

America's Greatest Ally and the USS *Liberty*

On June 8, 1967, in the midst of the Six-Day War, Israeli aircraft and naval vessels attacked the United States Navy's intelligence ship, USS *Liberty*, killing 34 Americans and wounding 171 more. The episode remains one of the darkest and most controversial chapters in U.S. military history - not only because of the attack itself, but because of the cover-up that followed. When viewed against Israel's broader record of unprovoked aggression, perfidious tactics, and disregard for international law, the *Liberty* affair stands as a painful example of how the U.S. government has subordinated the lives of its own servicemen to its "special relationship" with America's so-called greatest ally.

A Pattern of Aggression and Perfidy

Israel's actions in 1967 cannot be understood in isolation. The Six-Day War itself began with an unprovoked, pre-emptive Israeli airstrike on Egypt - a blatant violation of the UN Charter. International law recognizes only defensive action after an armed attack; there is no legal doctrine of "anticipatory self-defense." Israel, however, has repeatedly cloaked its unilateral wars and strikes under this invented rationale, from the 1956 Sinai invasion to the 1981 attack on Iraq's Osirak reactor and beyond.

Just as troubling is Israel's record of deception in warfare. The 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel was carried out by Zionist militants disguised as Arabs. The 1954 "Lavon Affair" involved Israeli operatives planting bombs in Western targets in Egypt to frame local groups. And as recently as 2024, Israeli forces disguised themselves as doctors, nurses, and patients to kill three Palestinians inside a hospital - an act that meets the definition of perfidy under the Geneva Conventions. Against this backdrop, the events of June 8, 1967 appear less as a tragic accident and more as part of an established modus operandi.

The Attack on the USS *Liberty*

The *Liberty* was a clearly marked U.S. Navy vessel, bristling with antennas, with its hull number and name painted in large characters, and flying an American flag so large it could not be missed. Survivors testified that Israeli reconnaissance aircraft flew over the ship multiple times that morning, close enough for pilots to wave at sailors on deck. Hours later, unmarked Israeli jets struck with rockets, napalm, and cannon fire.

The assault progressed in phases. First, airstrikes knocked out communications, accompanied by deliberate radio jamming to prevent distress calls from reaching the U.S. Sixth Fleet. Next came torpedo boats, one of which launched a torpedo that tore a massive hole in the ship's hull and killed 25 men instantly. Survivors reported that Israeli gunboats strafed lifeboats - a clear war crime under the laws of armed conflict. Finally, armed heli-

copters hovered over the shattered ship before breaking off the attack. At every stage, the attackers had opportunities to recognize *Liberty* as American. At no stage did they halt.

Israel later claimed it had mistaken the *Liberty* for the Egyptian horse transport *El Quseir*. This explanation collapses under scrutiny. The two ships bore no resemblance in size, silhouette, or equipment. Moreover, even if Israel truly believed it was attacking *El Quseir*, it would have been guilty of another war crime - the deliberate attack on an unarmed civilian vessel carrying livestock.

Motives and Theories

Why attack an American ship? Several possibilities converge. By sinking *Liberty*, Israel would have silenced a vessel tasked with collecting signals intelligence - intelligence that might have revealed Israeli operations beyond what Tel Aviv admitted to Washington. By using unmarked aircraft and attempting to sink the ship completely, Israel may have hoped to pin the attack on Egypt, thereby dragging the United States into the war on Israel's side. And by jamming the ship's radios, Israel made clear it did not want survivors broadcasting who the true attacker was. The most plausible explanation is that Israel intended for *Liberty* to vanish beneath the waves, with no witnesses left to contradict its narrative.

Cover-Up and Betrayal

If the attack was shocking, the aftermath was disgraceful. Survivors were ordered to remain silent under threat of court-martial. The U.S. Navy's inquiry lasted only a week, with testimony tightly constrained. President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recalled U.S. aircraft sent to defend *Liberty*, prioritizing geopolitics over their own men's lives.

High-ranking officials later admitted the truth. Secretary of State Dean Rusk declared he never accepted Israel's explanation. Admiral Thomas Moorer, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, called the attack deliberate and the cover-up "one of the classic all-time cases of the U.S. government covering up the truth." Presidential adviser Clark Clifford admitted bluntly that Washington judged its alliance with Israel "more important than the lives of our men." Even Captain William McGonagle's Medal of Honor ceremony was deliberately downplayed, denied the White House honors usually accorded.

Conclusion: America's Greatest Ally?

The USS *Liberty* incident reveals a brutal reality: in 1967, Israel killed and maimed hundreds of Americans, and Washington shielded Israel from consequences. The attack itself bears every hallmark of deliberation - multiple phases, deliberate jamming, unmarked aircraft, and the strafing of lifeboats. The cover-up proves that U.S. leaders were willing to sacrifice justice, accountability, and the memory of the dead in order to preserve an alliance.

For decades, survivors have held memorials largely ignored by their own government, even as the rhetoric of “America’s greatest ally” persists in Washington. But the *Liberty*’s wreckage and the testimony of its crew tell another story - one of betrayal, silence, and a relationship in which American lives have been deemed expendable.