A Fusion Bomb over Andalucía:

U.S. Information Policy and the 1966 Palomares Incident

✣ **David Stiles**

On the morning of 17 January 1966, the sound of grinding metal was suddenly heard over the countryside of Almería, a poor and desolate province of Andalucía, the southernmost region of Spain. Residents of the village of Palomares were interrupted from their daily routines by the collision of two gigantic U.S. Air Force planes. A B-52 strategic bomber on a transatlantic run had been refueling in the air when it came into contact with a KC-135 tanker aircraft, sending both planes down in smoke and flames. Debris scattered over a wide area, and Spanish emergency services rushed to the scene to search for any survivors. Several of the bomber's crew managed to parachute to safety, but all members of the tanker crew were incinerated before they hit the ground.[1] What was not immediately known about this accident is that the wreckage consisted of more than just twisted metal and charred corpses. The B-52 had been carrying four hydrogen bombs that were among the most advanced weapons in the U.S. Cold War arsenal. In the days that followed, established policy involving a wide range of military and government personnel came into effect.[2] At the same time, journalists traveled to the area and probed officials in Washington for any hints of information.

1. Flora Lewis, *One of Our H-Bombs Is Missing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. 12. This book, by a *New York Times* journalist, is a general account of the Palomares incident. A similar journalistic account is Tad Szulc, *The Bombs of Palomares* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967).

2. The U.S. military codename for an incident of this type is "Broken Arrow." The U.S. Navy's definition of a Broken Arrow includes any nuclear weapon incident in which any of the following have occurred: "the accidental or unauthorized detonation or possible detonation of a nuclear weapon (other than war risk); non-nuclear detonation or burning of a nuclear weapon; radioactive contamination; seizure, theft, or loss of a nuclear weapon or component (including jettisoning); public hazard, actual or implied." See Jaya Tiwari and Cleve J. Gray, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Accidents," Center for Defense Information (CDI), available on-line at <http://www.cdi.org/Issues/NukeAccidents/Accidents.htm>. The Palomares incident met all but the first criteria.

Journal of Cold War Studies
Vol. 8, No. 1, Winter 2006, pp. 49–67

It is clear how the military aspects of the operation were carried out. As with any military accident, the recovery teams had pre-established routines for cleaning up the crash site and securing sensitive equipment. What is not as readily apparent is how the government's information policy was implemented. President Lyndon Johnson, who played only a limited role in this episode, and his closest advisers, such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who were somewhat more extensively involved, failed to develop an information strategy that would minimize the adverse publicity from such a high-profile incident. Ultimately, the physical damage done by the accident was minimal, but the public relations fallout nearly caused a much broader debacle. Although the military recovery and cleanup plan was executed skillfully, it took much longer to complete than during previous nuclear weapon accidents. The United States had never before dealt with the sustained public scrutiny that came with such an extended recovery period.

Under these circumstances, the government had to improvise its information policy as the evolving situation demanded, at least until a more systematic approach could be adopted in a U.S. Information Agency (USIA) talking paper on 4 March 1966, more than a month after the accident. Angier Biddle Duke, the dynamic U.S. ambassador in Madrid, played a key role in this regard. He was able to help compensate for the lack of a formal information policy until the USIA document was issued. The path between the crash and the final resolution of the incident was long and circuitous, and it mostly involved informal interactions that have not been documented. To some extent, our understanding of policy formation in this case must be based on informed speculation. The most useful archival source is the national security file folder on the incident, which can be found at the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas.

Working principally from these documents, this article examines the development of U.S. information policy during the Palomares incident. The article is divided into four main parts. The first places the Palomares incident into a broader context by looking at the problem of information policy and nuclear safety. The second part briefly discusses the initial execution of military policy at Palomares, and the third shows how U.S. information policy evolved in the weeks after the accident. The final section assesses the outcome of this policy evolution, including the usefulness of the information policy; it also discusses some of the policy lessons that might be learned from this case, focusing on the importance of sound and rapid implementation of information policy when sensitive military events occur.

Information Policy and Nuclear Safety

The U.S. government has never been anxious to circulate detailed information about nuclear weapons. The locations and technical characteristics of these weapons were a closely guarded secret throughout the Cold War era and have remained so in the post–Cold War era. As a result, military public affairs representatives have often engaged in a spirited game of denial and misdirection with journalists, non-military government officials, and other interested citizens. A case in point is the 1965 entanglement between New York City officials and the Defense Department, which was moving convoys of nuclear weapons through the streets of Manhattan at night in spite of having a stated policy that it would not do so. For eleven months, the Defense Department refused to offer any clarification. Ultimately, increased media attention forced department representatives to meet with New York City officials and to admit that U.S. policy had changed. The department agreed to stop moving completed weapons through the city, but it reserved the right to continue moving weapon components.[3]

One of the reasons the 1965 episode took so long to be resolved is that mysterious nighttime convoys were not spectacular events that garnered significant media attention. The Defense Department had much greater difficulty concealing nuclear accidents when they involved the destruction of military aircraft and the deaths of American military personnel. Although the policy of the U.S. military was (and is) that it will "neither confirm nor deny" the presence of nuclear weapons in most military accidents, the Defense Department in the late 1960s exhibited greater willingness to reveal some details of major nuclear weapons accidents. After a nuclear-armed B-52 bomber crashed near Thule, Greenland in 1968, the Pentagon released a list of thirteen "serious nuclear weapons accidents" that had taken place from 1950 to 1968.[4] A number of these incidents were potentially disastrous, including the crash of a B-52 in Goldsboro, North Carolina, in 1961. In that episode, five of the six safety devices on one of the plane's nuclear bombs had failed, leaving only a single safeguard to protect against the accidental detonation of a nuclear device on U.S. soil. This sobering incident led to even more stringent safeguards on U.S. nuclear weapons.[5]

3. Joel Larus, *Nuclear Weapons Safety and the Common Defense* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1967), pp. 7–9.

