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***SPEECH TO THE USS LIBERTY VETERANS' ASSOCIATION AT
THEIR 40TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER, JUNE 10 TH. 2007.***

It is a great honor to be with you all this evening to mark the 40th anniversary of the attack upon the United States Ship LIBERTY, and to be gathered to honor the memory of those who perished, those who were injured, those who have subsequently passed on, and those survivors who can no longer be with us this evening, and finally of course the brave survivors whom we are all so proud to see united together.

I would also like to thank you all for inviting me to be your guest speaker. When I first came in touch directly with the LIBERTY survivors I did as one who had knowledge of events, had been involved in various analytical initiatives, and who had written about the LIBERTY. Now I feel like a member of the family, and one who passionately believes in and totally supports the cause that you have all been pursuing.

What I would like to do is explain how I became involved, some things that I know about and would like to share with you, and then discuss some ways ahead that I feel may be useful. The issues and causes, and I use the word causes in the legal sense, are very much relevant and dynamic today

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for the United States as a whole and the US Navy in particular. Why is this? Fundamentally it is about the truth, and ensuring that the record is set straight. It is about honoring the memory of those who gave their lives for this country, and in so doing we have to go through the process of analyzing in fine detail all the events surrounding the June War of 1967. I am not so sure that we as a Nation have truly learned all the lessons from the June War, and indeed implemented them in ways that will make our Navy more capable and our Foreign Policy and global strategy more successful.

How then did Tony Wells get involved? I will work backwards. Mr. David Walsh wrote an article "Friendless Fire" in the June 2003 Edition of the US Naval Institute Proceedings. His case was compelling and accurate, though not complete in some important detail in my opinion. His article forthrightly asserted that the book, "The Liberty Incident: The 1967 Attack on the US Navy Spy Ship", by a retired Naval Reserve Captain, A Jay Cristol, was seriously flawed. I completely and utterly agree with Mr. Walsh's conclusion. Mr. Walsh then came in for severe criticism, not by any objective standards of scholarship or analytical rigor, let alone substantive fact, but solely because he had challenged the Cristol thesis. At this point I

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wrote an article for the Proceedings that some of you may have read. It both supported Mr. Walsh while seeking to add more background and detail to his main contentions. I will talk more about the substantive aspects in a moment. I then came under fire, and I think that the Proceedings found itself in the middle of a sort of literary firefight at one level, while at another level there was an almost sinister aspect. I began to get calls inviting me to have lunch to discuss matters when I knew full well that the invitations were inspired by the Israeli lobby. I naturally declined. After some time the Proceedings did publish one short, but most important piece, that said very succinctly that the attack upon the LIBERTY was declared deliberate in their memoirs by both Dean Rusk and the CIA Director at the time. This was the last piece that I think Proceedings would entertain, but it did end that particular debate with a positive for the USS LIBERTY, since the Cristol lobby had tried to undermine both Mr. Walsh and myself. So how did I get to write such an article in 2003 and how may I claim a good measure of reliability? Let me explain.

In the mid 1970s the US Navy assembled a very fine team of Cold War specialists. At the unclassified level their work can be read in the book, "Soviet Naval Diplomacy" (Pergamon Press, 1979). I was a member

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of this team and researched and wrote the part dealing with the June 1967 Arab Israeli War. I also wrote a CNA Professional Paper number 204, dated October 1977, entitled, "The 1967 June War. Soviet Naval Diplomacy and the Sixth Fleet – A Reappraisal". I would like to take a few minutes to explain the wider context of the Israeli attack upon the LIBERTY. I had full access at the Top Secret and SCI levels and used the latest research tools for the time. In addition I conducted special interviews with late Secretary of State Dean Rusk and his key advisor Helmut Sonnenfeldt. Please note that my initial focus was Soviet. We were trying in the mid 1970s to fully understand the Soviets' modus operandi, their strategic goals, and the role that their growing naval power would play in pursuit of their national self interests.

In parallel to this I realized that a key question was what had motivated Israel to perpetrate such an egregious act against the USS LIBERTY? What were the total circumstances, strategic and operational, that led the Israeli leadership making the fateful decision to attack and destroy a US eavesdropping ship operating in international waters at the end of the Six-Day War. A war that witnessed Israel redefining its boundaries and asserting its military supremacy. I concluded in 1976-1977, and still believe today,

that it was the strategic underpinnings and US-Soviet relations that hold the answer to these questions. What I concluded was that Israel's actions during the Six day War brought US-Soviet relations to a stressful peak not seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Was Israel's attack on the LIBERTY an act of blatant and brutal Israeli realpolitik? Let us address this assertion.

