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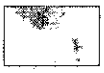
A Perfect Storm Near the Korean Peninsula

Korea & the U.S.: Partnership Under Stress

Korea as a "Land of Immigration"

Climbing Out of Hell: LBJ and the *Pueblo* Incident

Mansudaet'ak Kut: Commemoration of the Anniversary of 9/11



CONTENTS

LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER
A Perfect Storm Near the Korean Peninsula 4
Donald P. Gregg

PERSPECTIVES
Korea and the United States Partnership Under Stress 6
Don Oberdorfer

The Changing Face of South Korea: The Emergence of Korea as a "Land of Immigration" 16
Timothy C. Lim

Climbing Out of Hell: Lyndon Johnson and the *Pueblo* Incident 22
Mitchell B. Lerner

PORTFOLIO
***Mansudaet'ak Kut*: Commemoration of the Anniversary of 9/11** 62

TKS EVENTS IN REVIEW 27

TKS EVENTS AHEAD 58

RE: SOURCES & INFORM@TION 66

Films on DVD, Film Releases, Newly Published Books
Exhibitions, Conferences, Opportunities, Teaching Resources

ON THE RECORD 71

Joint Press Release of the Seventh Inter-Korea Ministerial Talks in Seoul from August 12–14, 2002; Agreement at the Second South-North Economic Cooperation Committee Meeting in Seoul from August 27–30, 2002; Agreement Reached at the First Round of Working-Level Talks on Inter-Korean Railways and Highways from September 13–17 at Mt. Kumgang; Joint Press Release of the Eighth Inter-Korean Ministerial Talks in P'yongyang from October 19–22, 2002

WHO'S WHO & WHAT'S WHAT 73

Photo Book Captures Old Korea in Transformation to Modern State; Three Korean Sopranos to Sing Together with the Three Tenors; Im Kwon-taek Receives Numerous Honors for *Chihwaseon*; Party and Praise for South Korea's Heroes; Gloria Park Wins Big Apple Classic; Tracing the Hidden Side of a 1563 Dutch Shipwreck; Mi Hyun Kim Wins Wendy's Championship; Movies Introduced to Korea in 1897; Dissident Art Deemed Worthy of a Permanent Display at the Seoul Museum of Art; North Korea's Late Entry Expands Asian Games Soccer Draw; Korean Strongman Park Chung-hee Faces the Music; Visiting Professor Enthuses over the Dinosaur Prints; Prestigious Venice Art Exhibit Invites First Korean Artist; Madonna's *Evita* Screened in P'yongyang; P'yongyang Suggests a Unified Romanization System for the Korean Language; North Korean Sets Weightlifting Record at the Asian Games; Student Activist Gets 18 Months in Jail; Jimmy Carter Wins the Nobel Peace Prize; Se Ri Pak Earns Fourth LPGA Victory of 2002 Season; Mystery Mother of North Korean Political Heir Dies; Poll Shows Troubled Youth; For Most Seoulites Being Middle-Class Is an Accepted Fact; Commuting the Pacific, Unseating *The Simpsons*; Korea's Pop Diplomacy; Dark South Korean Film Set in DMZ Opens Pusan Festival; Cho Choong-hoon, Builder of a Business Empire, Dies at 82; Ambassador William H. Gleysteen, Jr. Passes Away; Saburo Ienaga, Renegade Japanese Historian, Dies at 89; Korean Cinema Referenced in English; Sunken Mongol Ship Restored; Seoul Plans to Build World's Tallest Building; South Korea Cinema Halts Bond Movie Showings; Movie Hall for Foreigners Due in Seoul; Yong Jin Choi Receives South Korean President's Award