4. See Tiwari and Gray, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Accidents." This article also contains a complete list and description of all accidents involving U.S. nuclear weapons "that can be verifiably documented and corroborated from more than one source."

5. See Tiwari and Gray, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Accidents," for a more extensive description of the Goldsboro incident.

Unfortunately, the U.S. military and government have not always been diligent about learning from nuclear accidents. In *The Limits of Safety,* published in 1993, Scott Sagan makes an interesting and revealing observation about the U.S. military's institutional memory of early nuclear accidents. Oddly, the Goldsboro incident and every other B-52 incident prior to the Palomares crash were absent from the 1988 official history of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), which depicted a spotless record until 1966.[6] Sagan contends that SAC failed to learn any significant lessons from the Thule crash, and he notes that this institutional amnesia leads him to a deep pessimism "about the ability of large organizations and regulating agencies to predict when safety systems will fail" and when serious accidents will occur.[7]

Sagan's analysis is convincing and sobering, but it focuses more on the flaws in military safety procedures than on the issue of information policy in the aftermath of military accidents. He does not explore why the 1988 SAC timeline of nuclear accidents begins with Palomares. A quick survey of the incidents that came before 1966 suggests a plausible reason: an almost total void of lasting public scrutiny. Before Palomares, the United States came close to disaster on a number of occasions. A 1956 crash of a B-47 bomber at the Lakenheath Air Station in England came perilously close to leveling a large part of eastern England with a nuclear blast, yet little damage was actually done. The Goldsboro crash could also have triggered a massive detonation, but the United States was spared. Although no nuclear detonation occurred at Palomares either, this incident—unlike previous incidents—had consequences that went beyond creating a temporary scare.

In at least three respects, Palomares was more serious than any of the previous accidents. First, it was the first major incident to take place over a nonnuclear country. Serious as Lakenheath and Goldsboro were, they occurred over countries that already possessed nuclear weapons and that had already assumed the potential risks associated with the construction, storage, and transportation of nuclear devices. An incident reportedly took place in 1958 at a U.S. air base in Sidi Slimane, French Morocco, but it was relatively minor in terms of the area polluted, and it did not attract much attention.[8]

The second reason that the Palomares episode was of unprecedented importance was the degree of contamination. Previous incidents spread little or no radioactive pollution. For example, only one bomb broke apart at Golds-

6. In 1959 a B-52 collided with a KC-135 over Kentucky and crashed in an incident that was similar in many respects to the Palomares accident, though without the release of nuclear material.

7. Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 202–203.

8. See Tiwari and Gray, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Accidents," with particular reference to the section titled "January 31, 1958, Unidentified Overseas Base."

boro, and the amount of dispersed radioactive material was insignificant. At Palomares, two bombs experienced non-nuclear detonations and spread an unprecedented amount of hazardous material. Eduardo Ramos and Emilio Iranzo, two scientists from the Junta de Energía Nuclear in Madrid, presented a report on the Palomares incident at the Second International Symposium on Nuclear Radiation Hazards, held in Monaco in October 1966. The two specialists, who played significant roles in the decontamination effort, noted that Palomares was of special interest to contamination experts because it was the first known episode to pollute a wide area.[9]

The third reason for the unprecedented seriousness of the Palomares episode is its impressive longevity as a newsworthy topic. Both the bomb recovery effort and the radiation cleanup process took several months and involved a large number of personnel. Consequently, journalists could talk to many of the people involved over a relatively long period of time, and they could also sweep the area for any clues about U.S. military activities. Palomares was newsworthy for more than just a few days; it was of significant interest to the media and the public for several months, from the B-52/KC-135 collision to the recovery of the final missing bomb.

The U.S. government had dealt with nuclear accidents before, but never an incident with public relations dimensions on the scale of the Palomares drama. It therefore comes as no surprise that U.S. information policy took a significant period of time to adapt to this new situation. As this article shows, the initial policy of saying as little as possible about the situation might have worked if the military recovery and cleanup had been as quick as they were after previous accidents. But the military side of the effort took months and thus ultimately required a significant change in information policy.

The Initial Military Policy Execution: Enter the President?

