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Publicity About Search for Sub Worries CIA

By Jack Nelson
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Washington

The Ford administration refused yesterday to discuss the Central Intelligence Agency's recovery of part of a Soviet submarine. This stance reflected concern that stories of the salvage operation will antagonize the Soviet Union and jeopardize further undersea intelligence operations.

William E. Colby, director of the CIA, expressed such concerns before detailed stories of the salvage operation surfaced yesterday.

The CIA had plans to resume its salvage operation this summer, according to Colby, but might be deterred if publicity turns the matter into an international incident.

He also implied that the recovery ship, the Hughes Glomar Explorer, which he said was built especially for the salvage operation, might be used for other undersea intelligence work.

The Soviet Union has lost several other submarines, according to the CIA, and keeps the site of at least one sinking under surveillance to guard against a recovery attempt.

The CIA's salvage project raises several questions about the agency's method of operation, including matters of international law and the CIA's connections with billionaire Howard Hughes, who carried out the contract and provided the cover for the project.

However, until columnist Jack Anderson broke a story about the project in a Mutual radio broadcast Tuesday night, Colby had persuaded executives of newspapers, magazines, net-

works and wire services that the project was of such importance to national security that details of it should not be revealed.

Several congressional leaders, as well as Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, agreed yesterday that recovery of the submarine could be of such intelligence value as to justify the expense and risk entailed in the project.

However, this view was far from unanimous. Several members of Congress questioned the value of the project and said it was another example of the CIA operating without adequate congressional oversight.

"If the CIA can spend \$350 million with which to pay Howard Hughes to raise obsolete 18-year-old submarines, then I think the agency needs a cost-benefit ratio — no wonder we're going broke," said Senator Frank Church (Dem-Idaho), chairman of a select committee

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investigating CIA operations.

Although stories of the operation created a furor on Capitol Hill, they were greeted with silence by Moscow officials and the Soviet media.

The CIA had been operating on the assumption that the Soviets had known about the salvage operation at least since last February 8

when the Los Angeles Times published the first story about the project. However, that story contained only sketchy details and CIA officials theorized that the matter might die down if there was no further publicity.

The CIA's theory now is that the more the story is reported, the better the chance that the Soviets will react adversely. This, CIA officials contend, could jeopardize detente, as well as damage chances to complete the salvage operation and start new salvage projects.

If U.S. or Soviet officials

do eventually react, they can be expected to react on the basis of larger policy needs. If they decide a hardening of relations is called for, the reaction could be nasty.

But if they want to keep detente as the norm for U.S.-Soviet relations, any reaction could be expected to be cautious.

Diplomatic sources in Washington said they thought stories of the salvage operation are unlikely to cause a serious break in U.S.-Soviet relations.

Disclosure of details of the operation clearly was embarrassing to the CIA, which in recent weeks has been rocked by reports it had allegedly engaged in widespread domestic spying and had been reportedly implicated in assassination plots in at least three different countries.

One of several CIA officials who briefed newsmen on the project said that "because the submarine is a man of war, it clearly would be a violation of international law" for a country other than the Soviet Union to recover it.

A legal expert with the Navy said that the presumption of international law is that the sovereign retains title of a sunken public vessel in international waters unless the vessel has been "abandoned." The question of when a vessel can be considered "abandoned" is unclear.

The spectacle of Americans raising a sunken sub that contained bodies of Russian sailors without notifying the Soviet Union of that fact has caused additional embarrassment.

The bodies — fewer than

ten were recovered — were buried at sea in ceremonies conducted in Russian and English by a U.S. Navy captain, according to the CIA. The Soviet national anthem was played during the rites, which were recorded on videotape and sound.

Two major questions about the salvage operation that are still unanswered are whether the operation will have been worthwhile if it can go no further and whether it will be resumed.

Several CIA officials have differed.

One official, for example, said that if the mission has to be aborted now, it already will have been worthwhile because of the value of materials retrieved from the one-third of the sub that was raised. He indicated the materials were of considerable intelligence value.

On the other hand, Colby said that as of now the mission could be considered only a "marginal success."

The submarine reportedly contained three nuclear missiles, but the CIA says it recovered none of them. Neither was there any indication that the CIA recovered the submarine reactor or communications apparatus, including cryptographic equipment — all of which were considered of prime interest in the salvage mission.

The Glomar Explorer still could be dispatched to the scene of the salvage operation to resume the mission this summer. One CIA official said the mission has to be carried out during a June-through-September "weather window," a period when conditions are conducive to the salvage operation.

Intelligence sources here say the mission will not necessarily be scrubbed. They say probably no decision will be made until the CIA and the White House have had a chance to assess public reaction and reaction from the Russians.