NEWS IN REVIEW 80

TRENDS IN TRADE & BUSINESS 88

MEMBERS IN FOCUS 94

on the cover...
Shaman Jung Mun San performing the *Mansudaet'ak Kut* in New York City in commemoration of 9/11
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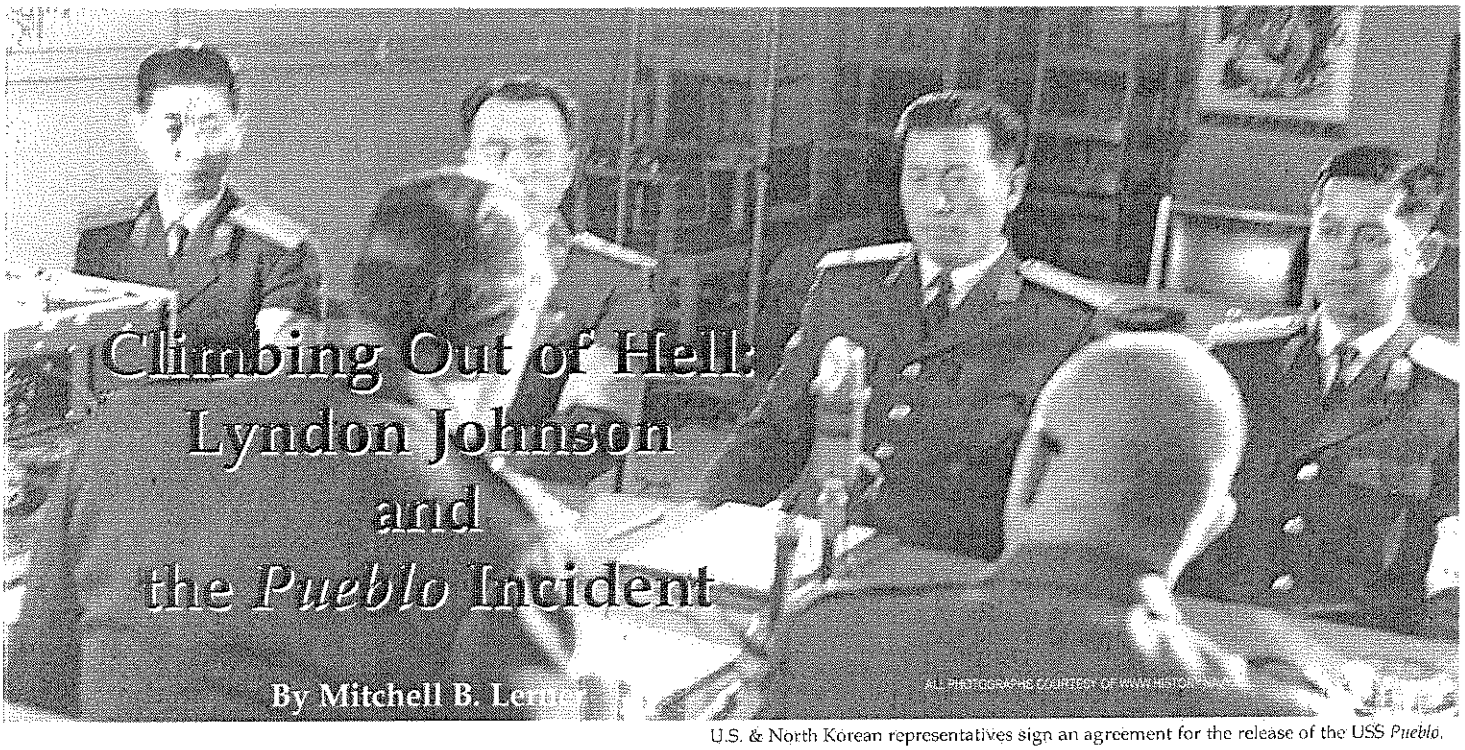

Climbing Out of Hell: Lyndon Johnson and the *Pueblo* Incident

By Mitchell B. Lerner

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U.S. & North Korean representatives sign an agreement for the release of the USS *Pueblo*.

Two days before departing the port of Sasebo, Japan, Commander Lloyd Bucher of the USS *Pueblo* received a final piece of advice: "Remember," cautioned Rear Admiral Frank Johnson, "you are not going out there to start a war." It appeared to be an unnecessary warning. The *Pueblo*, a small and dilapidated ex–cargo vessel that the Navy had only recently rescued from mothballs and christened for oceanographic research, seemed unlikely to make it out of port, let alone spark an international incident. Yet those aware of the ship's real purpose knew that Johnson's admonition was not unwarranted. The *Pueblo* was no ordinary research ship; it was instead a top-secret electronic intelligence collector about to depart for the coast of North Korea (DPRK) for her first mission. It was a trip from which she would never return.

