

American Media Miss the Boat

“Alison Weir presents a powerful, well documented view of the Middle East today. She is intelligent, careful, and critical. American policy makers would benefit greatly from hearing her first-hand observations and attempting to answer the questions she poses.”

- **Thomas Campbell**
Former US Congressman (R-CA)
Dean of Haas School of Business,
University of California

“When the speech ended, Ms. Weir was met with thunderous applause, and across the room there was a widespread sense of satisfaction that someone was saying what needed to be said.”

- *New York Times*

About Alison Weir

In winter 2001, freelance journalist Alison Weir spent a month traveling alone throughout the West Bank and Gaza to see for herself what was going on. Upon her return she founded If Americans Knew, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing Americans with accurate information on this critical region. She has spoken on Capitol Hill, at the Center for Policy Analysis, and at numerous universities and other venues throughout the U.S.

www.IfAmericansKnew.org
contact@IfAmericansKnew.org • 202-631-4060

American Media Miss the Boat

*For USA Today, Freedom of the Press
Means the Right to Report It Wrong*



Alison Weir
Founder of If Americans Knew

CounterPunch, June 23/24, 2007:

Capitol Hill, October 2003. It is a historic occasion. An independent, blue-ribbon commission is to release its findings from an investigation into an internationally significant 36-year-old attack on a US Navy ship that left more than 200 American sailors killed or wounded.

The commission consists of:

- A former ambassador to one of the US's most important allies
- A US Navy rear admiral and former head of the Navy's legal division
- A Marine general, America's highest ranking recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor and the former Assistant Commandant of Marines
- A US Navy four-star admiral, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs

of Staff (the highest military position in the country), former Chief of Naval Operations, a World War II hero, and the only Naval admiral to have commanded both the Pacific and the Atlantic fleets

The panel is moderated by a former ambassador who served as Chief of Mission in Iraq and Deputy Director of Ronald Reagan's White House Task Force on Terrorism.

The commission announces explosive findings:

- That the attack, by a US ally, was a “deliberate attempt to destroy an American ship and kill her entire crew”
- That the ally committed “acts of murder against American servicemen and an act of war against the United States”
- That the attack involved the machine-gunning of stretcher-bearers and life rafts
- That “the White House deliberately prevented the U.S. Navy from coming to the defense of the [ship]... never before in American naval history has a rescue mission been cancelled when an American ship was under attack”
- That surviving crewmembers were later threatened with “court-martial, imprisonment or worse” if they talked to anyone about what had happened to them; and were “abandoned by their own government”
- That due to the influence of the ally’s “powerful supporters in the United States, the White House deliberately covered up the facts of this attack from the American people”
- That due to continuing pressure by this lobby, this attack remains “the only serious naval incident that has never been thoroughly investigated by Congress”
- That “there has been an official cover-up without precedent in American naval history”
- That “the truth about Israel's attack and subsequent White House cover-up continues to be officially concealed from the American people to the present day and is a national disgrace”
- That “a danger to the national security exists whenever our elected officials are willing to subordinate American interests to those of any foreign nation...” and that this policy “endangers the safety of

facts of the powerless, or simply that they don’t like to admit mistakes. I don’t know if it’s all of the above, or whether they’re just too busy to bother and too jaded to care.

Whatever the reason, until American news media start being conscientious enough to get their reports on Israel right, Americans are going to continue being disastrously misinformed about one of the globe’s most destabilizing, tragic, and potentially calamitous areas of conflict. When the media refuse to report on findings by a four-star US Navy admiral and the highest ranking Medal of Honor recipient in the United States, and ignore an affidavit of historic proportions, perhaps it’s not surprising that they also ignore the 18-month truce conducted by Hamas despite continuing Israeli violence, the role in the current Palestinian strife played by Israeli-orchestrated policies of divide-and-conquer, and that they perpetually, just as in the USS Liberty attack, report the context dead wrong.

