

[from: 'Breaking the News – dispatches from a veteran reporter'. Newsletter by James Fallows. February 6, 2023.]

Troubles in the Skies.

Here is an aviation story that involves more unknowns than knowns: the now-defunct Chinese spy balloon. I'll deal with it Q-and-A style.

Q: Do we believe the Chinese government statement that this was just a science-oriented weather mission?

A: No.

Q: What could the people who launched it conceivably have been thinking?

A: Who knows. At the moment I can imagine three possibilities, all bad.

-First, this could have been a screwup in the most basic sense. Whoever launched it thought the jet-stream winds would keep it over Canada, rather than dipping into the U.S.

-Second, this could have been a screwup within the Chinese leadership. Some military hothead might have thought that sending the balloon would be a great way to poke the “declining” Americans, while prove his or her own “fighting spirit” initiative, and also demonstrating China’s technical and military prowess.

-Third, this could have been a screwup in the grand-strategic sense. Perhaps the all-knowing, all-wise Xi Jinping approved the plans, as a way of demonstrating China’s technical and military prowess, and putting the Americans on guard.

Q: Was the U.S. ever “in peril” during this flyover?

A: Not from the balloon. Again, conceivably there is some peril: We don’t know what we don’t know. But on current evidence, this seems like a gigantic screwup on the

Chinese side. It reveals simultaneously how far they might be willing to push things, and how bad they might be at doing so.

I would not want to be the person who pushed this great idea within the Chinese leadership.