On the afternoon of January 23, 1968, DPRK ships surrounded the *Pueblo* while she lay motionless off their eastern coast. Gunfire met Bucher's attempts to escape, and the commander soon surrendered with one dead and four wounded. The struggle lasted less than two hours but ended with an American captain surrendering his ship in peacetime for the first time since 1807. It would require almost a year of difficult negotiations before the two rivals found a diplomatic solution that returned the men, but not the ship, to the United States just in time for Christmas.

For Lyndon Johnson, the *Pueblo* Incident seemed to be just one more in a long line of crises that marked a tumultuous year. "If I had to pick a day that symbolized the turmoil we experienced throughout 1968," he later wrote, "I think January 23 would be the day—the morning the USS *Pueblo* was seized." That afternoon the president lunched with a group of senior foreign policy advisors. Robert McNamara opened the meeting with a wry comment directed at Clark Clifford, who was scheduled to replace him shortly as secretary of defense: "This is what it is like on a typical day. We had an inadvertent intrusion into Cambodia. We lost a B-52 with four H-bombs aboard. We had an intelligence ship captured by the North Koreans." Clifford did not miss a beat. "Mr. President," he asked, "may I leave now?"

With few details available, LBJ ordered the creation of a task force to investigate the seizure. Six days later, the board offered a three-point framework that would guide the American response. First, the administration had to arrange the speedy return of the 82 American prisoners; second, they needed to placate South Korea (ROK), which was already displaying signs of unease at the northern aggression; and finally, the United States needed to avoid being drawn into a second Korean war, despite the emotional appeal of a military response.

These goals, especially the last two, were complicated by another act of DPRK aggression. On January 21, thirty-one North Korean Army officers disguised as members of the ROK 26th Army division reached the "Blue House," the official presidential residence in Seoul, with orders to assassinate ROK president Park Chung Hee. Shortly before they launched their attack, a suspicious ROK policeman stopped them, and the ensuing firefight left

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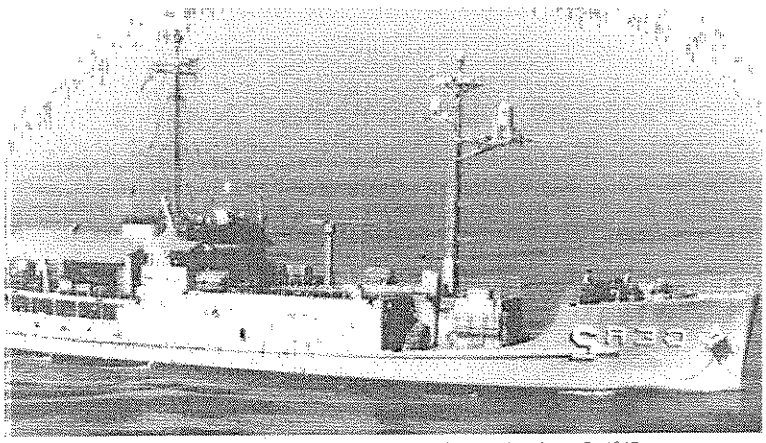
eight South Koreans and five members of the commando team dead. The rest of the guerrillas fled, all but two of whom were captured or killed within the next two weeks. An infuriated ROK population demanded retaliation, and only extreme American pressure prevented Kim's actions from sparking a second Korean war; "Few people" recalled an American General, "realize how close we came to war on January 21."

The final goal was the one that needed to be addressed most urgently, as the American people demanded violent retribution for the attack. "There should be no word mincing in our demand for the swift and safe return of both ship and crew," wrote the *Buffalo Daily News*, "nor should North Korea be deprived for long of the measured dose of retribution her sudden belligerency has so emphatically asked for." Telegrams calling for action flooded the White House. One Georgia resident ordered the president to "get off your complacent rear and get the ship and its crew back," and a Florida man demanded, "Release, retaliation, or your resignation." LBJ whetted the public's appetite by increasing the American military commitment in the region. Quickly, he dispatched a naval task force to the Sea of Japan that included three aircraft carriers and eighteen destroyers, approved the delivery of seven tactical fighter and two tactical reconnaissance units to South Korea, and deployed twenty-six B-52s and ten KC-135s to Okinawa and Guam. The president also activated 15,000 reservists from the Air National Guard, the Air Force Reserves and the Navy Reserves—the first such call-up since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Having avoided a military conflict and stabilized ties with South Korea, LBJ turned to diplomacy to achieve... a quick resolution to the standoff.



USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2) off San Diego, California, October 19, 1967

However, despite the desires of the American people, Johnson and his advisors saw the increased firepower only as a tool to complement their diplomatic efforts. In searching for a peaceful settlement, LBJ found that he faced not one obstinate nation on the Korean peninsula but two, as South Korea complicated the dangerous situation by demanding a more militant response from its American benefactor. When none was forthcoming, many South Koreans took to the streets in protest. On February 7, American soldiers fired warning shots to turn back demonstrators marching near Panmunjom, and the next day over 1,000 ROK high school students protested in front of U.S. Information Service Centers at Taegu and Kwangju, demanding, "Away with boot-licking conferences."

With a war already raging in Vietnam, the Johnson administration now undertook the difficult task of placating the very bellicose ROK government of President Park Chung Hee through whatever means necessary. Immediately, LBJ appealed to Park's vanity, issuing flattering public statements and overt promises to remain committed to the ROK. He also sent Park a personal letter, promising to keep him "fully informed" about the Pueblo situation and praising his "courageous leadership" and faithfulness as a "trusted friend and ally." The sentiments had some impact. Park, wrote Ambassador William Porter, was "clearly moved.... One may occasionally make him smile and even laugh, but it is a very rare thing to see his emotions stirred as they were by the president's message."

LBJ, however, recognized that the key to placating Park lay not in flattering letters but in material goods. In early February he asked Congress to add $100 million in military supplies to South Korea's already approved aid package for 1968, which totaled over $220 million. "We need to give whatever aid is necessary to South Korea," he told congressional leaders. "They are among our best allies." Congress complied, authorizing transfer to South Korea of an F-4E jet squadron worth over $58 million, airfield improvements, four fast patrol cutters, 10,000 new M-16 rifles and over $15 million in various counter-insurgency and police funds that included a self-propelled 8-inch howitzer battalion and a company of helicopters. Johnson also arranged an additional $32 million counter-infiltration package that included patrol boats, surveillance planes, electronic detection systems and chemical defoliants—all of which came from a program intended only for Vietnam-related purchases.

Although military and economic assistance was the primary inducement, LBJ took other steps to ensure ROK cooperation. Some were minor, such as his pledge to appoint a South Korean as deputy commander of the UN military forces in Korea. Others were more substantial, like his promise to increase ROK access to business opportunities and nonmilitary jobs in Vietnam. In some cases he even forced Agency for International Development (AID) administrators to purchase substandard ROK products for use in Vietnam. Rutherford Poats, assistant administrator

l-r: USS *Pueblo* crewman checks in as he is repatriated; greeting crewmembers, upon their repatriation by North Korea, on December 23, 1968.

for AID's Far East branch, recalled the president using "rather colorful language" with AID personnel, demanding they keep Park happy. Accordingly, Poats, who had been about to suspend purchases of ROK-produced galvanized steel, continued to buy it despite the fact that he considered it "not up to snuff."

Although the arrangement appeared to be one-sided, it actually benefited both nations. Park had the ability to wreak havoc with American foreign policy—one military strike over the 38th parallel could have sparked a war with disastrous ramifications, even just a few properly timed public comments might have ruined, or at least delayed, negotiations. By providing economic aid, military assistance and public adulation, Johnson kept open the negotiating lines that would prove to be his best possibility for retrieving the men of the Pueblo while reducing the chances of another Korean war. Nor did he yield to Park's demands on crucial issues. State Department personnel, for example, refused to allow ROK representatives to attend negotiating sessions, nor did they send them transcripts of the conversations, despite the fact that they were provided to both Japan and the Soviet Union. This pattern of giving on the smaller issues in order to win the larger ones marked U.S.-ROK relations throughout the crisis. Johnson was willing to sacrifice money, equipment and time to placate his South Korean ally but would not allow them to hinder negotiations for the prisoners, impede his efforts in Vietnam, or drag America into war. For these larger goals, millions of dollars in equipment seemed a small price to pay.

