

Laird suspects watched lifting

Secrecy called vital to detente

By Peter Lisagor
Our Washington Bureau Chief

WASHINGTON — Former Defense Sec. Melvin Laird believes the Russians were fully aware of the Central Intelligence Agency's attempt last year to salvage a Soviet nuclear submarine that exploded and sank in the Pacific in 1968.

"I'll bet you Soviet trawlers watched the whole operation," Laird said in an interview in which he maintained that the secrecy surrounding the venture was essential to avoid a public confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The implication of Laird's statement was that the Kremlin chose to wink at the CIA's recovery mission so long as it remained secret. He suggested that public disclosure would have forced the Russians to react openly, with potentially adverse consequences to the policy of detente.

IN 1960, it was recalled, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev called off a summit conference with President Eisenhower and heightened Cold War tensions when a U.S. spy plane, a U-2, was shot down over Russia and Ike first denied, then admitted its mission.

The U.S. salvage ship

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Soviets of sub

brought up a part of the Soviet submarine but not its code room or missile warheads, according to published accounts of the operation.

"I guaranteed the Soviets knew about it the day we lifted it," said Laird, who was head of the Defense Department when the project was approved in 1970.

LAIRD THUS disputed the main argument of the CIA in seeking to suppress the story of how it tried to salvage the sub and its intelligence secrets with a special craft built at an estimated cost of \$350 million by a company owned by Howard Hughes, the eccentric billionaire.

The CIA argued the Russians did not know about its salvage operation, and that disclosure now would abort a scheduled attempt to recover the rest of the sub this summer.

Administration sources took issue with Laird's contention, insisting the Russians had searched for the submarine in vain and then abandoned it

years ago.

Laird defended the construction of the hitherto super-secret, Hughes-built ship, which he called "an experimental rescue ship" and which he said was designed to provide "a capability America really needs. We might have to pull one of our own subs out some day."

LAIRD SAID the Navy was "not happy" when the salvage ship project was first approved, because it wanted to undertake it. But inasmuch as Navy contracts require competitive bidding and CIA contracts do not, it was decided that the intelligence agency should handle the project to preserve its secrecy, Laird said.

Continue sub salvage, some officials urge

Daily News Wire Services

WASHINGTON — Despite some congressional criticism of the CIA's quest for a sunken Russian submarine, some U.S. officials reportedly favor going ahead with the salvage operation.

Some key members of the administration reportedly feel the CIA operation is providing the United States with a propaganda coup as well as valuable military and technological information.

In the operation last summer, a CIA-sponsored research ship raised part of a Soviet submarine, armed with nuclear missiles, from the bottom of the Pacific Ocean northwest of Hawaii.

BUT THE remainder of the sub, including its nuclear missiles and code devices, remain on the ocean bottom. The Soviet Union has lost several other submarines, according to the CIA and at least one site is under surveillance by the Russians to guard against a recovery attempt.

President Ford has refused to comment on the disclosures but some of his White House advisers were reported to be strongly opposed to continuing the salvage attempt.

Moscow also has maintained an official silence on the affair.

Some members of Congress, however, have questioned the worth of the operation, reported to have cost \$350 million.

HIGH intelligence sources

say they got useful information from the part of the G Class Russian submarine they retrieved, even though it was one of Russia's older subs, diesel rather than nuclear powered.

Had they raised the whole vessel, they would have gotten Russian nuclear missiles and probably found code devices with which they could decipher 7-year-old messages and learn about the deployment of nuclear warheads around the world when the sub went down in 1968.

While the actual documents and equipment on the sub would be outdated, they would open a window on Soviet thinking about nuclear warfare, one intelligence source said.

Congressmen said that detente and President Ford's June summit with Soviet leaders would not be damaged by disclosure of the incident.

"I don't see how it could upset the summit unless they determined we were responsible for sinking it," said Sen. John Sparkman (D-Ala.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

THE SPECIALLY designed salvage boat is owned by billionaire Howard Hughes under

a secret CIA contract.

The submarine incident will be a subject of House and Senate debate now under way on American intelligence operations.

Sen. Frank Church (D-Ida.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the incident showed the need for a close watch on the CIA's budget, which is never published and is known only to members of certain congressional committees.

"There has to be a limit on how much is spent on intelligence," Church said. "If we are prepared to pay Howard Hughes \$350 million for an obsolete Russian submarine, it's little wonder we are broke."

Church told reporters Thursday that it was possible Hughes would be called by the committee as a witness.