If you think it’s worth a few minutes of your time to contact *USA Today’s* corrections department, you’ll find their email address reassuring:

“Commitment to Accuracy” accuracy@usatoday.com (800-872-7073)

Notes

1. Congressional Record, October 11, 2004; Vol. 150, No. 130; pages E1886 to E1889 <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?r108:2:/temp/~r108uInpOX:>
2. <http://www.usliberty.org/supporters.htm>
3. http://ifamericansknew.org/us_ints/ul-boston.html
4. A number of excellent articles in the military’s professional journals are exceptions to this general media blackout; for example, “In Awesome Peril: Heroism in Defense of the USS Liberty,” *VFW Magazine*, Richard K. Kolb, June/July 2007, pp. 32-35. http://www.ifamericansknew.org/us_ints/ul-kolb.html. Inexplicably, however, to date this article has not been posted on the VFW website. This failure to post a significant article on Israel is reminiscent of an article published in *Foreign Service Journal* on June 1, 2002 about the Israeli government’s torture of American citizens. This report also was not placed on the publication’s website. It can be read at: <http://www.parnersforpeace.org/inmedia/db200206010/>
5. http://www.ifamericansknew.org/us_ints/ul-staring.html
6. http://www.ifamericansknew.org/us_ints/ul-peck.html
7. http://ifamericansknew.org/us_ints/ul-moorer.html
8. <http://www.michaeloren.com/bio.htm>
9. <http://ussliberty.org/>
10. <http://ussliberty.com/thebiglie.htm>
11. http://www.wrmea.com/archives/December_2003/0312014.html
12. <http://www.asne.org/kiosk/archive/principi.htm>

counsel had subsequently disavowed the inquiry. Nevertheless, given the fact that newspapers rarely correct omissions, and given the power dynamics of the situation (a national newspaper has a great deal, a reader next to none; the Israel lobby has a massive amount, the Liberty survivors barely any) I didn't expect *USA Today* to run a correction on this omission.

However, an outright, irrefutable error, I thought, was a different matter. When a statement is shown to be erroneous, papers usually run a simple, short correction in a corrections box. Since the paper's claim that there have been 11 US investigations finding "mistaken identity" is without any substantiation whatsoever, I felt it would be impossible for *USA Today* editors to deny the need to correct it.

I was right. It was impossible for them to deny this. So, instead, they (1) created a new definition for a word they couldn't justify (investigation), (2) defended a different statement, one from the middle of the article (which was also incorrect; I am now asking that they correct this one as well) and (3) stated that what they had meant to convey was not wrong, and therefore they didn't need to correct the statement that they still had not denied was incorrect.

It has been one of my more bizarre exchanges with US editors.

It is now more than two weeks since I first contacted *USA Today* about its need to run a correction. In that time they've run over 25 corrections. For example, on June 19th they were careful to inform readers: "A daily feature Friday tracking Barry Bonds' progress toward Hank Aaron's career home run record misidentified the home city of the Braves when they signed Aaron in 1952. It was Boston." On June 15th they took the time to tell the public: "A story Wednesday on the FX series *Rescue Me* misstated a family relationship. Sheila is the widow of Tommy's cousin." Nothing, however, on their erroneous reporting on an incident of profound geopolitical importance.

I am not privy to the internal workings of *USA Today* and the individual predilections of its writers, editors and owners, so I have no idea what is going on. I don't know if reporter Oren Dorell and/or his editors unconsciously or consciously tilt toward Israel, or whether they were simply sloppy. I don't know if their refusal to correct an obvious mistake is caused by defensiveness or arrogance, partiality toward Israel or unwillingness to trigger the displeasure of pro-Israel superiors or Israeli-centric readers/advertisers. I don't know if it's that they prefer the explanations of the powerful to the

Americans and the security of the United States"

Newsworthy?

Not when Israel is the attacking nation. Not when Israel is the "ally" to whose interests American needs are said to be subverted.

This extraordinarily high-ranking commission was reporting on the 1967 Israeli attack on the USS Liberty. Many analysts believe that the Liberty attack could be Israel's undoing – at least as far as US support is concerned – if Americans knew the facts about it.

