

The Pueblo Warnings

The evidence that at least twice this month, after seizing South Korean vessels, North Korea had warned that it might also take countermeasures against nearby American "spy boats," raises serious questions about the American command and control system that permitted the Pueblo to be captured.

Secretary of Defense-designate Clark Clifford has promised the Senate Armed Services Committee that after taking office he would review "the decision-making process and the authorities granted that would permit a lightly armed U.S. ship, without protection, to sail close to hostile shores even though in international waters." That is all to the good. But the Congress and the country also have a right to know who was responsible for this humiliating misadventure, and how it could have happened.

The Asia analysts in Washington knew of the North Korean warnings from the U.S. Government's Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Were their superiors in the Pentagon and State Department informed? Did anyone alert the Pacific Command and the captain of the Pueblo? If they were alerted, why were precautions not taken to provide the Pueblo with surface or air protection or, at least, with a more effective contingency plan for action if threatened with capture? The affair is reminiscent of the manner in which American officials disregarded warnings of an imminent Chinese invasion of Korea in 1950 and the failure adequately to alert Pearl Harbor in 1941.

The North Korean warnings were unmistakable. On Jan. 6, according to South Korean sources, seventy South Korean fishing craft were attacked and five captured by three North Korean ships. On Jan. 11 the South Korean radio announced an incursion by two fast North Korean ships into a group of 200 South Korean fishing boats, one of which was sunk by collision and three forced to go north.

The North Korean communiqués, carried on the English language service of the (North) Korean Central News Agency, were almost identical on both occasions. That of Jan. 11 stated: "The United States imperialist aggressor troops again dispatched from early this morning hundreds of fishing boats and spy boats into the coastal waters of our side off the Eastern coast to perpetrate hostile acts. This noon our naval ships on patrol duty on the spot detained the vessels involved in the hostile acts. As long as the U.S. imperialist aggressors conduct reconnaissance by sending spy boats, our naval ships will continue to take determined countermeasures."

On Jan. 21, North Korea's delegate at Panmunjom, Gen. Pak Chung Kook, protested formally against the United States "having infiltrated into our coastal waters a number of armed spy boats, espionage bandits together with a group of South Korean fishing boats." According to his account on Jan. 25, he "repeatedly demanded that you immediately stop such criminal acts."

Whether or not the accusations were true, why were not the warnings taken more seriously?