



**Mitch Lerner, “A Failure of Perception: Lyndon Johnson, North Korean Ideology, and the Pueblo Incident,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 25, Issue 4 (Fall 2001): 647-675.**

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In the most recent issue of *The SHAFR Newsletter*, Robert Divine wrote a short essay on the role that chance played in his career. It was only with his second year at the University of Texas that he set out to become an historian of U.S. foreign policy. In the years to come, Divine established himself as a major name in the profession, served as president of a relatively new scholarly organization called the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, became one of the early pioneers of Eisenhower revisionism and mentored the likes of John Lewis Gaddis, Randall Woods, and H.W. Brands. When Divine attended graduate school, diplomatic history was significantly narrower in focus, but broader in research than it would be when he retired in the mid-1990s. Samuel Flagg Bemis, who was on Divine’s dissertation committee, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1927 and 1950 for books he wrote using multi-lingual and multi-national research on topics that were beyond the living memory of the U.S. public. In the Cold War years, as U.S. influence in world affairs grew, diplomatic historians turned their attention to more contemporary topics than Bemis’s *Pinckney’s Treaty*. Divine’s 1953 dissertation, on U.S. immigration policy from the 1920s to the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, is a good example. (1) In moving to twentieth century topics, historians of U.S. foreign policy often focused on U.S. actions and ignored events outside of Washington. This tendency was to a certain degree understandable. As a democracy, the U.S. government made most of its documentation available a few decades after major events, while other players in world affairs did not.

Now, Mitch Lerner, an assistant professor at Ohio State, Newark and Divine’s last graduate student, shows us that sometimes the story makes little sense unless we look at Wellington’s “other side of the hill.” In 1968, the North Korean Navy seized control of the U.S.S. *Pueblo*, while the ship was on an intelligence-gathering mission off the coast of the peninsula. The incident was the first time in over 150 years that an American ship had surrendered in a time of peace. The crewmen then spent a year in captivity before the North Koreans released them. The ship was never returned. The Johnson administration, as well as the President himself, thought the incident was part of a larger world wide communist effort to weaken U.S. power and influence. The resolution of the crisis and the return of the American sailors came only when a U.S. official signed a letter of apology for the violation of North Korean waters, which he renounced even before signing. After returning home, the crew reported that their captors showed little interest in acquiring military intelligence, asked rather odd questions about American culture, and wanted statements they could use for domestic propaganda. It is little wonder then that Secretary of State Dean Rusk characterized the whole episode as “bizarre.”

Lerner argues in persuasive and convincing fashion that the incident was bizarre only from a Washington based perspective. “The *Pueblo* seizure can be best understood in conjunction

with the changing realities of North Korean life in the 1960s. Specifically, it requires knowledge of *\_juche\_*, the ideological construct that dominated the nation during and after the 1960s” (p. 654-655). According to this concept, the nation needed a strong leader, instead of the party, to lead the Korean masses in three main areas: an independent foreign policy reflecting the sovereignty of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, economic self-sufficiency, and a strong national defense. After a period of promise in the early 1960s, the North suffered humbling reverses in the first two areas and needed a victory in the third arena to bolster the *\_juche\_* concept. The seizure of *\_Pueblo\_* was a gift from Mars himself and allowed the North to show that the nation was strong and powerful enough to humble, if not humiliate, the American giant.

People and organizations that should have known better, like the Central Intelligence Agency, chose instead to attribute the motivation for the taking of the ship to global factors rather than local considerations unique to Korea. Indeed, as Lerner notes in a footnote rather than in the text, the incident not only would have ended much sooner if the national security bureaucracy had done a better job of analyzing North Korean actions, but it might never have happened in the first place. The U.S. might have never sent an unarmed ship on such a dangerous operation if it had understood the difficult circumstances the North Korean regime faced and the lengths to which it was willing to go to challenge conventional norms in international affairs.

What makes this assessment all the more damaging is that Lerner uses documents that would have been available to U.S. policymakers back in 1968. Since the end of the Cold War, many in the profession have returned to the demanding international, multi-lingual focus of Bemis. The rush to gain access to the documents of the former Communist regimes is understandable. We are finally getting the other half of the story. There is a danger in going too far in the pursuit of new documents, though. Not all documents are available, and it is ultimately, an ability to use analytical reasoning and put events into context than are the hallmarks of a good historian. This article is a good example. Lerner does not read Korean, but it would be a waste of time for him to invest the time and energy in mastering the language: North Korean documents are simply not available. Instead, he uses speeches and political tracts available in translation, which are the sources with the information he needs to explain North Korean actions. The fact that documents generated by the North Korean bureaucracy are unavailable would probably would have been an indication to Bemis that Lerner’s study was too recent for his liking, but it certainly would be what the old master considered diplomatic history. The article explains the perspective from the “other side of the hill.”

While this is an impressive article-one that clearly adds to the overall reputation of *\_Diplomatic History\_* and the entire subfield, it is not without some shortcomings. The use of the term “Congressman” to describe Strom Thurmond and John Stennis is misleading. The title is normally used to describe a member of the House of Representatives, a body in which neither ever served. Stennis was also a Democrat, not a Republican. These complaints, however, are fairly trivial. More significant is a slightly deceptive title. A strong debate has developed in the field of presidential studies on Johnson’s handling of foreign policy matters other than Vietnam. (2) Yet this article will not add much to the debate, for Lyndon Johnson is a brief figure in the pages of Lerner’s account. Despite these minor blemishes, this article is an exceptionally good one that anyone writing, reading, researching, or teaching in the subfield should read with care.

Finally, reading this article after the terrorist attacks of September 11 was disturbing in a way that Lerner clearly could never have intended since he wrote it over two years ago. The national security bureaucracy clearly failed in this instance to provide accurate or meaningful information about a regime that seemed and still seems so alien to most Americans. As the nation prepares to seek retribution for the lives lost in September, it strikes me that we have identified and blamed certain individuals, organizations and regimes for this attack mainly on the word of intelligence information that has not been shared with the public. I have no doubt about the honesty of the individuals making this analysis; I just worry if they got it right. Sooner or later, the U.S. government needs to share the evidence with the people it serves.

#### Notes

(1) Robert A. Divine, "How I Became a Diplomatic Historian," *The SHAFR Newsletter*, vol. 32, no. 3 (September 2001), 43-48.

(2) One group that I like to call the Longhorn school or the Divine school-since many of these scholars have some type of association with the University of Texas and/or Divine-argues that, with the notable exception of Vietnam, Johnson handled U.S. foreign policy quite well. For some works of this school, see the essays in Robert A. Divine, editor, *The Johnson Years*, 3 volumes (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1981-87); also see another collection of essays, H.W. Brands, *The Foreign Policies of Lyndon Johnson: Beyond Vietnam* (College Station: Texas A University Press, 1999); H.W. Brands, *The Wages of Globalism: Lyndon Johnson and the Limits of American Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "Lyndon Johnson, Foreign Policy, and the Election of 1960," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 103, no. 2, (October 1999), 147-174; Mitchell Lerner, "Vietnam and the 1964 Election: A Defense of Lyndon Johnson," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 25, no. 4, (Fall 1995): 751-766. The "been in Texas too long" school-the name comes from a phrase that Warren Cohen used to describe Johnson and many of the scholars of the Longhorn school-holds that Vietnam came to dominate every other aspect of U.S. foreign policy in the 1960s and led to a number of disasters. See the essays in two compilation volumes: Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, editors, *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Diane B. Kunz, editor, *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade: American Foreign Relations During the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

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