But they don't. Here's why:

A search of hundreds of the largest news media in this country indexed by Lexis-Nexis does not turn up a single US newspaper that mentioned this commission, a single US television station, a single US radio station, a single US magazine. While it was mentioned in an Associated Press report focusing on one of the commission's most dramatic revelations, Lexis reveals only a sprinkling of news media printed information from this AP report, and those few that that did failed to mention this commission itself, its extremely star-studded composition, and the entirety of its findings.

Apart from a few members of the alternative press and the excellent *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (not indexed by Lexis), this commission might as well not have existed as far as most of the US media is concerned – and therefore, the American public.

While the results of its investigation can be read in the Congressional Record, "Findings of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Israeli Attack on the USS Liberty, the Recall of Military Rescue Support Aircraft while the Ship was Under Attack, and the Subsequent Cover-up by the United States Government,"¹ only an infinitesimal fraction of the American citizenry has any idea that a commission made up of some of the nation's most respected military leaders stated publicly and forcefully – on Capitol Hill – that a US president chose to sacrifice US interests and US servicemen (specifically, the 25 of the 34 dead who were killed after US rescue missions were recalled) to Israeli interests, and then ordered a cover-up of his actions.

Almost no one knows that the US's purported "special" ally tried to sink a Navy ship, and then quibbled for years over what it would pay in compensation to the widows, children, and parents of those it killed and to the United

States for the ship it destroyed. (Thirteen years later it grudgingly paid \$6 million for a ship valued at \$40 million.)

The one piece of this story that did make it into the mainstream media has also remained astonishingly buried: testimony that provided the final nail in the coffin of claims that the Israeli attack – which lasted two hours; consisted of rockets, napalm, and torpedoes; and killed 34 Americans total and injured over 170 – was somehow accidental.

This testimony, which was read at the Capitol Hill event, was by Captain Ward Boston, the chief counsel to the one US government investigation ever undertaken of this attack, the Naval Court of Inquiry. This quickie investigation, overseen by Admiral John S. McCain (the current Presidential contender's father), who gave subordinates one week to conduct an investigation that normally would have been allotted a minimum of six months, found the attack to be a case of "mistaken identity." The report, which focused on the performance of the crew and the adequacy of communications, and which excluded critical testimony from crew members, is the keystone in Israel partisans' claims that the attack was accidental. All other US reviews of the attack that state it was accidental cite this investigation as their source.

For decades, Liberty crewmembers and authors such as James Ennes, Stephen Green, Paul Findley, John Borne, and James Bamford had provided substantial evidence that this conclusion was false. Numerous American officials of cabinet-level positions and the equivalent have stated publicly that they believed the attack to be intentional. Senior military, diplomatic and intelligence officials had long held that the magnitude and duration of the attack on the easily recognizable ship precluded any possibility that it was a mistake.²

Captain Boston's testimony was a dramatic confirmation that they were correct.

In his testimony, Boston stated that he had decided to end his 30-year silence and was going to expose the truth: the Court of Inquiry conclusions had been a sham. President Lyndon Johnson and his secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, had ordered the court to cover up the fact that all the evidence had indicated clearly that the attack had been intentional.³

Somehow the major media missed this, even though AP, uncharacteristically, had an excellent news report on it. There was no report in USA Today,

8. House Armed Services Committee Review of Communications, May 1971: Liberty communications were discussed along with other communications failures. The committee reported no conclusions concerning the attack.

9. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 1979/1981: [Miami bankruptcy judge A. Jay Cristol, author of a book exonerating Israel] claims that the committee investigated the attack and exonerated Israel, yet he has been unable to provide minutes, a report or other evidence of such an investigation. Rules of the select committee require that any committee investigation be followed by a report. There is no report of such an investigation; ergo, there was no such investigation.

10. National Security Agency Report, 1981: Upon the publication in 1980 of "Assault on the Liberty" by James Ennes, the National Security Agency completed a detailed account of the attack. The report drew no conclusions, although its authors did note that the deputy director dismissed the Israeli excuse (the Yerushalmi report) as "a nice whitewash." The report did not exonerate Israel.

