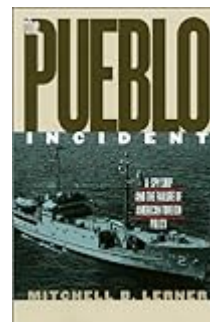


Mitchell B. Lerner. *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xii + 320 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1171-3.



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In Harm's Way: The Tragedy and Loss of the USS *Pueblo*

In Harm's Way: The Tragedy and Loss of the USS *Pueblo* Library.

On January 23, 1968, the USS *Pueblo* was attacked, boarded, and captured by North Korean forces. The loss of the ship and its crew was one of the most agonizing incidents of Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency and could easily have sparked another Korean war. It did not. Today, the details of the *Pueblo* Incident are remembered by few and unknown to most, and the incident itself is little more than a footnote to the history of the Cold War.

Mitchell B. Lerner's new book, *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy*, is a detailed and thoroughly researched account of the *Pueblo*, its mission, its capture, and the captivity of its crew. Lerner, assistant professor of history at Ohio State University, writes well and thoughtfully organizes his work. He has proved also to be a diligent researcher with the demonstrated ability to blend both primary and secondary source materials into solid narrative. He makes good use of official Navy records and other archival materials and newly classified information from the Johnson

The book, however, does not live up to its title. Lerner's account is the story of the fate of one ship and crew in a long war. The book is also about poor planning, bad decisions, flawed risk assessments, and an intelligence warning failure. It is not the story of a failed U.S. foreign policy.

Lerner begins on solid ground. He traces the history of the USS *Pueblo* to the origins of the secret program to outfit and operate a fleet of intelligence collection ships. Initially, these mobile signals intelligence (SIGINT) collectors were part of an operation by the National Security Agency (NSA) to launch a fleet of unremarkable and unobtrusive vessels to engage in the high-stakes mission of intercepting communications and electronic signals emanating from foreign shores. With the backing of both the Navy and the Office of Naval Intelligence, NSA ran "Operation Clickbeetle" as an alternative to using naval combatants in an intelligence gathering role. In doing so, the United States was taking a page from the play-book of the Soviet Union. The Soviets had been using non-

combatant auxiliary ships in international waters, off the U.S. coasts and near naval bases, to gather intelligence and snoop on U.S. military activities.

More tellingly, NSA's sea-going SIGINT operations were not without good result. In 1962, one such ship uncovered the first evidence of Soviet missiles in Cuba. The value of the program was not lost on the U.S. Navy; it soon began to press for non-combatant ships of its own to use for intelligence collection. The first ships to be modified for these missions were Liberty-class and Victory-class cargo ships built during the Second World War.

But the U.S. Navy was fighting a costly war in Vietnam, and the tight fiscal constraints imposed by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara forced naval decision-makers to cut corners. Preoccupied with readying ships for combat, pressed to make ends meet, the Navy turned to its moth-balled fleet to seek out smaller ships for less costly conversions. A plan was made to convert light cargo ships, less than half the size of the Liberty-and Victory-class ships for the operations. It was an ill-advised choice.

Lerner recounts in careful detail the problems converting the FP-344, a general-purpose supply ship, into a secret-purpose, modern intelligence-collection platform, the *Pueblo*. The ship was originally built in 1944 and it had been sent into reserve shortly after the Second World War, where it remained neglected and rusting. Funds for the conversion of what would become the *Pueblo* and a sister ship were cut from \$15 million to \$8.5 million and dozens of important planned repairs and refits were eliminated or ignored. Bureaucratic snafus, carelessness, and conflicting priorities in the shipyard turned the conversion of the *Pueblo* into an ordeal for her new captain, Lieutenant Commander Lloyd Bucher, and for the misinformed workers and supervisors assigned to the project. "The end result was one of the omnipresent realities of the *Pueblo's* conversion: those who paid attention to the ship could not know anything about it, while those cleared to know about it did not pay any attention" (p. 30).

