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So Who's Afraid of the Israel Lobby?

by Ray McGovern

Who's afraid of the Israel Lobby? Virtually everyone: Republican, Democrat – Conservative, Liberal. The fear factor is non-partisan, you might say, and palpable. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) brags that it is the most influential foreign policy lobbying organization on Capitol Hill, and has demonstrated that time and again – and not only on Capitol Hill.

Seldom has the Lobby's power been as clearly demonstrated as in its ability to suppress the awful truth that on June 8, 1967, during the Six Day War:

* Israel deliberately attacked the intelligence collection ship *USS Liberty*, in full awareness it was a U.S. Navy ship, and did its best to sink it and leave no survivors;

* The Israelis would have succeeded had they not broken off the attack upon learning, from an intercepted message, that the commander of the U.S. 6th Fleet had launched carrier fighters to the scene; and

* By that time 34 of the *Liberty's* crew had been killed and over 170 wounded.

Scores of intelligence analysts and senior officials have known this for years. That virtually all of them have kept a forty-year frightened silence is testament to the widespread fear of touching this live wire. Even more telling is the fact that the National Security Agency apparently has destroyed voice tapes and transcripts heard and seen by many intelligence analysts, material that shows beyond doubt that the Israelis knew exactly what they were doing.

The Ugly Truth

But the truth will come out – eventually. All it took in this case was for a courageous journalist (an endangered species) to listen to the surviving crew and do a little basic research, not shrinking from naming war crimes and not letting senior U.S. officials, from the president on down, off the hook for suppressing – even destroying – damning evidence from intercepted Israeli communications.

The mainstream media have now published an exposé based largely on interviews with those most intimately involved. **A lengthy article** by Pulitzer Prize winning investigative reporter John Crewdson appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Baltimore Sun* on Oct. 2 titled "New revelations in attack on American spy ship." To the subtitle goes the prize for understatement of the year: "Veterans, documents suggest U.S., Israel didn't tell full story of deadly 1967 incident."

Better 40 years late than never, I suppose. Many of us have known of the incident and cover-up for a very long time and have tried to expose and discuss it for the lessons it holds for today. It has proved far easier, though, to get a very pedestrian Dog-Bites-Man article published than an article with the importance and explosiveness of this sensitive story.

A Marine Stands Up

On the evening of Sept. 26, 2006, I gave a talk on Iraq to an overflow crowd of 400 at National Avenue Church in Springfield, Missouri. A questioner asked what I thought of the study by John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt of Harvard titled *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. The study had originally been commissioned by *The Atlantic Monthly*. When the draft arrived, however, shouts of "Leper!" were heard at the *Atlantic*. The monthly wasted no time in saying thanks-but-no-thanks, and the leper-study then wandered in search of a home, finding none among American publishers. Eventually the *London Review of Books* published it in March 2006.

I had read that piece carefully and found it an unusual act of courage as well as scholarship. That's what I told the questioner, adding that I did have two problems with the study:

First, it seemed to me the authors erred in attributing virtually all the motivation for the U.S. attack on Iraq to the Israel Lobby and the so-called "neoconservatives" running our policy and armed forces. Was Israel an important factor? Indeed. But of equal importance, in my view, was the oil factor and what the Pentagon now calls the "enduring" military bases in Iraq, which the White House and Pentagon decided were needed for the U.S. to dominate that part of the Middle East.

Second, I was intrigued by the fact that Mearsheimer and Walt made no mention of what I believe to be, if not the most telling, then perhaps the most sensational proof of the power the Lobby knows it can exert over our government and Congress. In sum, in June 1967, after deliberately using fighter-bombers and torpedo boats to attack the *USS Liberty* for over two hours in an attempt to sink it and kill its entire crew, and then getting the U.S. government, the Navy, and the Congress to cover up what happened, the Israeli government learned that it could – literally – get away with murder.

I found myself looking out at 400 blank stares. The *USS Liberty*? And so I asked how many in the audience had heard of the attack on the *Liberty* on June 8, 1967. Three hands went up; I called on the gentleman nearest me.

Ramrod straight he stood:

"Sir, Sergeant Bryce Lockwood, United States Marine Corps, retired. I am a member of the USS Liberty crew, Sir."

Catching my breath, I asked him if he would be willing to tell us what happened.

"Sir, I have not been able to do that. It is hard. But it has been almost 40 years, and I would like to try this evening, Sir."

You could hear a pin drop for the next 15 minutes, as Lockwood gave us his personal account of what happened to him, his colleagues, and his ship on the afternoon of June 8, 1967. He was a linguist assigned to collect communications intelligence from the *USS Liberty*, which was among the ugliest – and most easily identifiable – ships in the fleet with antennae springing out in all directions.

Lockwood told of the events of that fateful day, beginning with the six-hour naval and air surveillance of the *Liberty* by the Israeli navy and air force on the morning of June 8. After the air attacks including thousand-pound bombs and napalm, three sixty-ton torpedo boats lined up like a firing squad, pointing their torpedo tubes at the *Liberty's* starboard hull. Lockwood had been ordered to throw the extremely sensitive cryptological equipment overboard and had just walked beyond the bulwark separating the NSA intelligence unit from the rest of the ship when, he recalled, he sensed a large black object, a tremendous explosion, and sheet of flame. The torpedo had struck dead center in the NSA space.

