

 **Article REVIEW**

David Stiles. “A Fusion Bomb over Andalucia: U.S. Information Policy and the 1966 Palomares Incident.” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 8.1 (Winter 2006): 49-67.

Reviewed by **Bob Tomlinson**, Claremont Graduate University and California State University, Northridge

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“**A** Fusion Bomb over Andalucia” by David Stiles, illuminates an important and little known incident from the American involvement in the Cold War. During this standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, nuclear-armed American aircraft flew the international skies to deter a surprise Soviet nuclear attack. It was not until 1968 that this operation, known as “Chrome Dome”, stood down and aerial nuclear alerts were no longer a routine policy for the United States.

On 17 January 1966 an in-flight collision over Spain between a nuclear armed B-52 and a KC-135 Tanker aircraft led to the destruction of the two aircraft and the initial loss of four hydrogen bombs. Stiles thoroughly documents this incident yet, it is not the accident which is the focus of his article - it is the aftermath. Specifically, the core of his analysis is how National Security information policy is negotiated and acted upon during times of crisis. It is Stiles’ contention that, in a crisis (particularly involving nuclear weapons), “...uncoordinated and improvised handling of sensitive information by government officials endangers US security” rather than enhancing US security policies. The desire of certain US government officials to safeguard classified information regarding the status and deployment of nuclear weapons hindered the development of a successful information policy.

Nuclear weapons accidents were not new to the United States prior to the incident in question, and Stiles chronicles a number of incidents involving nuclear weapons. However, even during these earlier incidents there was no coherent systematic approach by the US government to deal with nuclear accidents. According to Stiles, the military was all too willing to “neither confirm nor deny” the presence of nuclear weapons during any of these incidents while members of other government agencies were more willing to release incident details as a result of outside pressures.

According to Stiles the situation in Spain in 1966 was different and requiring a coordinated response from all government agencies. First, the incident involved a major ally of the United States who did not have nuclear weapons; second, the impact of the crash was extensive. The incident caused the non-nuclear detonation of two of the weapons spreading hazardous materiel over a wide area in Spain. One weapon was relatively intact; the fourth bomb fell into the sea and, after an exhaustive underwater search, was recovered three months later. There was no hiding or minimizing the extent of this accident. The period of time needed to clean up the contamination and find the missing nuke in a foreign country drew the attention of the media and the public.

How would this incident affect the United States’ Cold War alliance with Spain? What would be its impact on the future of our nuclear deterrent policy? These two questions should have been the major focus of a coordinated public information policy plan; however, from Stiles’ perspective, this was not the chosen approach.

Here is where Stiles initiates a skewed analysis of how public information policy is negotiated and formed. Public information policy rarely begins with the President. Stiles correctly points out that within the Johnson Administration the President was accustomed to receiving broad strategic information on which to make decisions. Having been apprised and briefed by his National Security advisors, the President was unlikely to focus much of his time and energy on crafting public information policy on this incident. This goes to the heart of Stiles' inability to document the President's direction on how this incident would be handled.

What is missing from the article (and the footnotes) is the documentation of the governmental negotiations and the bureaucratic discourse on the optimal handling of this incident. Some of the most prominent government players in such an incident would have been the Department of Defense, The United States Air Force, Strategic Air Command and United States European Command and the State Department. Each of these organizations would have had its own agenda or rationale for either engaging the public on the incident or not. Stiles does cover the State Department's effort, particularly the role of US Ambassador to Spain during this incident Ambassador Angier Biddle Duke receives Stiles highest compliment for advocating a more open public information approach with the Press and the Spanish people. However, nowhere in the article is there any documentation about what the ramifications would have been for European Command, Strategic Air Command or other military agencies on the loss of nuclear weapons and its effect on future defense policy. This is the critical debate within the government that should be documented.

Another criticism of Stiles' article is his placement of the incident in its historical perspective. January 1966 was the height of the Cold War, American troops were fully involved in Viet Nam and the Civil Rights movement was in full swing. Within any bureaucracy, developing public information policy takes time and effort. Although in historical hindsight this incident appears the most significant agenda item for the Johnson administration, in truth, Stiles has not produced any documentation to prove that it was the number one priority for the President. While I agree with Stiles' conclusion that a forthright, coordinated information policy approach is worthwhile during a significant nuclear accident, such an approach must take into account the requisite negotiation and the internal discourse between various governmental agencies. More focused research into, and documentation of, the other agencies involved would have illustrated the point more clearly.

Bob Tomlinson is a retired U.S.A.F. Colonel with 26 years military experience. He holds two Master's degrees (Public Administration and Military History) and is a Ph.D. candidate at Claremont Graduate University. He currently teaches at California State University, Northridge (World Civilization to 1500, War & Society – The American Experience, History of War in the Modern World) and the Naval War College, Port Hueneme (2005-06 National Security Decision Making, 2006-07 Joint Maritime Operations). He has published articles on Terrorism and the War in Iraq in the *Ventura County Star* and *The Naval Institutes Proceedings Magazine*.

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