

C.I.A. Tried to Get Press To Hold Up Salvage Story

Agency Officials Argued for Delay on Ground of National Security—Media Agreed, But Only Temporarily

By MARTIN ARNOLD

The Central Intelligence Agency tried until the last moment Tuesday night to get the press to withhold the report of the agency's attempt to raise a sunken Soviet submarine from the floor of the Pacific Ocean.

The agency's effort to prevent publication was an intense one, and it illustrated once again the complex, subtle and sometimes tortuous interplay between the Government and the press.

The account of these efforts was put together from interviews with members of the news media.

The basic issue, raised in dramatic form by the C.I.A.'s attempts to get the news media to withhold the story, is one that comes up, in one way or another, nearly every day in the practice of journalism: it is simply when to print a story and when not to.

In this case, that issue was complicated by reasons of national security. The process that went into the decision to disclose the story finally was a complicated one.

The C.I.A. efforts, which were successful for weeks, consisted of telephone calls and visits to news offices by William E. Colby, Director of Central Intelligence, and other agency officials. It included briefings on some details of the submarine story to some members of the press, with the stipulation that in return for the briefing the story would be at least temporarily withheld from the public.

Mr. Colby, when making his plea to one newspaper, would list the other newspapers, television and radio networks and magazines that he had "locked up," in his words, on the story.

Rumors in Capital

All of the media involved, acting independently of each other, agreed to withhold the story, but only temporarily. The New York Times, for instance, had decided not to print the story until the C. I. A. either made another effort to retrieve the submarine or decided not to go ahead with the project. But The Times also informed the agency that it would publish a comprehensive article on the operation if it became

known that others were about to disclose details publicly.

But last week rumors began to sweep Washington that there was an important C.I.A. story in the works.

According to the agency, the news organizations that agreed to withhold the story were The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, The Washington Star, Time magazine, Newsweek magazine, the three television networks and the National Public Broadcasting System.

All of those who agreed to withhold the story said they had done so to allow the C.I.A. to make a further attempt to salvage the submarine—in effect to help it protect its ongoing operation.

The newspapers involved said that they planned on printing the report eventually, and Time magazine said that it would print it only after some other journal had printed it.

The story was finally made public by Jack Anderson, the columnist, on the Mutual Broadcasting radio station in Washington at 9:30 Tuesday night. This released The New York Times from its agreement to delay publication of report, and The Times then published it in all editions yesterday.

