

Charles B. Seib

Post 10/28/77

# Lessons From a Submerged CIA Story

Details of the CIA's involvement with the American press continue to surface. A few weeks ago we had Carl Bernstein's examination of the spy agency's use of press people for its own purposes.

Now, thanks to a Freedom of Information suit brought by Harriet Ann Phillippi, a reporter, we have a picture of how the CIA tried to suppress news of its Glomar Explorer caper back in 1975, and succeeded for a time.

Both of these items show that the CIA operated most effectively at the top. Media brass can be prime patsies.

In case you've forgotten, the Glomar Explorer was the ship Howard Hughes built for the CIA at a cost of a quarter of a billion dollars. Its mission was to lift from the bottom of the Pacific Ocean a Russian submarine that had perished there. We don't know how successful that mission was; the conflicting press reports that finally came out have never been resolved. We do know that the Glomar is in mothballs, waiting for a buyer.

Apparently the Glomar was able to raise part of the sub in the summer of 1974. Apparently, also, the plan was to try for the rest of it the following sum-

mer. But in early 1975 a leak appeared—not in the Glomar but in security.

A story mentioning the CIA submarine hunt appeared on the front page of the Los Angeles Times. There were errors—the wrong ocean, for example—but the story brought a CIA reaction so swift and frantic that William Thomas, editor of the Times, was persuaded to move the story back to page 18 in that morning's late editions.

Thereupon William Colby, then CIA Director, and his lieutenants set out to convince the press—the whole press—that any further publication on Glomar would be a threat to national security.

Colby's efforts succeeded briefly, but they were self-defeating in the end. By the time he finished trying to stop the story, practically the whole Washington press corps knew about it. Finally, columnist Jack Anderson brought down Colby's jerry-built structure by telling the Glomar story in a radio broadcast.

True to the best journalistic tradition, the giants of the press took Anderson's 300-word broadcast as a signal and blossomed out with voluminous but contradictory versions of the Glomar

caper. We still don't know which—if any—version was right.

That is all history. What is new is the documented details on how the CIA stroked news executives and played them against each other, keeping records, including transcripts of telephone conversations, along the way.

Colby sewed up not only the Los Angeles Times, but also The New York Times and The Washington Post; Time, Newsweek and Parade; the networks and public broadcasting. But every deal leaned on the same weak reed: "We won't publish—unless somebody else does." So when Anderson pulled the plug, the deluge followed.

The documents give the full flavor of the dealings between the CIA and the media brass:

Thomas, editor of the paper that first surfaced the story, promised, according to CIA, "to exercise the full authority of his position to keep the results [of his reporters' digging] from ending up in the L.A. Times."

He is also reported in the documents to have offered to let the CIA see what his reporters turned up and to remove "any particularly sensitive items" from

a story he prepared for use if suppression failed.

Thomas says that while he agreed to suppress the story, he did not make such offers. He says that he told CIA agents he would expect them to answer questions and, that while he did review parts of the story with them, he did not give them the right to censor.

Katharine Graham, publisher of The Washington Post, assured Colby in a

## The News Business

telephone conversation the CIA transcribed that "it is not anything we would like to get into" and "we have no problem with not doing it." She noted, however, that "it can be that things are starting that have not gotten here."

Mrs. Graham gave the assurance after consulting with Howard Simons, managing editor of The Post. At the time The Post did not have anything on the Glomar story, but it put reporters on it. Their work was not used until Anderson broke the story.

A New York Times executive, identified in the documents only as E-1, also

agreed to hold the story, although a Times man, Seymour Hersh, probably had done more work on it than any other reporter.

So what comes out of the documents is a clubby press establishment pact: "I won't tell if you won't tell." It took an entrepreneur on the fringe of the establishment, Jack Anderson, to break it down.

Taken all together, the documents say two things. They say, first, that news people are not as heedless in deciding what to print as is sometimes charged. They do, on occasion, bow to arguments of national security—although they often come to regret it, as I suspect most of those involved in the Glomar suppression did. And second, the documents say that the press, at least at its upper reaches, is easy to con.

There is no evidence I know of that the executives who agreed to suppress the story made any real effort to find independent evidence to support or refute Colby's claim of national security. It seems to me that they accepted his pitch with disconcerting speed.

There is, to be sure, evidence that they realized—and told Colby—the fix couldn't last. But that is another matter.