

# UNDER COVER

## KAL 007: *Non Possumus*

The most terrible lesson of KAL flight 007 is this: The Soviet Union has thus far emerged from the catastrophe almost completely unscathed.

The American administration, so eager to denounce the Russians, has been unable to act in a way suited to its words. We called the Soviets "monsters," but we agreed to sell them more grain. "Thunderous inaction," the *New Republic* called Reagan's response, even while it agreed with his conviction that sanctions are unworkable and only help others to "steal our business." In fact, the administration is too ready to plead *non possumus*.

The grain embargo *did* hurt the Russians, though less than Mr. Carter hoped, and, in any case, there are other possible sanctions that might be more effective. The Reagan administration, however, seems to discover that we can do nothing whenever action would endanger our profits—a lucky coincidence, to say the least. Politically, Mr. Reagan seems close to the *New Republic's* position that any American government must conform to the fact that the American people "have less stomach for deprivation than the Russians," a notion which abandons the obligation of political leadership at home or abroad. The administration seems all too willing to treat the destruction of KAL 007 as a grisly sort of good fortune, calculated to support the president's position on defense expenditures and his chances for reelection.

This is nothing new: Mr. Reagan and his advisors have demonstrated a consistent tendency to see political life and its crises as so many media events. Even in those rather sordid terms, however, the administration has bungled the airline disaster.

The decision to destroy KAL 007 was genuinely inex-



cusable. Consequently, Mr. Reagan and those who spoke for the United States did not need to play down or pass over the uncertainties which surround the flight. Nevertheless, they did so, and as facts surface or questions assert themselves, more and more Americans—made cynical by experience—have come to suspect that the administration intended to conceal the truth. (About 61 per cent of Americans, according to a recent major poll, believe that the administration is not telling us the whole story.) That the administration has acted so feebly only reinforces the suspicion that our government is not really serious. The administration, in other words, has helped to dissipate American indignation and hence to weaken its own hand.

Diplomatically, matters are even worse. As indicated by our precarious and possibly pyrrhic success in the U.N. Security Council, the United States seriously underestimated the amount of latent sympathy for the Soviet position. Other governments understand the fears that probably moved Soviet authorities: Is the flight a test? An attempt to set a precedent? If we do not act now, will we be able to draw the line later on? Most countries are unable to protect their borders against overflights, spy missions, and the like, and they resent their own weakness. In this sense the Soviet Union acted as a surrogate for weak regimes, and more governments and peoples than will ever acknowledge it felt a vicarious identification with Soviet ruthlessness.

The USSR has made its point after all. No aircraft is likely to be careless about Soviet airspace for a long, long time. The Soviet Union has reminded other governments and peoples that it is an adversary one tempts only at great peril. To teach such a lesson the Soviet Union is more than willing to give up a few Aeroflot flights, delay Mr. Gromyko's appearance at the U.N., and put up with similar annoyances. Like Machiavelli, the USSR believes that it is better to be feared than loved.

The United States has certainly failed to demonstrate that it is much to be feared. Unfortunately, we have not inspired love either: Our diplomacy has been heavyhanded where it could easily have been gentle. After all, whatever may be true in the dark side of the soul, people the world over detest the Soviet Union's routinized cruelties. The United States can lead and strengthen that decent loathing in our own people as much as in others, but to do so we need moral seriousness even more than material power. So far American policy has only confirmed the teaching that pity and compassion are fundamentally maudlin.

We have lent a kind of support to the Soviet Union's implicit conviction that love is weak as well as blind. The USSR has demonstrated that it will run risks and pay a price in pursuing its bureaucratic inhumanities. The United States needs to give evidence that it will dare as greatly and offer up as much in defense of civility and charity. So far Mr. Reagan's response to the Soviet Union's atrocious conduct has fallen short of that standard, and he risks making KAL 007 into a not-so-secret victory for the Soviet Union. In this case, as in his tangled policy in Lebanon, the president owes the American people at least that kind of moral courage which also goes by the name of candor.

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