President Johnson was first advised that "an accident involving nuclear weapons had taken place" in his daily morning briefing on Monday, 17 January 1966. This initial report contained the basic facts of the incident, including the presence of four thermonuclear weapons on the B-52. The briefing informed the president that the 16th Nuclear Disaster Team had been "dis-

9. Eduardo Ramos and Emilio Iranzo, "Experience Gained from a Case of Accidental Contamination by Radioactive Elements" (paper presented at the "Second International Symposium on Nuclear Radiation Hazards," 10–15 October 1966, Monaco). This paper includes an extensive evaluation of the radioactive contamination found at the Palomares accident site, as well as a description of the cleanup techniques.

patched to the area," following procedures that were already clearly laid out for accidents involving nuclear weapons. Over the next few days, the president received updates each morning and evening. The White House kept no records indicating whether Johnson issued any personal orders, although "it is most likely that he talked to both Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara by telephone and in person."[10] It seems clear, however, that the president allowed the Air Force to follow preestablished policies that had been specifically designed for nuclear accidents.

The individual at the White House who probably had the most influence over the situation was the briefing officer. Arthur McCafferty served in this role, sometimes scrawling notes to the president at the end of his reports that reemphasized the primary significance of the news. For example, on the morning of 18 January, McCafferty wrote: "Weapons have spread debris around with some contamination."[11] Had military officials wanted the president to authorize action that was not part of established policy, such a request would almost certainly have been broached during these briefings. McCafferty also seems to have played a key role in checking to see that policy was being properly followed. In a memorandum on the day of the accident, he quoted from specific treaties with Spain establishing the legality of American actions. Specifically, he reported that the United States had the right in such cases to "go to the site and conduct rescue, salvage, and decontamination operations within a ring cordoned off by our own forces." Furthermore, he noted that the Spanish were obligated to establish an "external ring to keep out unauthorized persons."[12]

Once officials had confirmed that the planned actions were authorized by treaty, they did not need to ask the president to make any decisions. Further memoranda to Johnson from McCafferty and special reports from other offices covered key points, including the U.S. military's effort to buy and destroy all farm products in the immediate area as quickly and indiscreetly as possible.[13] As the land cleanup finished, the search shifted to the sea, where one of the thermonuclear weapons was still lost. But because the daily reports on the situation indicated only that efforts were continuing, the matter was largely dropped from the president's briefings. The weapon was situated un-

10. "Message (Draft)," 10 August 1966, in Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL), National Security File (NSF), Country File (CF), Spain (Sp), B-52/KC-135 Accident (B-52). This document looks back on the president's role during the Palomares incident; it was prepared either by or at the behest of Bill Moyers.

11. "Memo for the President," 18 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

12. "Memo to Bromley Smith from Art McCafferty," 17 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

13. "Report on B-52/KC-135 Accident in Southeastern Spain," 19 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52. This is a special situation report for the White House from the National Military Command Center.

der 2,500 feet of water, so it was difficult for navy submersibles to keep accurate records of its precise location even when they sighted it. On 17 March, Johnson was informed that contact had been made with an object "approximately five miles off shore" that was thought to be the weapon.[14] But in early April, when the recovery team finally recovered the bomb, the event did not garner significant attention in the halls of the White House. From the beginning of the incident to its final resolution, the president's role was strictly limited. His aides handled most aspects of the matter and did not bother Johnson with unnecessary details.

Engaging the Press

The Spanish press featured thorough coverage of the incident, starting on the day of the crash. U.S. officials on the scene watched these reports closely, initially reporting only that no stories contained "critical comment" and that the major publications were simply treating the crash as "an unusual news event." Film from the site had appeared on Spanish national television without negative commentary. On 19 January, the Spanish Foreign Ministry told U.S. military officials that the domestic coverage had likely "reached its peak" and would begin to decline.[15] On the other hand, the international press was only getting started. *The New York Times* and other major dailies noted the crash a day later than the Spanish press. The 18 January editions of the *Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* (among others) carried an Associated Press (AP) report that listed the most basic details of the incident but made no mention of nuclear weapons or radioactivity.[16] In both cases, the story was buried deep in the news section, with no further mention of the crash the following day. U.S. officials reported that only two international reporters were on the scene in the first few days, one from the *London Daily Mirror* and another representing United Press International (UPI).

These two journalists were more than enough to change everything. On 20 January, to the U.S. government's chagrin, a UPI story on the front page of *The New York Times* and in *The Washington Post* disclosed that the United States had lost several nuclear weapons in the crash and that U.S. Air Force

14. "Memo for the President—Subject: Report on Nuclear Weapons in Spain," 17 March 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

15. "Department of Defense Cable #53337 from CSAF to Joint Chiefs of Staff and others," 19 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

16. "B-52 and Tanker Collide over Spain; 5 Dead, 2 Missing," *The New York Times,* 18 January 1966, p. 16. Also published as "Two Air Force Jets Collide; 5 Die, 4 Saved—Children See Flaming Plunge in Spain," *Chicago Tribune,* 18 January 1966, sec. 1A, p. 6.

personnel were engaged in a massive search effort. The Defense Department refused to comment on the report before it was published.[17] The Spanish government had wanted to avoid any mention of radiation in official statements but had agreed with the U.S. ambassador to Spain, Angier Biddle Duke, that the release of more information would be necessary if the story assumed "added dimensions" in the international press.[18] Accordingly, the U.S. Air Force quickly admitted that the B-52 had been carrying nuclear arms, but refused to give any further details and did not confirm that any weapons were missing. Furthermore, the Air Force insisted that there was no danger to local Spaniards. The statement was widely covered and was incorporated into UPI's continuing coverage from the site of the accident.[19]