Even after extensive conversion work, the *Pueblo* was hardly ready for sea. During sea-trials, an inspection uncovered more than four hundred deficiencies, seventy-seven of which were so severe the ship was judged unfit for service. By the time additional repairs were made, and Bucher and his crew departed on their ill-fated mission to Korean waters, the *Pueblo* was an unstable, poorly equipped, dangerously overloaded ship with a green crew, erratic compass, balky engines, and steering

controls that failed repeatedly while the ship was underway. Even in the best of circumstances, it could barely make a speed of thirteen knots (about half that of North Korean patrol boats).

Lerner's assessment of the deficiencies of the ship and crew are carefully documented and his conclusions are more than amply supported by the overwhelming evidence he has uncovered. This ship was simply not ready for its intended mission. This fact, in and of itself, adds much to our understanding of the *Pueblo* Incident.

Fortunately, this work also includes a careful assessment of the hazardous nature of the *Pueblo's* mission. Here Lerner is at his best—and at his worst—in his analysis of the incident. Lerner quickly gets to the heart of matters as he begins to unravel the unsettling details of the risk assessment that was undertaken in advance of the "Clickbeetle" operation planned for the *Pueblo* and its crew. The *Pueblo* was sent on a mission judged to be of "minimal risk."

Lerner, in new work on the incident, uncovers and details a badly flawed risk-assessment process. Agencies with information that would have created a clearer picture of North Korean intentions never properly disseminated their findings to permit all-source analysis. Moreover, the entire process of higher review seems to have been nothing more than a bureaucratic ritual of rubber-stamping from one level to the next. It was, General Joseph Carroll of the Defense Intelligence Agency lamely explained in later testimony, the result of unfortunate timing. The review process at the Joints Chief of Staff level, for example, took place overnight during the Christmas holiday season.

Improbably, analysts assessing mission risk seemingly ignored the signs of North Korea's growing belligerency. Lerner methodically picks apart the denials and defenses erected by embarrassed officials in the wake of the seizure and in subsequent investigations. This author builds a sound case when he cites the list of indicators that should have signaled to mission planners that the *Pueblo* was indeed at risk. Lerner cites a single, succinct paragraph in the House of Representatives subcommittee report that said it all:

"No level of authority in either the intelligence chain of command or the operating chain of command was sensitive to the abundant evidence indicating the development of a progressively more aggressive and hostile attitude by the North Koreans. The tremendously increased number of border incidents with South Korea, the at-

tempted assassination of the South Korean President, and the North Korean broadcast with respect to ships entering claimed territorial waters were all discounted or ignored by responsible agencies, with the exception of the National Security Agency” (p. 62).

Unfortunately, Lerner fails to recognize this part of the *Pueblo* tragedy for what it really was: an intelligence warning failure. Its root causes were creeping normalcy and mirror imaging, both analytical biases that quickly skew any assessments. American ships had been harassed on previous missions. Angry North Korean rhetoric was customary. Each escalation of North Korean belligerency, coming as it did over time, was seen as part of an expected pattern. The threshold of aggression was creeping ever higher, yet it was seen as nothing out of the norm. Then, too, by emulating Soviet-style operations for seagoing intelligence collectors, American analysts assumed Soviet client states would react in the same way the United States reacted. It was believed the North Koreans would mirror American reactions to foreign intelligence ships in international waters off their coasts, watching them warily but not contesting their presence.

Lerner ignores the obvious facts of the intelligence warning failure and instead argues it was symptomatic of the great failure of American foreign policy in the Cold War. It is the central thesis of his book. Lerner contends that the prevailing American view of worldwide communist conspiracies, orchestrated in Moscow, prevented policy-makers from understanding that emerging communist nations might pursue their own agendas.

“In designing the *Pueblo*’s mission,” Lerner writes, “preparing the ship for launch, and attempting to resolve the crisis, American policy makers consistently failed to treat the North Koreans as North Koreans, instead viewing them as one cog in a greater communist conspiracy that consisted of virtually interchangeable parts.... [T]hey clung to this comfortable worldview that reduced complex events to simplistic shades of black and white and saw everything as a zero-sum contest for world domination” (p. vii). He then argues that this view was responsible for a string of foreign policy failures in Vietnam, Cuba, Guatemala, and elsewhere. “This myopia,” he later adds, “would have severe ramifications for American troops world-wide, whether they were fighting in the jungles of Vietnam, keeping the peace in Lebanon, or operating a small intelligence boat [sic] off the North Korean coast” (p. 63).

