



## *Blood in the Water: How the US and Israel Conspired to Ambush the USS Liberty* by Joan Mellen.

Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2018. Pp. 446. ISBN 978-1-63388-464-9.

Review by Janice J. Terry, Eastern Michigan University (jterry@emich.edu).

---

*Blood in the Water* focuses on a particularly dark chapter in modern US military and political history. The author, Joan Mellen (Temple Univ.), has written a number of books on international policy during Cold War era. Her present well-researched account of the attack on the USS *Liberty* during the Six Day War in 1967 and its subsequent cover-up is based on published sources, photographic and video collections, primary documents, and many interviews with survivors of the attack. Mellen's journalistic, popular-history style of writing<sup>1</sup> makes her book easily comprehensible, even to readers unfamiliar with the Six Day War, the Middle East, or the complicated politics of the region.

The USS *Liberty* was a technical research (i.e., spy) ship (14) tasked with gathering intel only on Arab targets, not Israel; there were several Arabic translators aboard but none fluent in Hebrew (14-16). Mellen makes clear from the outset that Israel, in a classic "false flag" operation, deliberately attacked the *Liberty*, intending to sink it and leave no survivors to bear witness to the actual attack and its perpetrators (15).

The crucial question is, of course, why would Israel attack a ship belonging to the United States, its closest ally? Mellen sets out to explain how the plan for the attack was conceived and unfolded in real time, and how it was covered up when the ship did not sink and there were surviving eyewitnesses. Marshaling a plethora of documentation and interviews with survivors, Mellen convincingly argues that the plot was first conceived by James Angelton of the CIA and Meir Amit of the Israeli Mossad (intelligence agency).

Angelton, described by some colleagues as mentally ill (47) and a "paranoid conspiracy theorist" (360), was partial to rogue operations and secrecy (49); he also "privileged the state of Israel" (28), cultivating Israeli generals (52-54) and visiting the state dozens of times. He also helped to obfuscate or deny Israel's nuclear capabilities; these were known to the John F. Kennedy administration (37-39), but in a "wink, wink, don't tell" approach, the United States continues to deny Israel's nuclear capabilities to the present day.

While JFK adopted a fairly even-handed approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict, seeking friendly relations with President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in spite of his growing ties with the Soviet bloc, Angelton and then Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson loathed Nasser and continued to seek his downfall. Although Mellen does not mention it, Johnson was not the first western leader who wanted Nasser toppled and/or assassinated. A decade earlier, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden had approved of the joint British-French-Israeli attack on Egypt in the 1956 war.

Chapter 4, "Toppling Nasser," describes some of Israel's plans to overthrow or assassinate Nasser (63). As early as 1953, in the so-called Lavon Affair, Israel had tried to discredit Nasser and force a US attack by having Israeli agents plant bombs at US properties in Cairo and blame Egypt.

---

1. She taught literature and creative writing at Temple for fifty years.

The plan failed when the bombers were captured and identified by the Egyptian government (64). But after Egypt signed an arms deal to acquire weaponry from the Soviet bloc, the US gave a green—or at the very least yellow—light for Israel to attack or invade Egypt (81, 120). Plots to remove Nasser were shelved (83) during the Kennedy administration but reactivated after JFK's death.

Some in the CIA, the Johnson White House, and Israel planned for Israel to attack and sink the *Liberty*, leaving no survivors. The United States and its ally Israel would then blame Egypt for the attack, thereby creating a *casus belli* for a “preemptive” US air attack on Cairo and the overthrow or assassination of President Nasser. In many ways, the plan followed the Mossad motto, “by way of deception thou shalt do war” (93).

Thus, the June 1967 Israeli attack on Egypt came as no surprise to Washington. The real question was when, not if, the attack would occur. The United States had already assured the Israelis that it would not interfere if Israel invaded Egypt (101), going so far as to leak the gaps in Egyptian radar coverage to Israel (127). Using the Egyptian closure of the Straits of Tiran as a pretext, the Israeli air force effectively destroyed Egypt's air force and Israeli ground troops launched a successful full-scale land attack across the Sinai Peninsula to the east bank of the Suez Canal. Hours before the 8 June attack on the *Liberty*, Israel killed 850 Egyptian POWs in the Sinai (140). Some claimed that Israel then attacked the *Liberty* to ensure that the crime remained a secret; but the facts plainly indicate that the plan to attack the ship far predated the killings in Sinai.