On 21 January, the inability of U.S. information policy to deal with a nuclear accident of the magnitude of the Palomares crash became increasingly clear. The AP and Reuters had sent reporters to the scene and had begun their own intensive coverage, with special emphasis on the attitude of local residents. Although the AP reporters knew that a nuclear device had not exploded, they found that this was not the consensus among the locals. Roy Ferguson, a Reuters reporter, covered an angry demonstration in the nearby village of Cuevas de Almanzora, citing comments by the participants.[20] However, Ferguson had not actually witnessed some of the events he reported, and the Spanish government officially denied that they had even taken place.[21] In confidential observations, U.S. military officials had already noted what they perceived as the uninformed nature of the local population. They believed it was "doubtful" that many residents actually understood "the nuclear aspect of the crash." The mayor of Palomares had asked that his hands be checked for radiation, and a "leading village citizen" requested that Geiger counters be used on his hair. In both cases, the men had "seemed pleased" about the results of the checks and did not appear to be overly concerned.[22] Nevertheless, reporters continued to move through the area, apparently filing a combination of news and hearsay.

17. "U.S. Said to Hunt Lost Atom Device," *The New York Times,* 20 January 1966, p. 1. Also published in shorter form as "Atom Device 'Missing' in Jet Crash," *The Washington Post,* 20 January 1966, p. A5.

18. "Telegram from the Embassy in Spain to the Department of State," 19 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

19. "U.S. Admits Doomed B-52 Carried A-Arms," *Chicago Tribune,* 21 January 1966, sec. 1A, p. 10.

20. "Spanish Police at A-Crash Site Show Some Traces of Radioactivity," *The Washington Post,* 22 January 1966, p. A1.

21. "Telegram from the Embassy in Spain to the Department of State," 22 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

22. "Department of Defense Telegram from Torrejon to Secretary of Defense," January 1966 [day unknown], in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

By focusing public attention on the accident site, the journalists created problems for U.S. diplomats. A UPI story filed on 21 January claimed that U.S. officials in Madrid had stated that the Spanish government was censoring crash information. Because the head of state in Madrid was the fascist general Francisco Franco, this was not an implausible story. After all, the Franco regime had established a tradition of strong government controls over the media after the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. During that conflict, the government had demonstrated its willingness to manipulate the media through strict censorship and blatant propaganda, including the mutilation of corpses from automobile accidents to make fake atrocity pictures.[23] Despite this dubious record, Spanish Foreign Minister Fernando Castiella quickly complained to the U.S. embassy about the UPI story. Ambassador Duke called in the local UPI bureau chief, who "appeared shaken" and admitted that he had obtained "third hand" information for the story. The next morning, the same bureau chief telephoned Duke to apologize again and to report that he believed he "had been had" by his source "for political reasons."[24] He was certainly not alone in this respect.

Radio Moscow by this point was claiming that the site had been severely contaminated with "lethal radioactivity," a claim that almost nobody in the West took seriously. However, both the UPI story about Spanish censorship and the Reuters report on protests in nearby villages were suspiciously similar to propaganda that Radio Moscow was attempting to disseminate.[25] Concerned about the impact of the press, Ambassador Duke urged that "all necessary U.S. resources be provided" for the search effort and argued that further delays in recovering the one missing bomb would mean that the United States would be "faced with (the) practical necessity" of releasing more information.[26] As the press speculation continued to mount, Dean Rusk informed Castiella that the United States was "determined" to do everything possible "to minimize the effects" of the incident.[27] Both men knew that this had little to do with physical damage and everything to do with the public relations debacle that had emerged.

Spanish newspapers continued to cover the story, although they focused

23. Jerry W. Knudson, "The Ultimate Weapon: Propaganda and the Spanish Civil War," *Journalism History,* Vol. 15, No. 4 (Winter 1988), pp. 102–110.

24. "Telegram from the Embassy in Spain to the Department of State," 22 January 1966.

25. "Telegram From the Embassy in Spain to the Secretary of State," 26 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

26. "Telegram From the Embassy in Spain to the Department of State," 22 January 1966.

27. "Cable for the Ambassador (Duke) from the Secretary (Rusk)," 22 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52. Although this cable was sent to Duke, it was mostly a message that Rusk asked him to pass along to Castiella.

on a "return to normalcy in rural regions" and emphasized the lack of serious health hazards. In particular, they eschewed any specific references to nuclear weapons or radiation.[28] The international press was not nearly as timid in its ongoing coverage of the nuclear aspect of the incident. On 22 January, a Reuters report noted that "anxious peasants in southeast Spain" were wearing "miniature Geiger counters" given to them by U.S. officials.[29] The next day, Reuters noted that the focus of U.S. activity in the region had shifted to the sea—a claim that was accurate.[30] U.S. military officials by this point had concluded that the final thermonuclear weapon was probably not on dry land. A sea-based recovery effort required the participation of U.S. naval forces and a great deal of advanced marine paraphernalia. The U.S. embassy in Madrid advised Rusk several days later that the U.S. naval buildup and the "introduction of exotic equipment" had "rekindled high interest" from reporters, many of whom were apparently planning to return to the scene as soon as possible.[31]