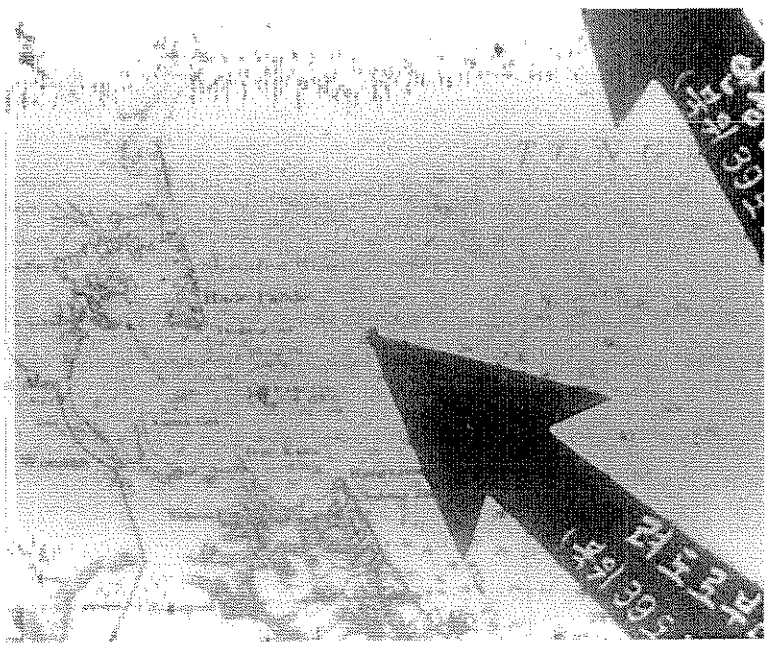
Having avoided a military conflict and stabilized ties with South Korea, LBJ turned to diplomacy to achieve the third of his goals, a quick resolution to the standoff. The first discussion between the two rivals regarding the *Pueblo* took place at the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) near Panmunjom on January 24. North Korea would only return the men, Major General Pak Chung Kuk explained, when the administration agreed to "admit the violations, provocations, and aggressive acts committed by your side in the DMZ and in our coastal waters; to apologize to our side for them... and to assure at this table that your side will not commit again such provocations and aggressive acts." This proposal, which quickly became known as the "Three A" demand (admit, apologize, assure), remained the *sine qua non* of negotiations for the next 11 months. Kim Il Sung simply refused to budge from this position, and the Johnson administration, wisely refraining from launching a military response, had to search everywhere to try to gain some leverage.

LBJ left no stone unturned in this effort to find a less humiliating solution. Attempts to involve the United Nations and the International Red Cross were launched, albeit unsuccessfully as Kim refused to consider any third party involvement. The administration also launched a global démarche, contacting every nation with ties to either the Soviet Union or North Korea in order to request their intercession. American representatives appealed to hundreds of nations from Argentina to Uruguay, none of which could convince Kim to listen. Other plans involving the International Court of Justice, secret talks at a neutral site, or any other form of international mediation reached the same fate. Kim simply refused to discuss the issue with anyone other than the United States and anywhere not of his choosing.

Still, the administration continued its quest for a peaceful solution that would not compromise the American position internationally. Great effort was exerted behind the scenes to involve the Soviet Union, which used its limited influence with Kim Il Sung to prevent the crisis from escalating. Still, the Soviet leadership was pessimistic; the American military buildup in the area, Kosygin noted, "indicated that there were many hotheads in the Pentagon who needed tranquilizers."

On February 10, the administration offered to conduct a full inquiry and to "express regrets" if appropriate; the offer was contingent, however, on Kim first returning the *Pueblo* and crew. Pak rejected the proposal at the next meeting and returned the dialogue to the "Three As." In the middle of the month, the United States offered to abide by the findings of an impartial fact-finding body and pledged to apologize if it ruled in North Korea's favor but again demanded Kim first release the men. "We do not see," concluded the State Department, "how we can go any further." After Kim rejected the idea, the administration suggested the men be released to a neutral nation that would hold them while charges were investigated. Pak called the idea "nonsense... an insult to [DPRK] sovereignty." Another suggestion, this time to try the case before a three-member investigatory panel, was similarly dismissed as an "absurd example of Washington's brigandish logic."