As Mellen emphasizes, the *Liberty* had been deliberately ordered into the war zone and denied its requested armed escort (142). Subsequently, some alleged that Moshe Dayan was responsible for the attack on the *Liberty* (162n78), but Mellen persuasively shows that Meir Amit, head of Mossad, ordered Dayan to attack the ship (377n78). Indeed, she argues that higher-ups were complicit from the outset (162) and compares the attack on the *Liberty* to the Gulf of Tonkin incident that was used to justify the US bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong (165).

Chapter 6, “Heroes in the Seaweed,” the crux of the book, provides an almost minute-by-minute account of the attack. Clearly, no one was expected to survive it (208). Israeli air forces fired on the ship for forty minutes and sent in helicopters “to finish off the job” (212). The attack lasted an hour and a half, not five or six minutes as the Israelis and their supporters later claimed. But it failed to explode the ship's boilers, which would have destroyed and sunk it (208). Israeli forces fired on the US sailors in lifeboats and dropped napalm canisters, some of which were subsequently photographed, on the ship's deck. Of the crew of 295, 34 were killed and 174 wounded. The ship was penetrated by 821 rockets and machine-gun rounds, and torpedoes blew a 40-foot hole in its hull (263). Incredibly, the crew managed to save the radio antenna and send out SOS signals. Otherwise, ship and crew both would have disappeared into the Mediterranean (185). The narrative of the attack is bolstered by many photographs of the damages and crew members.

During the attack, Mellen notes, American airplanes armed with nuclear bombs were sent toward Egypt, but were recalled when the *Liberty* failed to sink (152–53, 215, 234). Neither LBJ nor Defense Secretary Robert McNamara ever admitted any responsibility for the attack or its cover-up. Mellen makes a persuasive case that the entire operation was meant to create an excuse to remove Nasser from power (229); if true, this was perfidy at the highest levels of government.

Even after the attack failed to sink the *Liberty*, the rescue of the ship and its survivors was delayed. The ship was ordered to sail for Malta, instead of the far closer island of Crete, perhaps in hopes that it would yet sink; once it reached Malta, a news black-out was put into effect (254–60).

Chapter 9, “Cover-Up,” concerns the labyrinthine cover-up of the attack, as well as the intimidation of the young survivors who were ordered to deny that *Liberty* was a spy ship. As late as

2018, the CIA still refused to release many documents pertaining to the attack; those that have been made public are heavily redacted. The official Israeli response and subsequent inquiry characterized the attack as a horrible accident. Mellen dismisses Israel's "preposterous" (177) claims that its forces mistook the *Liberty* for the *El Quseir*, an old, moth-balled Egyptian ship half its length.

Naturally, LBJ, McNamara, National Security Advisor Walt Rostow, and the Pentagon all accepted Israel's representation of the attack as accidental (246). Mellen describes the perfunctory US inquiries into the incident (264) and the final report minimizing the "ferocity of attack" (266). American officials, including the US Ambassador to the UN, Arthur Goldberg, a Johnson appointee, various well regarded journals like *Commentary*, and the Israeli official report on the incident all espoused the "tragic accident" explanation. Israel provided a "paltry" (334) compensation of ca. \$3 million to the survivors and paid ca. \$6 million for damages to the ship. Even years after the attack, the survivors were still being warned never to publicize their firsthand accounts of it (256–57). While no major monument to the *Liberty* exists in Washington or Arlington Cemetery, various small plaques like the one in Manistee,<sup>2</sup> Michigan, have been erected, usually at the behest of survivors.

Even a half century on, it is hard to get accurate information on the attack, its inception, and consequences. Survivors were not allowed to speak at the 2006 State Department Conference on the *Liberty*, nor were they given a place at the annual American Legion convention in 2018. Joan Mellen's new book is a small but salutary contribution toward a full, unbiased account of the attack on the USS *Liberty* and its long-term impacts.

---

2. Not "Manatee" (photo caption, 348).