the same basis, I'm not going to stay. I've got work to do."

Hays gathered up some papers and walked out.