The inability to find any ground for the basis of discussion haunted the United States throughout the year, but LBJ and his men doggedly continued to search for solutions. As 1968 drew to a close, they decided to make one final effort. In late November, James Leonard, the State Department's country director for Korea, discussed the *Pueblo* standoff with his wife Eleanor. He saw no solution other than providing the apology, Leonard admitted, but wondered how to do it in such a way as to minimize the American humiliation. Eleanor had an answer: agree to sign an apology letter only if North Korea would allow the U.S. negotiator, Major General Gilbert Woodward, to make a statement publicly repudiating it first. The president loved the plan and quickly ordered it to be presented as his final offer. All possible sources of pressure were utilized: Ambassador Goldberg made a desperate appeal to U Thant at the United Nations, who promised to use his limited influence to help arrange a deal. LBJ also sent word to the Soviet leadership, which took no public position but encouraged the DPRK to accept the proposal behind the scenes.

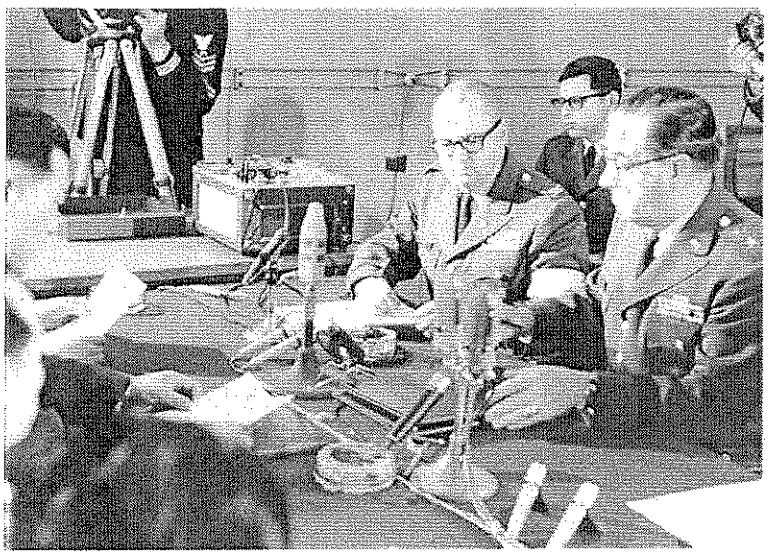


North Korean chart showing where they claim to have captured the USS *Pueblo*.

For a man of action and bluster like Lyndon Johnson, the idea that a great power... might not hold all the cards during a crisis with a smaller nation... was no doubt a difficult one to accept. Yet, accept it he did.

Since traditional forms of diplomatic pressure had accomplished little, the administration added a new tactic. In 1967 Kim Il Sung had ordered two large factory fishing vessels from Rotterdam's Verlome United Shipyards in an attempt to try to alleviate a serious decline in the DPRK fishing industry. In late 1968 Verlome announced that the ships would be launched in early 1969. When word of the deal reached Washington, the Johnson team believed that the threat of capture might finally put some badly needed pressure on Kim.

Although the administration had no real intention of hijacking the ships, which would not only antagonize the Netherlands but would be a violation of international law, there seemed nothing to lose by making such threats. In September Dean Rusk ordered the American ambassador to The Hague to inquire of Dutch officials when the ship would sail and when the title would officially pass into DPRK hands. "Ultimate object, of course, would be that such an inquiry on our part get back to [the] North Korean government," wrote the secretary of state. Throughout the winter, American officials made a conscious effort to be seen snooping around the ships and making inquiries of relevant authorities. Rusk also ordered the American embassy in London to contact the ships' insurer, Lloyd's of London, to express interest in the transfer of their titles to North Korea, and reminded the staff to request that Lloyd's mention these inquires to the DPRK government. At the same time, the administration pressured other nations not to provide North Korea with any fishing assistance, even suggesting to Japan that the United States might seize a small refrigerated fishing vessel that a private dealer was about to sell unless the Japanese government took actions to stop it.



U.S and North Korean representatives sign agreement for the release of the USS *Pueblo*'s crew.