11. House Armed Services Committee meeting of 1991/1992: Though cited by Mr. Cristol as an investigation which exonerates Israel, the U.S. government reports no record of such an investigation. Cristol claims that the investigation resulted from a letter to Rep. Nicholas Mavroules from Joe Meadors, then-president of the USS Liberty Veterans Association, seeking Mavroules' support. Instead of responding to Liberty veterans, however, Congressman Mavroules referred the matter to Mr. Cristol for advice. Survivors heard nothing further. Meadors' letter was never answered. The U.S. government reports that there has been no such investigation.

Ethics the USA Today Way

Armed with this information, I contacted *USA Today* about their story. They had committed two significant errors: one of omission and one of commission. According to the American Society of Newspaper Editors Statement of Principles, both types require a correction.¹²

Specifically, it was unconscionable for *USA Today* to include the finding of the Naval Court of Inquiry, as it had, while omitting the fact that its chief

deliberate, but reported falsely that it was not, because they were directed by the president of the United States and the secretary of defense to report falsely. So the findings are fraudulent. Yet these fraudulent findings were the basis for several other reports that followed.

2. The Joint Chiefs of Staff Report of June 1967: This was an inquiry into the mishandling of several messages intended for the ship. It was not an investigation into the attack. It did not exonerate Israel, because it did not in any way consider the question of culpability.

3. CIA report of June 13, 1967: This interim report, completed five days after the attack, reported “our best judgment [is] that the attack...was a mistake.” No investigation was conducted, and no first-hand evidence was collected. Then-CIA Director Richard Helms concluded and later reported in his autobiography that the attack was planned and deliberate.

4. Clark Clifford report of July 18, 1967: Clark Clifford was directed by Lyndon Johnson to review the Court of Inquiry report and the interim CIA report and “not to make an independent inquiry.” His was merely a summary of other fallacious reports, not an “investigation”... The report reached no conclusions and did not exonerate Israel... On the contrary, Clifford wrote later that he regarded the attack as deliberate.

5. and 6. Two Senate meetings: The Committee on Foreign Relations meeting of 1967 and Senate Armed Services Committee meeting of 1968 were hearings on unrelated matters which clearly skeptical members used to castigate representatives of the administration under oath before them. Typical questions were, “Why can’t we get the truth about this?” They were not “investigations” at all, but budget hearings, and reported no conclusions concerning the attack. They did not exonerate Israel.

7. House Appropriations Committee meeting of April and May 1968: This was a budget committee meeting which explored the issue of lost messages intended for the ship. It was not an investigation and reported no conclusions concerning the attack.

the New York Times, the Washington Post, the LA Times... you name it, and they probably missed it. Despite the significance of this new evidence, only a handful of newspapers printed it, mostly small, regional ones; a Lexis search a few days later revealed nine.

A major tree had fallen in the forest, and almost no one heard it, because the US media chose not to report it.

This mainstream media blind spot has continued, and with it an American cover-up of astounding proportions.⁴

June 8th, was the 40th anniversary of this attack. There were moving ceremonies in commemoration of the fallen at Arlington National Cemetery, the Naval Academy, and the Naval War Memorial in Washington DC. Survivors placed wreaths for their shipmates, sisters remembered their brothers; mothers wept yet again for their sons.

Somehow CNN missed this; ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly news missed it. Despite the fact that the USS Liberty was the most decorated ship in American history; despite the fact that its commander received the Congressional Medal of Honor; despite the fact that a War Crimes Report on the unprovoked attack has been filed by the crew, and that members of the military elite are calling for a sustained, public investigation; despite the fact that a Naval rear admiral stated that the Liberty honorees had suffered “an unprecedented injustice... at the hands of our very own Navy and government;”⁵ the national media almost entirely ignored the Liberty, its crew, and its significance. The Washington Post, in whose backyard this all occurred, printed nary a word on any of it. Not a single mainstream news outlet reported the statement by former high-ranking career diplomat and Reagan appointee Ambassador Edward Peck comparing the treatment of Pat Tillman’s death to the treatment of Liberty casualties:

The US has just gone through a long, painful, costly and embarrassing effort to unravel the cover-up of the death by friendly fire of Pat Tillman in Afghanistan. American servicemen will be punished for attempting to conceal the circumstances of the accidental killing of a single American soldier by his own comrades. It is totally unacceptable that even though Israeli servicemen would not receive punishment for carrying out orders...that resulted in the killing and wounding of more than 200 of the Liberty’s crew, our government has steadfastly refused to permit the survivors of the heaviest attack on

a Navy ship since WWII to tell properly constituted official investigators what happened on that fateful day.

