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Lessons From the Soviet Submarine Incident

The semi-success of the Central Intelligence Agency in dredging up a Russian sub from the bottom of the Pacific should impart a modicum of balance and sanity to the raging debate about this country's black operations. The episode shows dramatically that such operations can have a serious purpose which fully justifies secrecy.

It also demonstrates that other elements in the society, including the press, are prepared to treat matters of secret intelligence in a responsible way. It finally indicates that when events do force information out, the result isn't all that tragic.

Consider, first, the general reputation of the CIA. Recent events have made it seem a kind of post-graduate Ivy League playground where rich boys and girls spied on their countrymen between clumsy efforts to make and unmake foreign governments—preferably by assassination.

So strong is the will to believe in lurid fiction that many people take it for granted—though the evidence is highly doubtful—that the CIA knocked off the government of the late left-wing president of Chile, Salvador Allende. In the same vein—though the evidence actually goes the other way—it seems to be generally assumed that the agency regularly broke the law to pick up dirt on Americans at home and abroad.

The affair of the Soviet sub works to

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right the balance. It involved possible recovery of Soviet code books and nuclear weapons, and was thus clearly an important and legitimate operation. To foster the project large resources were mobilized with high organizational skill and considerable technical ingenuity. Secrecy was maintained for a long period—and appropriately so. National Security, this time, was genuinely at stake—not invoked as an excuse for covering up failure or impriety.

Word of the affair began to circulate as an outgrowth of a crazy set of events beyond the control of anybody in a free country. There was a burglary at the Summa Corporation owned by Howard Hughes. The company had served as a cover for the vague operation. The burglary set in motion a criminal investigation in Los Angeles.

In these conditions, it was impossible to keep the secret. In Los Angeles, where I was visiting, speculation was rife all last weekend, and a local radio station kept pushing the story. Finally

the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times, which had stayed off the story at the request of the CIA, came out with full details.

The breaking of the secrecy has an undoubted cost. While one-third of the sunken sub was recovered in operations last summer, the code books and nuclear weapons were apparently not retrieved. The CIA had plans for a second effort this summer to raise the remains of the sub. That can no longer go forward covertly. The United States cannot thus have access to Soviet codebooks and nuclear missiles without the Russians knowing it.

There may also be a diplomatic cost. Security freaks in the Soviet Union will probably turn this episode to account in ways that will inhibit still more open exchange of people. The episode may eliminate whatever slim chance there might have been for agreement on verification procedures to limit the number of tests allowed for new missiles.

But that cost is relatively small. Modern communications techniques make it extremely unlikely that the

codes of any advanced country can long be read by another country. Knowledge of past Soviet techniques for codes and the production of nuclear missiles might be interesting, but it is not, given the rapidity of technological change, vital.

While Soviet vigilance—and the interest of those who promote it—may be heightened now, there is certainly no sign that the Russians are kissing off detente. On the contrary all the evidence is that General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev is more than ever committed to the policy of easing confrontation with the United States and Europe.

Moreover, the affair of the sub yields one undoubted gain. The intelligence community now has good reason to know that the rest of the United States, including the press, is not embarked on a relentlessly hostile, indiscriminating effort to get security agencies. By the same token, those of us on the outside now have solid evidence of the high quality and great importance of the work being done by the intelligence community.

Trust, the most grievous lack in relations between the intelligence community and the rest of the country, now has a chance for re-birth. In the new climate there is even hope that the congressional investigation of the CIA, which is so necessary, can be conducted in a careful and responsible way.