The cold, oily water brought Lockwood back to consciousness. Around him were 25 dead colleagues; but he heard moaning. Three were still alive; one of Lockwood's shipmates dragged one survivor up the hatch. Lockwood was able to lift the two others, one-by-one, onto his shoulder and carry them up through the hatch. This meant alternatively banging on the hatch for someone to open it and swimming back to fish his shipmate out of the water lest he float out to sea through the 39-foot hole made by the torpedo.

At that Lockwood stopped speaking. It was enough. Hard, very hard – even after almost 40 years.

What Else We Know

John Crewdson's meticulously documented article, together with the 57 pages that James Bamford devotes to the incident in his book *Body of Secrets* and recent confessions by those who played a role in the cover-up, paint a picture that the surviving crew of the *USS Liberty* can only find infuriating. The evidence, from intercepted communications as well as testimony, of Israeli deliberate intent is unimpeachable, even though the Israelis continue to portray the incident as merely a terrible mistake.

Crewdson refers to U.S. Navy Captain Ward Boston, who was the Navy lawyer appointed as senior counsel to Admiral Isaac C. Kidd, named by Admiral John S. McCain (Sen. John McCain's father) to "inquire into all the facts and circumstances." The fact that they were given only one week to gather evidence and were forbidden to contact the Israelis screams out "cover-up."

Captain Boston, now 84, signed a formal declaration on Jan. 8, 2004 in which he described himself as "outraged at the efforts of the apologists for Israel in this country to claim that this attack was a case of 'mistaken identity.'" Boston continued:

"The evidence was clear. Both Admiral Kidd and I believed with certainty that this attack...was a deliberate effort to sink an American ship and murder its entire crew...Not only did the Israelis attack the ship with napalm, gunfire, and missiles, Israeli torpedo boats machine-gunned three lifeboats that had been launched in an attempt by the crew to save the most seriously wounded – a war crime...I know from personal conversations I had with Admiral Kidd that President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara ordered him to conclude that the attack was a case of 'mistaken identity' despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary."

Why the Israelis decided to take the draconian measure of sinking a ship of the U.S. Navy is open to speculation. One view is that the Israelis did not want the U.S. to find out they were massing troops to seize the Golan Heights from Syria, and wanted to deprive the U.S. of the opportunity to argue against such a move. Another theory: James Bamford, in *Body of Secrets*, adduces evidence, including reporting from an Israeli journalist eyewitness and an Israeli military historian, of wholesale killing of Egyptian prisoners of war at the coastal town of El Arish in the Sinai. The *Liberty* was patrolling directly opposite El Arish in international waters but within easy range to pick up intelligence on what was going on there. And the Israelis were well aware.

As for the why, well, someone could at least approach the Israelis involved and ask, no? The important thing here is not to confuse what is known (the deliberate nature of the Israeli attack) with the purpose behind it, which remains a matter of speculation.

Other Indignities

Bowing to intense pressure from the Navy, the White House agreed to award the *Liberty's* skipper, Captain William McGonagle, the Medal of Honor....but not at the White House, and not by the president (as is the custom). Rather, the Secretary of the Navy gave the award at the Washington Navy Yard on the banks of the acrid Anacostia River. A naval officer involved in the awards ceremony told one of the *Liberty* crew, "The government is pretty jumpy about Israel...the State Department even asked the Israeli ambassador if his government had any objections to McGonagle getting the medal."

Adding insult to injury, those of the *Liberty* crew who survived well enough to call for an independent investigation have been hit with charges of, you guessed it, anti-Semitism.

Now that some of the truth is emerging more and more, others are showing more courage in speaking out. In a recent email, an associate of mine who has followed Middle East affairs for almost 60 years, shared the following:

"The chief of the intelligence analysts studying the Arab/Israeli region at the time told me about the intercepted messages and said very flatly and firmly that the pilots reported seeing the American flag and repeated their requests for confirmation of the attack order. Whole platoons of Americans saw those

intercepts. If NSA now says they do not exist, then someone ordered them destroyed."

Leaving the destruction of evidence without investigation is an open invitation to repetition in the future.

As for the larger picture, visiting Israel this past summer I was constantly told that Egypt forced Israel into war in June 1967. This does not square with the unguarded words of Menachem Begin in 1982, when he was Israel's prime minister. Rather he admitted publicly:


"In June 1967, we had a choice. The Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that [Egyptian President] Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him."

Israel had, in fact, prepared well militarily and mounted provocations against its neighbors, in order to provoke a response that could be used to justify an expansion of its borders. Israel's illegal 40-year control over and confiscation of land in the occupied territories and U.S. enabling support (particularly the one-sided support by the current U.S. administration) go a long way toward explaining why it is that 1.3 billion Muslims "hate us."

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