This is obsequious, unctuous subservience to the peripheral interests of a foreign nation at the cost of the lives and morale of our own service members and their families. It should no longer be condoned.⁶

While AP did have a story on the Liberty on June 8th, the report, oddly, was filed from Israel and was sent out only internationally; US editors never saw it. Where the US media did produce stories, almost all (like the above AP story) gave the Israeli invention – that “investigations” showed it was accidental.

USA Today: Covering-up the Cover-up

USA Today is a case in point. According to its website, *USA Today* is the nation's top selling newspaper. Its average daily circulation is 2.3 million and it is available worldwide.

USA Today has a history of missing stories on the Liberty. It neglected to report on Ward Boston's historic revelations; it missed the independent commission's Capitol Hill announcement; it refused to print an op-ed by commission chairman and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas Moorer (later published by the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*?). In fact, in its 25-year history, it appears that *USA Today* had never carried a single news report on the USS Liberty.

On the June 8th anniversary, *USA Today* finally published a news story about the Liberty: "Coverup theory alive at USS Liberty reunion." The good news was that *USA Today* had finally discovered the Liberty; the bad news was that it relied on Israel partisans for the story's context and that it omitted major facts. Most troubling, it published a fraudulent statement that then framed the entire story.

While there are numerous objective US experts on this attack, *USA Today's* reporter Oren Dorell chose to use only analysts with ties to Israel: Michael Oren, who was born and grew up in the United States where he was active in Zionist youth movements, emigrated to Israel where he took Israeli citizenship, served in the Israeli army, participated in Israel's first invasion of Lebanon, and, most recently, served as a Major in the Reserve during Israel's 2006 invasion⁸; and Mitchell Bard, a former editor of the *Near East Report*, the

publication produced by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Israel's lobby in the United States. (None of this information was in Dorell's article). Despite the fact that the Liberty survivors have created an award-winning website⁹ containing first-hand testimonies and exhaustive documentation on the attack, and that there are additional websites with valuable information, Dorell's article mentioned only one website – Bard's.

While Dorell did interview crewmembers, his failure to include any of the massive evidence supporting their contention that the attack was intentional conveyed the impression that these survivors were simply traumatized conspiracy theorists. Worse yet, he preceded their statements with a sentence that contained an outright falsehood: "Israel has always insisted the attack was a case of mistaken identity, and 11 U.S. investigations over the years have reached the same conclusion."

While it is true that Israel proclaims its innocence, the second half of this statement is, quite simply, a fabrication.

The Myth of the “11 Investigations”

If *USA Today* had investigated this claim, continually put forward by Israel partisans, its editors would have discovered that in 2006 the reference librarian at the Library of Congress had investigated this allegation and found it to be false:

After checking numerous resources, including the CIS (Congressional Information Service) Indexes to Congressional Hearings (both published and unpublished), and the Public Documents Masterfile, I could find no evidence that the Congress ever held hearings or launched an investigation into the June 8, 1967 incident with the USS Liberty.¹⁰

Even earlier, in 2003, a writer for the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Terence O'Keefe, investigated this claim and similarly found it to be hokum. In his subsequent article, also clearly missed by *USA Today*, O'Keefe discussed each of these alleged “investigations,” as well as their alleged conclusions. Following are excerpts from his report:¹¹

1. The U.S. Navy Court of Inquiry: The court concluded that “available evidence combines to indicate...[that the attack was] a case of mistaken identity.” ...According to Captain Ward Boston, chief legal counsel to the Court of Inquiry, the court found that the attack was