After a year of failures, the administration had finally stumbled across an effective strategy. On December 17, 1968, the two delegations sat down at the MAC to discuss the *Pueblo* crisis for the twenty-sixth time. With grim determination, Woodward offered to endorse a letter of guilt written by the North Koreans but demanded the right to repudiate it publicly prior to signing. Pak called for a 50-minute recess and returned with the long-sought announcement: "An agreement has now been reached," he declared, "upon the question of principle." The Johnson administration was thrilled, albeit a bit shocked that the plan had worked. "It is as though a kidnapper kidnaps your child and asks for fifty thousand dollars ransom," explained Dean Rusk, "you give him a check for fifty thousand dollars and you tell him at the time that you've stopped payment on the check, and then he delivers your child to you."

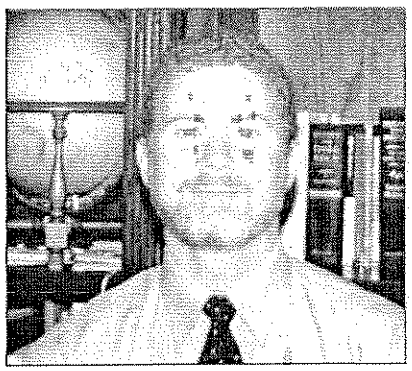
On the morning of December 23, Pak and Woodward met to end the standoff. The American opened by reading a statement that rejected the DPRK claims. "I will sign the document," Woodward concluded, "to free the crew and only to free the crew." He then signed the letter. "The United States government," it acknowledged, "shoulders full responsibility and solemnly apologizes for the grave acts of espionage committed by the U.S. ship against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." Ninety minutes later the nightmare ended for the 82 survivors of the USS *Pueblo*. The men were released across the Sachon Bridge, which traverses the military demarcation line separating the two Koreas. Bucher was the first one the captors led to the bridge: "Now, walk across that bridge, captain," a soldier ordered. "Not stop. Not look back. Not make any bad move. Just walk across sincerely!"

Fighting the urge to run, Bucher slowly began his march home. First to greet him was Army Colonel John Lucas, who spoke the words Bucher had waited 335 days to hear: "Welcome back, Commander Bucher." Turning back to the bridge, he identified his men as they crossed over in 30-second intervals. As each one reached the end, Bucher loudly pronounced his name and greeted him with a strong handshake and a broad smile. "It's just like," one officer announced upon reaching the American side, "climbing out of Hell into Heaven."

The resolution came just in time for Lyndon Johnson, whose White House tenure was rapidly drawing to a close. In the chaos that surrounded LBJ's final year in office, the *Pueblo* Incident quickly faded from public memory. Yet the story offers a surprising glimpse into the policies of an administration that is often criticized for its failings in foreign affairs but rarely praised for its accomplishments. And in the face of loud public demands for retribution, LBJ wisely stuck to a diplomatic course that avoided another costly Asian war. In the face of growing pressure from South Korea, he kept his ally in line with a skillful combination of the carrot and the stick. In the face of lengthy and discouraging negotiations, he continued to try new approaches until finally stumbling across a combination that worked.

The brash and confident LBJ who sent troops to Vietnam in 1965 while loudly predicting victory was now nowhere to be seen. Johnson, the *Pueblo* Incident suggests, had finally realized that power is relative—possession of a certain type or degree of power in one situation does not necessarily translate into the ability to apply it in another. North Korea was no match for the United States by any traditional measure of power, and yet the world situation in 1968 and Kim's possession of 82 hostages made such traditional measures irrelevant. For a man of action and bluster like Lyndon Johnson, the idea that a great power, like the United States, might not hold all the cards during a crisis with a smaller nation, like North Korea, was no doubt a difficult one to accept. Yet, accept it he did, and in doing so he not only saved the lives of the 82 crewmen and the thousands of others who would have died in a second Korean war, he also proved to a world audience, as one international paper wrote, "that diplomacy is still not bankrupt and that restraint in the face of a crisis such as this can benefit mankind."

Mitchell Lerner is an assistant professor of history at The Ohio State University and author of *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002). He is a research fellow working on the Presidential Recordings Project at the Miller Center.



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