To do this let me just recap a few salient facts. In May 1967 President Nasser of Egypt took several major aggressive acts against Israel at the same time that the Syrian government began to encourage the Palestinians to intensify guerilla operations against Israel (Wells, Soviet Naval Diplomacy, P. 158). On June 5, 1967 Israel launched a stunning preemptive attack. By June 10, when a Cease-Fire was established, Israel had defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank of the Jordan River and had taken the Golan Heights.

Why then attack the LIBERTY on June 8? The Soviet Union was a key player, not in the shadows but as a demonstrative protagonist.

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The Soviets were supporting the new Syrian regime to the hilt – economic and military aid, while Palestinian guerilla operations from Syrian bases against Israel were intensified. At the same time the Soviets turned up the gain in supporting Nasser in Egypt. In mid May 1967 the Syrians protested to the Soviets that the Israelis were going to invade Syria, occupy Damascus and topple the Baathist regime. I provided details of Nasser’s further belligerent acts in “Soviet Naval Diplomacy”. The Soviets were obstructionist, derailing international peace efforts. At this point your brave men in the LIBERTY were forward deployed. They were at the pointy end of the spear. In one sense, as an eavesdropping ship, they were the point of the spear. What did Washington want? The Administration wanted to be inside the mindset and intentions of all the main players, including Israel. The LIBERTY was on station to help unravel the plans, intentions, and operations of the key players.

Let me make one very key point - Israel’s plan could spell disaster for US-Soviet relations – an attack upon Syria, Moscow’s client.

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Let me sidestep a little for a few moments, and then come back to the main theme. Where was the US Navy while all this was happening? The Soviet Fifth Eskadra, their Sixth Fleet equivalent for want of a better comparison, was qualitatively and quantitatively weak compared with the Sixth Fleet, despite Soviet augmentations via the Turkish Straits. However, the Soviets made their moves and created what became known later as standard anticarrier task groups, with the effective shadowing of the AMERICA and SARATOGA Battlegroups. The word tattletale entered the US Navy's lexicon at this time. The Soviets' main thrust was to occur with its ground forces, and in particular its airborne forces. Both the US and the Soviet Union showed constraint at sea, despite incidents in East Asia in the Sea of Japan on May 10 and May 11 1967. In my work in the 1970s it became very clear exactly how Moscow intended to respond militarily, and 40 years later it still sends a shiver down my spine, particularly in light of the conversations that I had with Dean Rusk.

Did the Soviet Union plan to intervene and why? The answer is "yes", the "why" is because Israel intended to invade Syria and take Damascus. This single fact is the key. In response the Soviets planned to do two

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things: provide military resupply to Syria and to intervene directly. The Soviets began operations on June 8, 1967, the day that the LIBERTY was attacked. The Soviet plan was to launch Red Army paratroopers into Syria and place them between an advancing Israeli army and Damascus. AN-12 CUB aircraft, the standard Soviet paratroop and cargo transport, were used, flying from fields in Hungary across Yugoslavia and then over the Adriatic and Mediterranean to Syria. The Soviet operational plans and actions were not spontaneous reactions to the Israeli advance. They were well planned in advance, with Yugoslavia granting overflight rights. The Soviets were poised to take on the Israelis. I wrote thirty years ago, “The threat to intervene was raised again – intensively – when the Syrian forces collapsed as the Israelis stormed the Golan Heights on June 9, a collapse that left the road to Damascus virtually undefended”. The Cold War balance was now becoming dangerously out of kilter. USS LIBERTY was a key source in the NSA network. The Hotline quickly became an extraordinary successful means of preventing a major conflict. Moscow made it clear – if the Israelis did not desist the Red Army would execute a massive airborne drop into Syria and confront the Israeli army.

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In March 1977 I interviewed separately Dean Rusk and Helmut Sonnenfeldt. I became privy to unique perspectives and data not previously released. Both men gave their permission to publish their comments. Dean Rusk told me that he and President Johnson “had never assumed any other “ that the Soviets would use their airborne forces. I wrote the following about Dean Rusk, “his feelings at the time was one of despair if the Cease-Fire had not held and the Israelis not halted when they did” (Wells, P. 166, Soviet naval Diplomacy). I asked Dean Rusk what the US would have done? He believed that the US would have landed Sixth Fleet aircraft in Israel to deter the Soviets from invading Israel. Dean Rusk believed the latter highly likely once the Soviet Airborne Forces had overwhelmed the Israelis. They would retake the Golan Heights and march into Israel itself, a total disaster. President Johnson demanded that the Israelis end their advance into Syria, while he sent the two Sixth Fleet carrier Battlegroups nearer to the Syrian coast. The Israeli-Syrian Cease-Fire came not a moment too soon. As the Duke of Wellington said after the Battle of Waterloo, “ It was a very close run thing”.

