

Two Salvage Capers

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Nobody has explained how the Government came up with the \$350 million it cost to salvage half of an obsolete Russian submarine from the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, and responsible people who understand our Government may dismiss the question as silly.

Everybody knows the Government has large funds of money secretly at its disposal for projects of this sort. When the urgency of the project is sufficiently compelling, the cash can be dug up. This being the case, however, a more puzzling question arises. To wit, why couldn't the Government come up with the \$222 million it says it needed to "save" Cambodia?

The obvious inference is that the Government is not so interested in saving Cambodia as it wants us to believe. The arithmetic of the two adventures—Cambodia and submarine—is enough to suggest the Government's true sense of Cambodia's value. Consider:

Cambodia: \$222 million.

Submarine: \$350 million.

Cambodia's worth in Washington is equal to 63 per cent of one obsolete Russian submarine. No wonder Lon Nol is packing his trunk.

Well, the Government will explain that this is an irresponsible distortion. The submarine salvage was financed from secret funds of the Central Intelligence Agency. This money is hidden in other agencies' budgets; hardly anybody knows how or where. Congress says take it and don't tell us what you're doing with it.

Money for Cambodia, on the other hand, has to be doled out by Congress in public view, the Administration will explain. Therefore, the arithmetic above suffers from the classic error of adding apples and oranges.

The trouble with this explanation is that it isn't so. The Government financed a lengthy war in Laos not long ago—and may still be doing so, for all the public knows—from the C.I.A.'s secret budget. Are we now to believe that if President Ford were determined to save Cambodia he could not cadge from C.I.A. the \$222 million he says he must have to do the job?

A Government willing to spend \$350-million to satisfy its curiosity about Soviet hardware would surely not play the miser for a paltry \$222 million if it truly believed this amount would preserve a country essential to national welfare.

The aroma of politics is heavy over all this transparent duplicity. Secretary of Defense Schlesinger has already accused Congress of causing an American failure in Indochina with its "niggardly" refusal to put in more money.

This seems an odd criticism from an Administration that valued Cambodia at considerably less than an obsolete submarine when the cash was being parceled out, but we are dealing here not with logic but with the logic of politics.

If logic were at work, we might reasonably ask why Messrs. Ford and Kissinger did not open their campaign for the \$222 million until Cambodia's collapse became imminent. Were they asleep at the switch? Didn't they know what was happening?

Of course they knew. They knew that Cambodia was hopeless and knew it was probably hopeless to expect more money from Congress. They surely knew, too, that when the collapse finally came they would be vulnerable to the blind rages of American politics which commonly rouse the electorate when demagogues ask, "Who is to blame for losing our noble ally?"

The Administration's last-minute campaign to get \$222 million from Congress was probably little more than political self-defense, a hedge against the inevitable battle cry to get the rascals who lost Cambodia.

The trifling sum—\$222 million—was a small inspiration. When Congress refused it, which was always likely, the Administration could come before us from the ruins, point the finger of shame at the wretched misers of Capitol Hill and declare that but for a band of miserable pinchpennies Cambodia would still be unlost on Election Day.

It is not the saving of Cambodia but the making of a campaign issue that now engages the Government. Everybody will get elected, or not, depending on how the wind blows, and for a long while no one will come right out and say, "I'd give you one-and-a-half Cambodias for one obsolete Russian submarine any day of the week."