U.S. officials anticipated that an even more damaging backlash could still develop as long as the government withheld information from the press. In what was more a public relations move than a diplomatic concession, the United States unilaterally announced on 25 January that it would no longer fly over Spain with nuclear weapons.[32] However, this shift in military policy was not enough. Pressure had begun to build among the Spanish people for formal action against U.S. activities in their country. A week after the crash, a petition to ban flights of nuclear weapons over Spanish territory was circulating in Madrid.[33] The U.S. government realized that such a move would set a dangerous precedent for U.S. bases elsewhere in the world, each governed by a military treaty similar to the one between Washington and Madrid. U.S. officials began to loosen their information policy, allowing the press to have access to a greater range of information. This shift was reflected in a 28 January 1966 report in *The New York Times* about the efforts under way to recover the last bomb from the Mediterranean Sea. The article correctly identified the weapon as a hydrogen bomb, gave a reasonable estimate of its location, and contained many details about the submersibles that were searching underwater.[34]

28. "Telegram from the Embassy in Spain to the Secretary of State," 26 January 1966.

29. "Peasants Near A-Crash Wear Geiger Counters," *The Washington Post,* 23 January 1966, p. A1.

30. "Spain's Hunt for A-Bomb Shifts to Sea," *The Washington Post,* 24 January 1966, p. A10.

31. "Telegram from Madrid to Secretary of State," 27 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

32. "US Halts A-Flights over Spain," *The Washington Post,* 26 January 1966, p. A6.

33. "Petition Drive in Spain Hits Overflights," *The Washington Post,* 26 January 1966, p. A11.

34. "Research Submarine Will Hunt for Lost H-Bomb—Deepest Diving Craft Made Ready to Ship to Spain—Midget Underwater Vessel May Also Be Flown There," *The New York Times,* 28 January 1966, p. 6.

Significant as this change in policy was, it did not prevent further damage to the image of the United States. On 29 January, the Spanish government formally prohibited the flight of U.S. planes carrying nuclear weapons over its territory. Spanish Information Minister Manuel Fraga Iribarne emphasized that the order was "without time limit and covered all types of flights, both refueling operations and otherwise."[35] The ban impeded U.S. military operations in Europe at a time when French President Charles de Gaulle was also seeking to diminish U.S. military influence on the continent. But the greatest damage was outside Europe. When Spain made its decision known, other countries that hosted U.S. forces began to rethink the terms of their relationships. Foreign Secretary Narciso Ramos of the Philippines called for a new treaty between his country and the United States that would establish stricter rules for the operation of U.S. military aircraft in Filipino airspace.[36] To preclude further such demands, U.S. officials were eager to bring the Palomares affair to a rapid end. But until the missing bomb was recovered, the U.S. government had to continue adjusting its information policy as circumstances demanded.

The Spanish government, for its part, was coming under growing public pressure. On 3 February, members of an underground Communist organization distributed leaflets urging protestors to gather in front of the U.S. embassy.[37] The next day, a street protest against the U.S. presence in Spain was staged in front of the Embassy.[38] Although General Franco was a dictator, it would have been politically risky for him to appear overly supportive of the United States, especially because some officials in his own government did not approve of Spain's military treaties with Washington. Hence, the United States was unable to mount any kind of joint public relations policy with the Spanish government to bolster the U.S. image.

A critical element in the U.S. public relations effort was Ambassador Duke, whose energetic and straightforward approach was radically different from the military's unresponsive demeanor. Duke had long been familiar with Spain, having served at the U.S. embassy in Madrid for a year during the Truman administration, when he was adept at socializing with the Spanish elite and ended up marrying a Spanish aristocrat. When he returned to Madrid in 1965, he was initially seen as a "middle-aged playboy" who would once again be an expert socialite and would not disrupt the good times by bringing up

35. "Spain Now Bars A-Bomb Flights—Closes Airspace to US Craft Carrying Nuclear Devices," *The New York Times,* 29 January 1966, p. 8.

36. Ibid.

37. "Protests in Spain," *The New York Times,* 4 February 1966, p. 3.

38. "600 Spanish March in Anti-US Protest," *The New York Times,* 5 February 1966, p. 8.

awkward subjects. But Duke turned out to be far more active and involved than either Washington or Madrid had anticipated.[39] The Palomares episode was no exception. On 2 February 1966, Duke traveled to Andalucía to evaluate the situation. Upon returning to Madrid, he briefed the media with a nearly complete account of what he had seen, although he was not allowed to acknowledge that a hydrogen bomb was still missing. The following day, the Defense Department criticized Duke's decision to release as much information as possible, but this criticism seemed almost beside the point at a time when the United States was experiencing a public relations disaster.[40] Even before Duke's press conference, the U.S. government was quickly approaching the point at which it could no longer plausibly deny that a hydrogen bomb was still missing. The additional release of information by Duke merely clarified the situation in Andalucía.