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The USS LIBERTY was in the middle of knowing more than the Israelis would tolerate. In the heat of battle and crisis nations can make disastrous mistakes. The Israelis made such an unconscionable and monumental error of judgement, quite deliberate and well planned. Moreover their advance into Syria bought superpower confrontation dangerously close. The timing of the LIBERTY attack was such that Washington knew that the Soviet Union was not responsible. Mr. Walsh is to be praised for revealing the glaring errors in the Cristol thesis.

What were the dynamics of communications during this critical period? What may LIBERTY have been listening to? In terms of the classified details I hope that the US government under the 40 year rule will release some or all of the material in 2008, though I suspect that the US may follow the British model with some material and wait 50 years. Please note that the UK is a serious player because of the special relationship and sharing of intelligence, particularly communications intelligence. What the UK eventually releases will be revealing, but hold your breath, we may have to wait a long time. The British are still releasing World War Two classified information.

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Please remember one simple observation: The US was interested in everyone's communications: Soviet, Israeli, Syrian, Jordanian, Egyptian, and all their communications with their allies and friends, and in particular the operations of their intelligence services. We could learn a lot from Soviet communications, as much if not more than from Israeli communications. It is like one great game of hearsay. This would be a good time to say that I hope that the new book that is being researched and written regarding LIBERTY will include an extensive visit to the Moscow archives in an attempt to get into the Soviet Communications intelligence archives, as well as those of the KGB and the GRU. In addition, the non Soviet Warsaw Pact intelligence agencies' archives are invaluable sources since they will include material that the Russians may not release. There are fluent Russian speakers who may volunteer their time to help unravel the material.

What does Tony Wells think about the specifics of the Israeli attack? Like Dean Rusk I have no doubts whatsoever that the Israelis wanted LIBERTY sunk without trace and with no survivors, no one to tell what had happened and by whom. The attack was conducted in such a way to minimize communications from LIBERTY. I believe that Israel wanted the identity of

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together with intense pressure from Moscow. The brave crew of the LIBERTY ensured that the ship survived. They fought their ship with all means at their disposal. This fact of courage and survival is the enduring hallmark and legacy of the USS LIBERTY. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, They did not give up and they did not surrender.

What else can we all do as a group? Several things I believe. Admiral Merlin Staring has written an incredibly erudite and accurate Statement that was presented to the Senate Armed Services Committee and to the Secretary of Defense. As a vehicle for political action I think that we all know that it will not generate action, and for reasons that I need not articulate. However, that document is vital in my opinion for the record and for ensuring that later generations understand what happened, and that indeed LIBERTY's crew were victims of egregious war crimes. Publication of Merlin's Statement is critical. As the JAG who investigated in 1967, and as the subsequent Chief Naval Judge Advocate when Senator Warner was Secretary of the Navy, Merlin's Statement has enormous credibility and will hold extraordinary respect with any open minded researcher and historian. In addition, the new book that is to be written should be thorough and meticulous and get

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into all the issues in fine detail. At some point the media will cease to be controlled regarding USS LIBERTY. Those who are not controlled and believe that the truth must be told will prevail. It is the American way. It will take time, but it will happen. The only caution I make is avoid any form of sensationalism at all cost. For examples, pursuing what the CIA wild card James Jesus Angleton got up to, and what our submarines were doing are factors, but they will not change very much, just send the public down wild, sensationalized goose chases. Not a good idea. Having the support of the right media channels is critical – open, honest, professional – that is what we need. They are out there. Let's go find them and take the cause of the LIBERTY to them.

I would like to conclude with two points: The long term resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis depends on the US being a true honest broker and working with the international community in reducing the current boundaries to something near to the pre 1967 June War boundaries, while making some boundary concessions to Israel in order to guarantee its long term security and survivability.

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My last point is that the brave men of the LIBERTY, by fighting their ship and not giving up, saved the United States from a potentially disastrous embroilment with the Soviet Union over Israel. Therefore, the US Navy should always have a major Fleet unit Named LIBERTY, permanently commemorating the heroism of its brave crew.

Thank you again for giving me this opportunity to be with you all and to do my small piece to honor you all and those brave shipmates who are not with us. Your spirit and courage will endure forever. This is your legacy.

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