

The Pueblo Caper

A remarkable thing has happened: Let the *Pueblo* be seized by North Korea, and every man-on-the-street becomes an international law “expert.” “An outrage!” “An act of piracy!” “Nothing like this has happened since 1815!” The air is filled with declamations on the law of the sea; I expect at any time to hark back to the eighteenth century and find the press teeming with discussions of the law of capture, contraband theory, and how many puffs at the hornpipe are required for a party to board ship.

The first point one finds striking is the sudden devotion of American politicians to rules of international law, after America has violated it time and again, and consistently in Vietnam for several years, and after releasing pictures showing American soldiers aiding and supervising torture of prisoners in Vietnam. The stench of hypocrisy in this affair is overwhelming.

Even on the narrow point of the capture of the *Pueblo*, there are enough fuzzy areas and ambiguities to give pause to even the most hopped-up patriot. North Korea, like many nations of the “free world,” claims twelve miles offshore as its territorial waters. The U.S. claims that the *Pueblo* was accosted sixteen miles out; the North Koreans said that the ship — which all sides acknowledge to have been a spy ship, pure and simple — was eight miles offshore. Four miles at sea seem to be pretty flimsy grounds for launching World War III.

And for those four flimsy miles, we are forced to rely on the word of a government which, as the astute and witty columnist Murray Kempton has reminded us, has consistently lied, and lied mightily, to the American people: during the U-2 incident, the Bay of Pigs, and now, it seems, at the Gulf of Tonkin, that mysterious incident in October, 1964 which served as the groundwork for all the escalation of the Vietnam war that the Johnson Administration has waged ever since. The American story about Tonkin has been changing steadily for years: At first a massive attack by North Vietnam's PT boats hurling numerous torpedoes at innocent American ships, the story has now been whittled down to one lone torpedo — maybe — against ships which admittedly had zig-zagged inside North Vietnamese territorial waters. But of course truth never really does catch up, in the public mind, with the Big Lie. Kempton concludes that, in this dispute, he is at this point forced to believe the North Koreans since *they* have not been lying to him lately.

With the advent of the *Pueblo* crisis, the air of Congress was filled with the predictable cries of the addled war hawks. Several joined Governor Reagan in calling, in the best John Wayne fashion, for an American fleet to go steaming up Wonsan Harbor to rescue ship and crew; one of the many difficulties, of course, is that the crew has long since been removed inland. Other statesmen want to bomb the ship to smithereens; apparently it makes no difference whether we rescue the ship or blow it up — so long as there is *some* mighty act of American violence. Meanwhile, we face the fact that, apart from one airborne division at Fort Bragg, N.C., there are no troops left with which to launch another war in Korea. As a result, some politicians are calling for the ultimate atrocity: atomic weapons. For this suggestion we can thank Senators [Henry M. "Scoop"] Jackson (D., Wash.) and [Strom] Thurmond (R., S.C.). Are we to blow up the Korean people, the ship and crew, and maybe the whole U.S. as well, over four disputed miles in the waters off Wonsan?