On 12 February, the State Department and Defense Department issued a joint statement acknowledging that one bomb was still unaccounted for. But they also stressed that the warhead was not armed.[41] The type of hydrogen bomb on the B-52 required a manual arming sequence before a devastating fusion explosion could occur.[42] To allay international fears about the handling of nuclear weapons, the joint statement indicated that the "built in safeguards" in American hydrogen bombs had been "perfected through years of extensive safety testing." The statement also described, in elaborate detail, the cleanup measures that had been undertaken to "eliminate the chance of hazard" and to "set at rest unfounded fears."[43] Unfortunately for Washington, these simple assurances were not enough for everyone. Soviet accusations were issued regularly in Spanish on Radio Moscow, and persuading some Spaniards

39. Szulc, *The Bombs of Palomares,* pp. 172–173.

40. Ibid., pp. 174–175.

41. "Joint Department of State–Department of Defense Statement," 12 February 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

42. Thermonuclear bombs differ from fission weapons. The destructive force of a fission bomb is derived from the chain reaction initiated by the splitting of the atomic nuclei of heavy elements like uranium and plutonium, a process known as nuclear fission. Hydrogen bombs use a small fission bomb to initiate a reaction that fuses small atoms together to create larger ones, producing a far more powerful explosion. The greater complexity of a thermonuclear bomb means that it has more components that can explode after a hard impact, but the elaborate security features in U.S. weapons normally ensured that such an explosion would not lead to a thermonuclear reaction. Simply dropping the device out of a plane from a high altitude, for example, would not produce a thermonuclear explosion on impact. The hydrogen bombs that were involved in the Palomares incident required the B-52's crew members to arm each bomb manually before it could be dropped in a successful attack. Some of the local residents in the Palomares region claimed to have witnessed large explosions when the bombs fell, but what they actually saw were small chemical explosions. In the two bombs that blew up, small containers of tritium deuteride (a highly combustible gas) had ruptured and caused an explosion, but this did not result in a thermonuclear detonation. If a thermonuclear detonation had occurred, no one in the Palomares region would have survived to tell about it.

43. "Joint Department of State–Department of Defense Statement," 12 February 1966.

that these accusations were untrue was difficult. By mid-February, the Franco government was becoming reluctant to issue any joint statements with the United States lest such a move be "misinterpreted as (a) reply or comment on" Soviet accusations.[44]

To try to mitigate the damage to U.S.-Spanish relations, USIA prepared a set of talking points, "The Bomb in Spain," that were intended to provide definitive answers to a wide range of questions about the Palomares incident and to rebut the flamboyant rhetoric emanating from Moscow. On 4 March, the document was completed and widely distributed to U.S. government installations around the world, bringing an end to the improvised information policy and establishing a much clearer stance that could be followed by all U.S. officials. But the value of the document was at least partly offset by the instruction that U.S. officials should not volunteer any information and should use the talking points only if they were directly questioned and as the specific situation required.

"The Bomb in Spain" acknowledged that four thermonuclear weapons had been lost and that one was still missing. It "emphatically" pointed out that no nuclear explosion had occurred and explained why there was no risk that the missing weapon would detonate. USIA anticipated follow-up questions for each answer. For example, if a reporter asked why the United States would continue to search even though the missing bomb posed no risk to others, U.S. officials were permitted to answer that the search could help determine the cause of the crash and to point out that the United States needed to protect the design of the bomb, which was highly classified.

The talking paper also served a number of specific purposes that had been informally handled by various U.S. government agencies. The first was to reassure the Spanish public, as well as people around the world, that no permanent harm had been done. The paper affirmed that Spanish "tomatoes, meat and milk" were not contaminated; and that the "ocean water" and the fish in it were unaffected. The second purpose, which had not yet been formally handled at all, was to counter the Soviet Union's inflammatory propaganda. A hypothetical foreign journalist might ask, "Was the accident in Spain a violation of the test ban treaty, as the Soviet Union has charged?" U.S. officials were instructed to respond: "Of course not. That is far-fetched, even for a Soviet propagandist."

A third purpose was to reassure people outside Spain that no harmful thermonuclear accidents could occur over their countries. But even with "The Bomb in Spain" as a guide, this objective was extremely difficult to achieve.

44. "Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Spain," 17 February 1966, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States,* 1964–1968, Vol. XII, p. 391.

The talking paper did not allow officials to reveal whether the United States flew over specific countries with nuclear weapons. Instead, the officials could offer only a vague statement that the United States would "never relax its concern with nuclear safety." However, if the journalist asked about Soviet flights carrying nuclear weapons, the American official was instructed to respond: "You should ask them. They have given us no information about the safety features of their weapons."[45]

The establishment of a uniform information policy was buttressed by the continued efforts of Ambassador Duke, who remained deeply concerned about Spanish public opinion. Duke came up with the whimsical idea of throwing a "Palomares swimming party" at Mojácar, a beach town close to the accident site. The basic idea was to plunge into the waters of the Mediterranean for an energetic swim, thereby demonstrating that the waters were clean and safe for human contact. Duke recruited his family and as many embassy officials as possible for the venture. Just after 9:30 a.m. on 8 March, Duke and his entourage strode down the beach and plunged into the water, under the watchful eyes of an amused media contingent. After a brief, impromptu cognac party on the beach, the swimmers took a tour of the accident region, returning to the beach at noon for another swim. On this second occasion, the Spanish information and tourism minister, Manuel Fraga Iribarne, joined Duke to brave the somewhat frigid March waters in a show of U.S.-Spanish cooperation and friendship.

