Congressional Record Reprint S. 527-28 - The Pueblo Affair

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
THE "PUEBLO" AFFAIR

Mr. MANSFIELD. Mr. President, I applaud the position of President Johnson, who recognizes that there are no simple ways out of the grave situation which has developed in the wake of the Pueblo affair. By taking the matter to the United Nations forthwith, the President has done what he can do at this point, to act in motion machinery for what is to be hoped can be a satisfactory solution.

In the meantime, however, the substance of our national interest ought not to be lost sight of in hot pursuit of its shadow. The problem of safeguarding the interests of this Nation, and in a very real sense, the world’s interests is to see to it that the 83 Americans—which I now learn is the accurate number—are returned alive, I repeat, the word is returned alive, and that there is no blame attached to the operation in Viet Nam where North Viet Nam and Laos lie between China and ourselves and where Russia is thousands of miles away to the north where it borders China.

At North Korea, Russia is right there as is China. If we should save these 83 Americans—and that is the most urgent and important consideration—we would do well to ponder these possibilities and to continue to move, as the President is doing, with caution, coolness, and restraint.

The situation in Viet Nam is difficult and dangerous. The situation developing in North Korea is dangerous and difficult and far more delicate.

[From the Christian Science Monitor, Jan. 29, 1968]

PERSECUTED ALIVE

(By Erwin D. Canham)

We are no longer in the era of gunboat diplomacy.

The terms of power have changed. Time was when a great nation like the United States could order its forces of marines in to Wonsan Harbor and tidied up the matter of the Pueblo in short order. But the world of power today is not the same; it is a world of nuclear cloud. It is a mighty deterrent.

Small nations like North Korea, with minimal physical power, are thus able to act with impunity as they have hardly ever been able to act in the history of the modern world. The role of the small nation is infinitely more difficult and dangerous. It is basically inhibited.

These are considerations to keep in mind when it is decided to station surveillance ships like the Pueblo off hostile coast. There isn’t much you can do about it when they get into trouble.

HIJACKING PERIL

Certainly, America’s public opinion, and possibly official judgment as well, has not caught up with the changed terms of power. Possibly by the day authorities should have thought long and hard before they placed craft like the Pueblo a few miles off North Korea, or deep in the Tonkin Gulf, or in other such exposed places. The dangers of hijacking are real and present.

Few of us know how valuable the use of spy ships really is. Perhaps the operation is of the essence. Perhaps it is of peripheral importance. The risk is certainly very great. It is to be hoped that the returns are comparable.

Presumably, the U.S. action trawlers which hover diligently off Cape Cod, and other parts of the United States coast, both Atlantic and Pacific, serve a very important mission along with their take of fish. But rarely have they pressed the 12-mile limit or anything like the practice in U.S. coastal waters. But there is a limit, a very great limit.

DANGEROUS UNCERTAINTY

There is a lot to be said for the value of all this spying. President Eisenhower’s open skies proposal is based on the wise assumption that the more each nation knows about the observable military dispositions of the other the safer it will be.

For the United States to see any unusual troop movements—or their absence—in East Asia will be important for the United States to see in the event of a nuclear attack, and vice versa, helps preserve the over-all peace. And perhaps, as I have pointed out in Korea’s case, a position of the North Korean forces—at a time when assassins and saboteurs were invading upon the Korean capital—would be helpful to evaluate the scale of the crisis.

RELATIVE IMPUNITY

But all this information does not provide the United States with the means of invading Wonsan and recapturing the Pueblo. Indeed, as American public opinion vividly reflects, the United States has had enough coping with its military problems in Vietnam.

For this reason, it would seem that most Americans are not demanding the kind of action which Mr. President has asserted freely in the good old days. "Perdieris alive or Raisult dead" is now an empty cry.

The age of the small nation is here. And while this relative immunity from big-nation war, certainly an embarrassment of the United States now, is the kind of world in which the United States believes. If great war has become too dangerous, too suicidal, for the human race, and if lesser wars have each taken a step toward the end, then the world has come into a new period.

There are circumstances in which force is used. The United States, for example, turned its back in Korea 15 years ago. Or in the Middle East last summer. But a great power has to be very prudent as it looks upon the uses.

It is a strange new world in which we live, but despite present chagrin it has stirring possibilities.

[From the Wall Street Journal, Jan. 29, 1968]

THE MOMENTUM OF BEIGEDRIENCE

Faced with a plausible replay of the Korean war while bogged down in Vietnam, the Administration can hardly be faulted for ordering a limited call-up of air reservists. For the danger is great that both sides could progressively harden their "responses" until the second Korean war would become a certainty.

No one pretends to know whether North Korea’s capture of the intelligence ship Pueblo signals an intent to open a second front. Many doubt it, seeing in the incident instead an attempt to exploit an inviting opportunity—the vulnerability of a lonely, lightly armed vessel jammed with sophisticated electronic gear.

The harsh fact nonetheless remains that the North Koreans are eminently capable of escalating that war, which has been a most uneasy state of suspension these 15 years, tying down 50,000 U.S. troops. It’s not only North Korea; the Communists can open second fronts in Laos and Thailand and elsewhere along the vast periphery of the Red menace.

A further fact is that right now may seem an attractive time for the North Koreans to get close to the border, before all of their handiwork in Vietnam, the U.S. is confronted with what may be the biggest battle of the war. Once the U.S. wins in Vietnam, it is not clear that the North Koreans will be able to get permission. Realistically, of course, one must assume that submarines are gathering data anywhere and everywhere, not just through water.

