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A. Jay Cristol. *The Liberty Incident: The 1967 Attack on the U.S. Navy Spy Ship.*

Washington: Brassey's, 2002. ISBN 1-57488-414-X. Maps. Photographs. Illustrations.

Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp.xx, 294. \$27.50.

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With advent of cable television, history related television content has moved away from traditional documentaries of great events and people towards what the *History Channel* has recently dubbed, "extreme history." Extreme history focuses less on chronological narratives and more on historical mysteries, controversies, marvels, investigations, and technology. This new form of televised history, along with Internet discussion forums, has fueled a nearly insatiable demand for controversies involving U.S. Navy ships: sort of a "History Mysteries" meets "Guts & Bolts." Some of these controversies spur members of Congress to order additional investigations of these episodes, which in turn cost the U.S. government vast sums of money.

Jay Cristol, therefore, has done the U.S. government a great service by devoting fourteen years of his life to exploring the *Liberty* controversy--the subject of no fewer than six major television shows. On 8 June 1967, Israeli jets and torpedo boats attacked the *Liberty*, a U.S. Navy ELINT ship steaming in international waters off the Sinai Peninsula. Thirty-four Americans died and 171 were wounded in the attack. The cause of the action is the subject of Cristol's insightful book.

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During the course of his life, Mr. Cristol, a Ph.D. in international studies, has served as naval aviator, a JAG officer, and as a judge. He is currently a federal judge and a part-time naval historian. With a lawyer's eye for detail and a retired naval officer's understanding of military hardware, he scrutinized every declassified document from the thirteen official U.S. and Israeli investigations of the incident. He also interviewed over 500 participants, including the Israeli pilots who participated in the attack.

In the final analysis, Cristol concludes that the attack was a tragic mistake and not an intentional attack by Israeli against a U.S. Navy ship. "There was neither a conspiracy nor a cover-up concerning the attack," writes the author, "It was not preplanned."(198) Rather, the action was a basic case of mistaken identity that often occurs among combatants during the fog of war. The author found no "credible evidence"(198) that the assault was intentionally made against a U.S. Navy ship.

The author, however, found a lot of credible evidence to support the mistaken identity explanation. His most important piece of proof is the gun camera film of the first Israeli Mirage IIICJ that attacked the ship. By analyzing the signature of the smoke emanating from the ship's stacks, the author demonstrates that the Mirage attacked *Liberty* on a windless day. Therefore, it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for the pilots of the planes or the skippers of the torpedo boats to identify the nationality of *Liberty* from its flag, which would have been drooped straight down. Those who argue that the attack was intentional often refer to the ship's 5-by-8 foot flag. "Many crew members," claims Cristol, "believe it was extended and should have been seen and identified as an American flag."(75) Because it was drooped at the halyard, it could not have helped pilots approaching the ship at 1,000 feet per second in identifying the ship.

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Another interesting theory thoroughly debunked in the book is that Moshe Dayan, Israel's Minister of Defense at the time, secretly ordered the attack. This accusation came from Norman Dacey, the national chairman of the American Palestine Committee in 1977. Dacey allegedly used the Freedom of Information act to obtain CIA intelligence documents on *Liberty*, and published excerpts of those documents in a 19 September 1977 advertisement in the *New York Times*. One of these documents claims that Moshe Dayan personally ordered the attack and "one of Israel's admirals adamantly opposed the attack."⁽¹⁴²⁾ Cristol shatters this myth by revealing that Israel only had one admiral at the time and he was in Haifa while Dayan was en route to Hebron at the time the supposed order was issued. To support this claim even further, Cristol even found a series of 8 June 1967 photographs of Dayan on the road to Hebron. In one photo, the author points out the time on Dayan's watch was 1325, about seventeen minutes before the first order was transmitted from the "pit" in Tel Aviv. Since Dayan clearly was not in the "pit" at the time, he could not have issued the order.

As the Dayan chapter reveals, *The Liberty Incident* does not simply analyze official documents and arrive at conclusions, it also attempts to grapple with every major conspiracy theory related to the episode. Many of these theories came out of oral histories conducted with the crewmembers of *Liberty*—those who suffered the most distress and pain over the incident. But many other theories were promulgated by television shows looking to improve their ratings. As the old saying goes, "controversy sells." Professional historians will find Cristol's chapter, entitled "Television's Perspective," particularly interesting because it demonstrates how television documentaries often favor conspiracy theories because they have a higher entertainment value than traditional historical analysis. This chapter also divulges the shoddy research of many historical documentaries, and the tendency of these shows to make a hash of even the most basic facts surrounding an historical event. The author reserves some of his sharpest criticism for a documentary produced by Geraldo Rivera for his show, *Now It*

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Can Be Told. “The program,” Cristol claims, “does little more than present the unsubstantiated allegations of two crewmembers.”(179)

One of the main reasons conspiracy theories about *Liberty* continue to persist is because both the U.S. and Israeli governments withheld information about the episode for ten to thirty six years after the event. Keeping key documents classified for so long, argues the author, “greatly contributed to the opportunity to cry cover-up and led to much speculation and many conspiracy theories.”(200)

One of the of the most damaging conspiracy theories came from Admiral Thomas Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1970-1974. When the *Liberty* incident occurred, Moorer was Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Fleet, and therefore out of the information loop as far as *Liberty* was concerned. Moorer, however, developed a strong interest in the incident after the fact because he knew one of its officers personally, Lieutenant Steven Toth, the son of one of Moorer’s U.S. Naval Academy classmates. Moorer rejects the mistaken identity argument based on his own personal experience in identifying ships as a navy pilot in World War II, but never researched the issue subsequently as the CNO or JCS Chair. In 1985, Moorer went so far as to tell Jim Anderson of United Press International that he did not investigate it when he became Chairman of the JCS because it was during the Vietnam War and he was “concerned with what was about to happen, and not what had happened.”(121)

After the publication of the book, Cristol filed a suit against the NSA, demanding that it release transcripts of Israeli radio transmissions made on 8 June 1967 and any other pertinent material on *Liberty*. The NSA ultimately released a recorded tape with an English transcript of communications in Hebrew between Israeli helicopters dispatched to *Liberty* following the attacks and an air controller. The transcript confirms that the Israeli helicopter pilots did not observe the American flag on the *Liberty* until 1512, some 30 to

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45 minutes after the attack was over and while Israel was attempting to conduct rescue operation. This “smoking gun” should have finally ended the debate about the *Liberty*, but as I write this review, new allegations of a cover up have recently surfaced.

On 22 October 2003, Captain Ward Boston, a former Navy attorney who was the senior legal council to the Navy’s 1967 Navy Board Inquiry investigation of *Liberty*, released a signed affidavit stating that President Lyndon Johnson and Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, ordered that the inquiry conclude the incident was an accident. Boston said he felt compelled to “share the truth” about *Liberty* following the release of Jay Cristol’s book. Cristol’s response to this new allegation will inevitably appear on his comprehensive web site, <http://www.libertyincident.com/index.htm>. This site not only contains information on allegations and new findings that have arisen following the publication of the book, but also displays most of the major documents Cristol used to write his book. As such, it is an essential companion to the book for any scholar interested in seriously pursuing this episode.