The swimming demonstration was judged by all involved to be a great success and earned the positive, front-page press coverage that Duke had sought.[46] Coverage in *The New York Times* was especially helpful. An AP photo of Duke and Fraga waving from the water was given a prime spot on page one, and correspondent Tad Szulc provided an upbeat description of the scene.[47] On page two, the *Times* ran a "man in the news" column on "direct-action envoy" Duke, celebrating the ambassador's public affairs skills and characterizing him as an important U.S. asset in the continuing Palomares drama.[48] Yet underlying the beach party was an ongoing problem that U.S. officials were not eager to discuss. They had not yet located the missing bomb and were facing the possibility that it might never be found.[49] The U.S. em-

45. U.S. Information Agency, "The Bomb in Spain—Talking Paper No. 28," 4 March 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

46. A more extensive account of this amusing episode can be found in Szulc, *The Bombs of Palomares,* pp. 219–228.

47. "US Envoy Swims Where H-Bomb Fell," *The New York Times,* 9 March 1966, p. 1.

48. "Direct-Action Envoy—Angier Biddle Duke," *The New York Times,* 9 March 1966, p. 2.

49. On many occasions, nuclear weapons or weapon components lost in airplane or naval accidents have remained buried in the sea, never to be seen again. The accident list in Tiwari and Gray, "U.S.

bassy in Madrid quietly began to prepare the Spanish government for such an outcome. An embassy official, William Walker, made this point clear when questioned by a probing Spanish official: "You should realize that we may never get it. It could just stay there forever."[50]

An Incident Runs Its Course: The Result of Successful Policy?

In the end, "The Bomb in Spain" talking paper did not have to be used extensively. By the time the paper was released, the media had already uncovered most of the details about the Palomares incident. In the meantime, Duke's open and somewhat humorous approach to the matter had helped to smooth over what could have been a public relations fiasco in Spain. Still, Duke worried that officials in Washington would undermine the progress he had made. On 14 March the ambassador expressed his concerns about the resolution of Palomares in a message to Jack Valenti, then serving as special assistant to the President.

> I write to you now (events happen so fast) in order to head off any possibility of premature announcements, either at the White House level or the State Department level, before I would be given an opportunity to be heard and subsequently empowered to handle the matter at this end. The manner in which the Palomares incident is terminated will be of great importance, not only in Spain, but to every nation in the world where there are nuclear overflights or bases.[51]

Duke believed that he, as ambassador, was the most appropriate person to manage U.S. information policy with regard to the Palomares incident. He was on the ground in Spain and knew Spanish government officials. He was the one who had achieved a public relations coup with the swim party in the Mediterranean Sea, ingratiating himself with all the press photographers.

Sure enough, Duke did end up playing a vital role in the final phase of the Palomares story. On 15 March, the U.S. Navy task force off the coast of Almería spotted the bomb's parachute, thereby ending the search phase of the operation and starting the recovery phase. On 18 March, the ambassador

Nuclear Weapons Accidents," covers such cases. In other instances, decades pass between the accident and the discovery of the missing weapons. The most recent example of a delayed discovery comes from a 1958 collision between a B-47 bomber and an F-86 fighter off the coast of Georgia. A group led by a retired U.S. Air Force officer reportedly sighted the weapon in September 2004. See "Lost Nuclear Bomb Possibly Found," CNN.com, 13 September 2004, http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/09/13/lost.bomb.

50. Lewis, *One of Our H-Bombs Is Missing,* p. 181.

51. "Angier Biddle Duke to Jack Valenti," 14 March 1966, in LBJL, White House Central Files, Confidential File, Country File, Spain (CO 272).

drafted a statement to the Spanish people that he would release upon recovery of the bomb. In it he explained that no radioactivity had leaked from the weapon and that "the collection and removal of contaminated soil and vegetation" had been successfully completed. Duke thanked the Spanish people "for their outstanding assistance in completing this task" and ended by asserting that the United States was successful in its goal of leaving the "Palomares area as it was before."[52]

On 7 April, the U.S. Navy finally recovered the missing bomb, giving the embassy in Madrid its long-awaited chance to make a declaration on the topic. As Tad Szulc described it in *The New York Times,* embassy spokesman William E. Bell made a "triumphant announcement" highlighting the safe recovery of the weapon and advised the media of a "'farewell' ceremony to the bomb" that would take place the following day.[53] Although Duke had continued to clash with U.S. military officials regarding his views of the need for a forthcoming information policy, he ultimately managed to convince Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara that allowing the media to view the recovered bomb would be the best way to close the entire affair. Over the objections of senior military officials, Duke hosted the bomb-viewing event on board the USS *Albany.* Never before had the United States publicly displayed a hydrogen bomb.[54] The decision to do so in this case suggested that the administration realized that Duke's open approach to information policy was far more useful and appropriate than the close-mouthed military approach that had prevailed during the first few weeks. A potential crisis with Spain and other U.S. allies had loomed large, but it had passed after the government formalized its information and public affairs policy and gave Duke enough leeway to operate his damage-control operations in Madrid.