But in making this claim Lerner confuses grand strategy, policy, operations, strategy, and tactics. America’s

grand strategy during the Cold War was containment. No matter what perceptions motivated that strategy, it was manifested in policy decisions. One such policy decision was to collect intelligence information on the Soviet Union, the Soviet Bloc, and non-aligned communist nations. SIGINT operations were one way to implement that policy, and the use of a fleet of SIGINT collection ships was proven strategy for conducting those operations.

The capture of the USS *Pueblo* was not, as Lerner goes to great lengths to argue, the predictable outcome of U.S. foreign policy failure. It was, in light of all the evidence, a tactical error made in implementing a sound strategy. This is no minor fault in a work that is so well researched. To argue that a tactical failure is a complete indictment of a larger foreign policy initiative is to engage in the same shallow debate that some media pundits relish. It is highly disappointing to find it in a work that is otherwise a solid piece of scholarship.

Lerner’s work also includes huge digressions and glaring oversights. He fails to show how Kim’s internal affairs, so carefully screened from the West, could have changed American perceptions or intentions. Simply put, American decision-makers initially had no reason to believe the *Pueblo* was not captured as part of a Soviet plan.

Then, too, Lerner fails to offer a cogent and complete analysis of the damage done to U.S. national security with the loss of the *Pueblo*’s secret intelligence gear and publications. If the author would prove the *Pueblo* Incident was a foreign policy failure, he should have made it a point to examine the damage caused to U.S. national security by the compromise of American intelligence methods and enciphered codes.

This oversight is even more surprising because Lerner includes James Bamford’s *Body of Secrets* in his bibliography. Having access to Bamford’s excellent book, Lerner must have known that the loss of the *Pueblo* and the information provided by the Walker spy ring gave the Soviets an enormous intelligence advantage they enjoyed for many years. Bamford’s account is by no means complete, but it points in the right directions. A discussion and assessment of this enormous compromise would have been a welcome addition to Lerner’s book. It would have been far more valuable to the reader than Lerner’s misplaced discussion of American culture in the 1960s. His scattershot chapter packed with references to the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, Broadway plays, Beatles tunes, and episodes of Star Trek

should have given way to a more sobering assessment of the gravity of the *Pueblo*'s loss.

Lerner also gives short shrift to the controversial inquiry and courts-martial proceedings brought against Bucher and his crew. This, too, is part of the *Pueblo*'s story, and the same analytical skills Lerner uses so well to assess the fitness of the ship and crew for duty might have been used to good advantage to unravel those proceedings.

While Lerner fails to defend the thesis of his work and overlooks some of the most important implications of the loss of the ship, he still offers some keen new views. For example, his discussion of the cautious diplomacy pursued by the Johnson administration, the failed attempts to secure international intervention, and the adroit maneuvers used to placate South Korea's Park Chung Hee provide the reader a valuable look at domestic politics, international relations, and the Johnson presidency.

An entire chapter is also devoted to the explanation of *juche*, the ideological construct developed by Kim Il Sung to explain the roots of his communist revolution. This worthwhile discussion is offered in the context of

an assessment of revolutionary North Korea as a failing state. Lerner develops the convincing argument that the North Koreans captured the *Pueblo* to exploit it for domestic ideological purposes. In so doing, he answers the nagging question of why Kim would risk another Korean war by attacking an American ship in international waters.

There is both meaningful and original work in the pages of *The Pueblo Incident*. Much of what Lerner offers here is highly revealing and deepens our understanding of the risks run in fighting the Cold War and the immense difficulties of pursuing relations with revolutionary North Korea. His assessments of the preparations of the ship and the analysis of the mission risk are solid contributions to our understanding. His depiction of the Johnson administration's management of the crisis is revealing, too. Those strengths make this a book worth reading and nearly compensate for Lerner's failure to prove the revisionist thesis of his work.

But, despite what Lerner may mistakenly believe, the tragedy and the loss of the USS *Pueblo* cannot be blamed on a failed foreign policy. It is fairer by far to only say the *Pueblo* was a ship that had been sent in harm's way.

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