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The Confusing Coverage Of the Submarine Story

When you think about it, there was a comic opera flavor to the Russian submarine story.

Consider: The country's professional spooks, the gentlemen of the CIA, team up with the country's No. 1 amateur spook, Howard Hughes, and embark on what they hope will be the biggest intelligence coup in history. They build themselves a ship to gladden the hearts of generations of Popu-

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lar Science readers (can't you see the Glomar Explorer, with all that fancy superstructure, on the cover) and sail off into the Pacific sunset. There they undertake the somewhat ghoulish task of raising from the deep a 17-year-old Soviet submarine that perished six years earlier, complete with crew.

But there are problems. The salvage effort is less than successful. And the secrecy, nurtured so carefully, begins to flake away. Before long, the CIA's head man, William Colby, is desperately persuading an ever-widening circle of news people to suppress the story at least until another salvage attempt is made next summer. They agree and all goes well until a columnist, Jack Anderson by name, blows the whistle in a radio broadcast. Whereupon, all the media bosses—including the editors of this newspaper—who had found suppression to be in the national interest decide the wraps are off and rush the story into print and on the air. Consternation engulfs the CIA and investigations are ordered on Capitol Hill. Comic opera all right, with a touch of science fiction. But underlying the whole outlandish performance are some serious news business questions. Here are a few that come to mind:

• Did Colby, a sophisticated man with many years of intelligence work behind him, really think that he could contain such a story by rushing from editor to editor, trying to blot it up like the lady in the paper towel commercials? For that matter, did the

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editors, equally sophisticated and experienced, really think that this unprecedented attempt at mass voluntary censorship in peacetime would work? But if Colby realized that his efforts were bound to fail, why did he try it? One answer that suggests itself is that, although he knew the story would come out, he wanted to keep some control over the form it would take.

• Were 70 bodies recovered and buried at sea, as the New York Times reported, or were there no more than 10, as reported by the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times? The question is not merely morbid. Since the submarine had a crew of about 85, the recovery of 70 bodies might indicate that more of the vessel was recovered than one-third, as was reported.

• A related question: The Post last Friday cited a report from intelligence sources "on the fringe of the CIA" that virtually the entire submarine had been lifted piece-meal. If that is true and if, as The Post also reported, the CIA retrieved at least two nuclear warheads for torpedos, what happens to Colby's argument that secrecy had to be preserved because a return visit to the wreck was essential?

• The first stories were barely off the presses when speculation began among news people as to whether the theme that ran through all versions—

that the mission was unsuccessful—was itself a CIA cover story to deceive the Russians. Did the CIA really want that version to get out and was all the negotiation with the press toward that end? Or turning that Machiavellian theory inside out, was the original version true and did the CIA engineer the later reports of success in order to counter grumblings that the whole adventure was a waste of \$350 million of the taxpayer's money?

More such questions could be framed. But those serve to illustrate the quandary of the press in a situation like this one. When deception is the norm, whom do you believe and what do you believe? Can you believe anybody or anything?

On balance and from hindsight, it appears that the media gave in too easily to Colby's national security argument. Little weight seems to have been given to the fact that a Feb. 8 story in the Los Angeles Times, although

sketchy and partly in error, must have alerted the Russians to the sub-raising mission. Also, there is something disturbing in Colby's success in achieving a sort of group agreement that "we won't print unless somebody else does." Aside from its other implications, it put the media executives in the uncomfortable position of having one man—Jack Anderson—decide whether the story would be printed and when.

Finally, there appears to have been no aggressive effort to check out Col-

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by's arguments for secrecy on Capitol Hill, at the White House or at the highest levels of the Defense Department.

We lost our national innocence in the matter of official lying, you will remember, in 1962 when Arthur Sylvester, the Pentagon's spokesman, said that it was the government's right "to lie to save itself." The Watergate experience later established the breadth and flexibility of that phrase, "to save itself." Further, most editors would agree that by the very nature of his job Colby has a license to lie. Yet they seem to have accepted his plea with a readiness they would have found naive in one of their reporters.

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The submarine was called nuclear in one story and diesel in another. It was an H, or "Hotel," class in one story, G, or "Golf," class in others. Its missiles were either hydrogen or atomic, depending on which paper you read. The mission was a flop, partly successful or quite successful. The Hughes-CIA relationship is still a monumental mystery. And what about that coveted code machine—did we get it or didn't we?

The contest between the government's natural desire for secrecy and the need to publish that is basic to an open society produced, at best, a draw. We may have to wait for the movie to find out what really happened.