An interesting policy dilemma emerged in the first weeks after the Palomares accident. The established military procedures for dealing with nuclear accidents were thorough and well organized. But a serious problem arose. Under the circumstances, the U.S. Air Force needed almost two months to execute its prearranged course of action. The loss of one of the bombs in the Mediterranean Sea did not invalidate the normal recovery procedures, but it did mean that the process would take longer.[55] The military procedures did not vary from case to case, but the public relations dimension

52. "Cable from Madrid to Secretary of State," 18 March 1966, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Sp, B-52.

53. "H-Bomb Is Recovered Intact after 80 Days," *The New York Times,* 8 April 1966, p. 1.

54. Szulc, *The Bombs of Palomares,* pp. 262–266.

55. The Air Force's methodical approach to the search eventually yielded a positive result, but the military officers were aided by specialists from the Sandia Corporation in New Mexico (among others) who made calculations and carried out experiments simulating the trajectory of the final missing bomb. See Lewis, *One of Our H-Bombs Is Missing,* esp. pp. 58, 152.

of the Palomares incident had to be hastily improvised at first and was not formally set until a few weeks before the military procedures were completed. The delay could have created a much larger problem had it not been for the talent and experience of Ambassador Duke. The United States would have benefited from having a better-organized information policy from the beginning, but this shortcoming was not necessarily the result of bad policymaking.

Rather, the difficulties arose mainly because of the way military information moved up and down the decision-making structure in the Johnson administration. President Johnson was accustomed to receiving broad strategic information and then making decisions based on plans that had already been carefully prepared by lower-level military officers and civil servants. Unlike some presidents, he did not normally weigh diverse aspects of specific problems to arrive at his own solutions. This meant that, in situations like this, he could not take due account of federal agencies' conflicting priorities. Soon after the planes crashed over Palomares, senior military personnel realized that the recovery operation could take months, but the plan at the State Department seemed to be to hope for an early resolution before the public affairs problem got out of control. Ideally, the president would have gauged these differing expectations and called for a realistic and properly synchronized plan of action.

In particular, if Johnson had sensed the State Department's unrealistic timeline, he could have corrected it by ordering the immediate development of a comprehensive talking paper to deal with the press, thereby avoiding the risks of an improvised information policy. The delay that actually resulted might have been far more damaging had it not been for Ambassador Duke. If we had records of the telephone calls and informal conversations that the president had with his advisers on this matter, we might be able to learn why he played a passive role in this episode. Conceivably, he was simply too busy and preoccupied with the situation in Vietnam and with his ambitious domestic policy program. Johnson was fortunate that Duke was ultimately eager to assume the executive role in the Palomares case, negotiating directly with State and Defense Department officials to create an effective public relations campaign in Madrid.

Johnson's minimal role in the Palomares incident suggests that a president will often be unable to observe and reconcile incompatible expectations between government departments. Because a figure like Ambassador Duke may not be around to perform damage control in the wake of a military accident, the U.S. government would benefit from having a firmly established policy to identify and separate information that must remain secret from information that can be released to the public. In a case involving the loss of nuclear weapons, an established information policy could trigger immediate ac-

tion by USIA (and now the State Department) that would limit the damage to U.S. interests.

As soon as the details of the Palomares incident reached Washington, USIA officials should have begun consultation with the State and Defense Departments to coordinate the government's information policy. If such a policy had been in place, it would have safeguarded classified information while simultaneously ensuring that the U.S. government was both consistent and as open as possible in its dealings with the press. As the government releases more information, it decreases the opportunities for the press and propagandists to fill in the gaps with damaging speculation. Duke's liberal stance on the release of information about the Palomares accident was ultimately the most potent weapon the United States had at its disposal, despite the Defense Department's reluctance to use it. An open and relaxed information policy served American security interests better than an overly reticent stance.

This article has focused on one example from the Cold War era, but the basic policy implications are applicable to a much broader array of situations. The uncoordinated and improvised handling of sensitive military information can cause significant damage to the public image of the United States. To mitigate this problem, the government should maintain a list of potentially damaging events, even those that might seem highly improbable. Examples might include the loss of sensitive weapons or other equipment; accidental contamination of land, air, or water by nuclear fuel or other dangerous substances; and even the improper or criminal behavior of U.S. military personnel, such as the Abu Ghraib prison scandal involving U.S. troops in Iraq.

This basic approach to information policy could also be used by homeland security officials in the wake of major terrorist attacks. If hearsay eclipses legitimate and truthful information sources at times when lives are in danger and public emotion is running high, the result could be exceedingly damaging. Officials should be in a position to gather and communicate relevant information as soon as possible, unless it is absolutely necessary to withhold materials for security reasons. Preparedness for an accident or a disaster includes knowing what to tell people in its aftermath. A sound information policy could be important to a government's ability to stave off public disorder and weakened political legitimacy. Because USIA was absorbed by the State Department in 1999, the most practical approach in the wake of a military accident might be to assign responsibility for the development of information policy to specially designated officials in the Department of Defense. Regardless of the specific organizational approach, the government must be ready to disclose as much information as possible in order to forestall harmful rumors and misinformation. As the Palomares case illustrates, a failure to release information can cause so much public relations damage that it endangers U.S.

security. In the event of a major military accident like the Palomares incident, the United States should err on the side of disclosing information rather than withholding it. Because the media and public interest groups will seek as much information as possible about sensitive events, the U.S. government can best protect its interests by accepting this reality and adhering to an information policy that is as forthcoming as possible.