DANGEROUS UNCERTAINTY

There is a lot to be said for the value of all this spying. President Eisenhower’s open skies proposal is based on the
unlikely, the U.S. strength in Vietnam being so much greater than was the French in 1954. At best, though, Khe Sanh is a bitter reminder how the communists can still mount after all the punishment they have taken from the U.S. And it could well impress the Russians as a good time for major trouble-making precisely for that reason.

For the fact, the U.S. is in fairly poor shape to wage a new Korean war, let alone any others. As our Washington shows, the call-up of reservists emphasizes that very point; for all its enormous power, the Vietnam war has spread the power thin and the nation is short of men and materiel for any sustained struggle with North Korea. Which adds one more chapter to the long lesson about the dangers of getting militarily overextended and overcommitted around the world.

Suppose, however, that the North Koreans have no such intentions, that the Pueblo's capture was an isolated foray. It is still a treacherous situation, because it is one in which each side's successive steps could carry things out of hand. North Korea could reach the call-up by more military moves; the U.S. could then react with tougher steps of its own. In no time the fat could be in the fire.

Caution thus is mandatory. So far we think the Administration has been reasonably restrained. Certainly it could not just sit there, saying and doing nothing while the North Koreans mined the ship and crew. Washington therefore is trying to exhaust diplomatic means—taking the issue to the Security Council, for example, before resort to force. Fortunately, this approach seems to have the approval of most members of Congress.

There is, finally, one specific reason why the Korean confrontation should not be allowed to escalate, willy-nilly, into war. It would be wholly disproportionate to the ostensibly cause, namely the Pueblo and the nature of its mission.

Remember the U-5? If the U.S. Government considers it necessary, and it doubts, it in the world as it is, to send a lone reconnaissance plane high over Russia, it must realize the risk and be prepared to lose the plane. The U.S. never regarded its shooting down by the Soviets as a cause of war.

Exactly the same with the Pueblo. Many questions are unanswered about the handling of its predicament, and the seizure itself is humiliating and infuriating. Still, if the U.S. views that kind of mission as essential, it should be prepared to accept what can happen without over-reacting to the point of risking actual war.

Granted, if the North Koreans do aim to re-open the war, these observations are academic. But for war to come without appropriate cause, merely through the momentum of mutual belligerence, could be as tragic as the consequences of the shot at Sarajevo.

[From the Baltimore (Md.) Sun, Jan. 28, 1969]

DEGREE OF CRISIS

For thoroughly good reasons, the Administration in Washington is doing utmost to focus upon the problem of the vessel Pueblo and its crew. One reason is that the alternative is military action of undefined and untried dimensions, however limited it might be at first; and with our massive commitment in Vietnam we could not easily undertake a second large war in Korea.

In Korea we are militarily thin, with some 50,000 troops spread in two divisions not considered combat-ready. Besides that, about 47,000 South Korean troops, presumably the best, are used down alongside us in Vietnam. Apart from questions of air and sea strengths and of materiel, those figures on ground troops give the picture. And the Vietnam war is so voracious in its requirements that we could not supply swift reinforcement in Korea.

Also grim to contemplate is the effect inaction in another large conflict would have domestically. The cancellations of internal undertakings, the economic disruptions, the imposition of controls, the mounting taxes, come all too readily to the imagination.

Then there is the fact, as the Administration knows, this is not inherently a major crisis. It could grow into one, but in its nature it is not. It is an incident: a serious one, but an incident.

One simple way of judging its inherent gravity is to note the comparative degrees of concern with which the public followed the proceedings of the United Nations before the Korean situation and during the Arab-Israeli war last June, and follows them now. At that time the facts and the issues were stark and plain, as were the dangers, including the danger of a direct American-Russian confrontation. Those dangers of that magnitude exist today only if permitted to develop from a state of general confusion. The North Koreans could encourage a heightening of danger by refusing flatly to release the men of the Pueblo, or by placing them on trial. Others, too, by intent or error, could contribute.

The Administration shows a determination, while preparing for contingencies, to make every effort to obtain the release of the men without using military force—every effort, that is, to not let events take charge and begin to sweep ahead with a momentum of their own, beyond control.

Mr. MANSFIELD. Mr. President, will the Senator yield?

Mr. MANSFIELD. I yield.

Mr. MANSFIELD, Mr. President, I have listened with a great deal of interest to the remarks of the distinguished minority leader. I can understand his great concern about the situation which has developed incident to the seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo and the imprisonment of its crew.

There is no question in my mind—none whatsoever—that the ship was illegally seized outside the 12-mile limit, which is the limit set by the North Korean Government itself. But I think the President is operating on the right wavelength, and in his capacity as the President of the United States and Commander in Chief is using every available means at his diplomatic disposal to see if it is at all possible to bring about the return of the 83 men, including the two civilians, which comprise the crew of the U.S.S. Pueblo.

What I am interested in, Mr. President, is the return of those 83 men alive—alive—and I think that is something we ought to keep in mind at all times because it would do no good to go in and say, "sink the Pueblo," or "bomb a city," as has been suggested, and in that manner seal the doom of the 83 men who were there, not by choice but under orders. We must see what we can do to save them.

Mr. President, that I think, is the paramount factor in this whole affair at this time. I am quite certain that the distinguished minority leader would agree with me in that respect.