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*The Liberty Incident* by A. Jay Cristol  
(Dulles, VA: Brassey's Inc, 2002, 294 pages)

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Anyone who has experienced combat or been in command of forces in combat can understand "fog of war"—the confusion engendered in the course of ever-changing events about which you have incomplete and often inaccurate information. Fog of war is compounded by the need to take prompt, decisive action in combat situations, even when you recognize that you don't have precise information. Author A. Jay Cristol makes a compelling case that the attack on the Liberty was a product of the fog of war, compounded by poor Israeli command and control, and a U.S. communications system which repeatedly failed to get through to Liberty the orders for her to clear the area.

The author, a former Naval Aviator, retired JAG Corps Reserve Captain, and a sitting federal judge, conducted his original research into the Liberty incident as part of his doctoral dissertation. Over the years, his interest continued and he has interviewed more than five hundred people who were involved in some way with the attack on Liberty. These included Liberty crewmembers, and senior Israeli and U.S. Government officials all the way up to Robert McNamara. He has also scoured the records of the ten U.S. and Israeli investigations and obtained the release of substantial numbers of classified documents, although some documents unfortunately remain classified despite the passage of 35 years.

The result is an exquisitely researched and articulately presented analysis of the events surrounding the

attack. Judge Cristol confronts all of the folklore surrounding the various conspiracy theories, and disproves them one by one. Any objective reader will be left totally persuaded that it was an unfortunate accident, and not some deliberate Israeli plan to attack a U.S. Navy intelligence collection ship. The conspiracy theories simply are not credible.

But conspiracy theories die hard. Americans seem to have a peculiar fondness for the notion of conspiracies. "Who shot JFK?" is still the subject of books and TV programs; there have been several new books on the supposed FDR conspiracy to allow the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor; there even are new theories on who shot Lincoln and why. In August of 2000, the History channel aired a particularly poorly researched and inaccurate program on the Liberty incident featuring author James Bamford and some entirely spurious claims which fueled the conspiracy theory flames. Sadly, Judge Cristol's book, excellent as it may be, will not end this sort of speculation.

There are unfortunate aspects to the way the U.S. government has handled the Liberty incident which contribute to this problem. Why, after more than 35 years, are the EC-121 tapes and several analyses and reports still kept classified despite repeated FOIA attempts to get them released? Releasing the documents might be embarrassing to the government, but their continued refusal to release them is seized upon as "proof" that the government is hiding something. Conspiracy theories will not be put to rest until all documentation is available for scrutiny.

In the view of many — particularly the members of the Liberty Survivors Association — the government also treated the Liberty survivors shabbily. Because of the pressures of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the danger of it escalating, the incident was deliberately played down. The crewmembers feel that, instead of being treated like the heroes which they indeed were, they were treated as pariahs — an embarrassment to the United States and a danger to

U.S.-Israeli relationships. Many survivors attribute this treatment to a desire on the part of the government to "hide something". The government has done little to dissuade them of this.

This author was given a first-hand appreciation of this perception of insensitive treatment afforded Liberty crewmembers when, in 1991, I was asked to attend a Washington DC reunion of the crew and present to them the Presidential Unit Citation which Lyndon Johnson had signed almost 25 years before, but which the crew believed had never been given to them. The original of the citation was thought to have been "lost long ago;" all I was able to present was a dog-eared Xerox copy! I was honored to be able to make the presentation, but embarrassed and ashamed at the way the entire matter was handled. Only recently did I learn that the original had indeed been presented, but that the presentation was made to the skeleton crew, which remained aboard Liberty while she was being repaired in the Med. The larger body of survivors was unaware of the award. Whether you happen to believe in conspiracy or fog of war, we surely could have handled that better and shown more regard for a brave crew. Judge Cristol has done a great service by his meticulous research and analysis. His book is a must-read for all who have an interest in the Liberty incident.