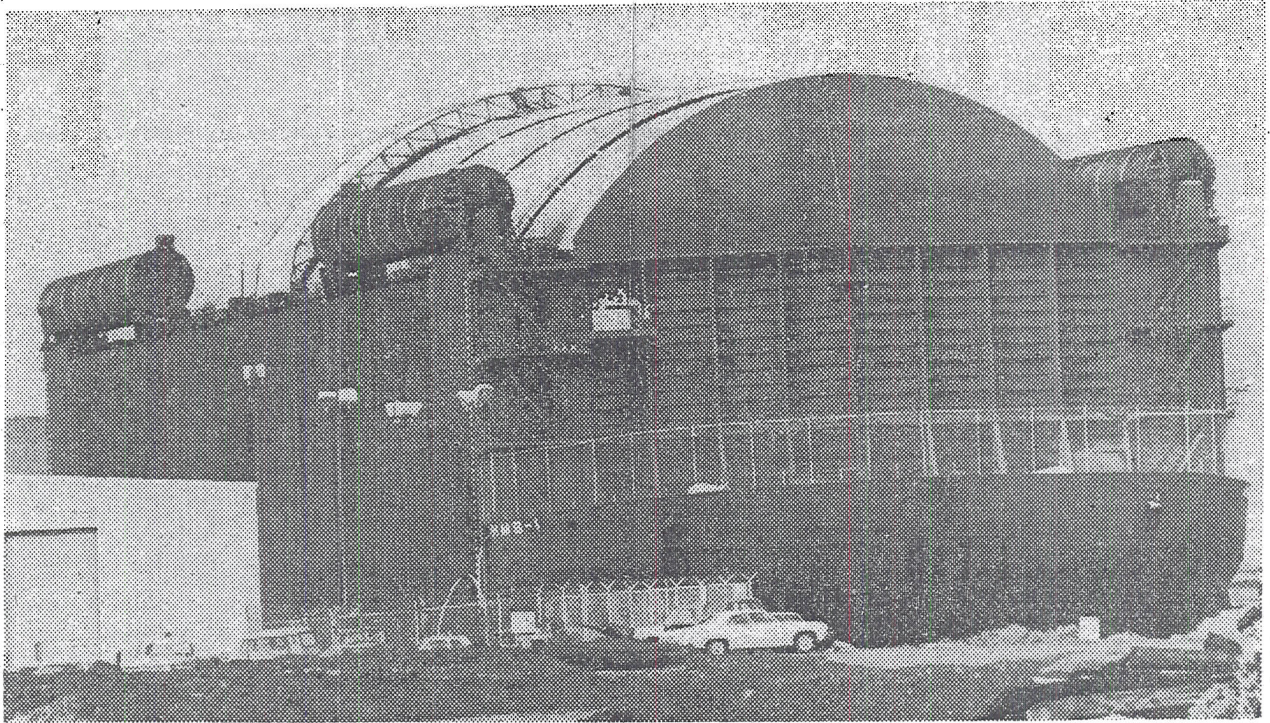
Saw Security Not Involved

Mr. Anderson said that he had spoken to a number of experts in the Navy and on the Senate committee that has "watchdog" authority over the agency and decided that the story at this late date did not involve national security.

"I don't think the Government has a right to cover up a boondoggle," Mr. Anderson said. "I have withheld other stories at the behest of the C.I.A., but this was simply a cover-up of a \$350-million failure—\$350-million literally went down into the ocean."

William Thomas, editor of The Los Angeles Times, said that his paper decided to print its story when he learned that The New York Times was publishing. The Washington Post missed the first edition with its article, but then published it.

Each news organization that knew of the C.I.A.'s attempt to raise the submarine decided independently of each other that



United Press International

The barge that was designed to take part in the salvage operation of the Soviet submarine shown under construction in Redwood City, Calif., in November, 1972. The

barge was built to be sunk, towed and then retrieved. This capability was built in to help hide the salvaged submarine from possible detection by Soviet satellites.

the agency's plea to withhold the information had, for the time being, some validity.

The C.I.A.'s reasoning was that public disclosure of the salvage attempt would preclude the intelligence agency from making yet another try at raising the submarine. Such a disclosure, it felt, would in essence interfere with what it called an "on-going military operation."

This reasoning was that salvaging the atomic missiles in the submarine was important to the United States because the careful study of those 1968-vintage weapons combined with other more recent data, could give the United States a fairly up-to-date picture of Soviet missile technology.

This, the C.I.A. contended, would not only be helpful militarily, but would also aid this country during its disarmament (SALT) talks with the Soviet Union.

Ongoing Operation

Under these circumstances, A. M. Rosenthal, managing editor of The New York Times, said The Times "believed that in this case the advantage of immediate public disclosure did not outweigh the considerations of disclosing an important on-going operation."

Mr. Rosenthal said that on the submarine story The Times "received information that Jack Anderson was going to disclose the details on the air [Tuesday], and after satisfying ourselves that this was true, decided to print our story."

On Feb. 8, 1975, The Los Angeles Times ran a page-one article saying that the C.I.A.

was involved in an effort to salvage the sunken submarine.

Almost as soon as the story hit the streets in Los Angeles, Mr. Thomas of The Times there was visited by representatives of the C.I.A. attempting to get the story "killed"—that is, dropped from the paper.

Mr. Thomas agreed to take the story of page one, but not to kill it, so for the remaining Times editions the report ran on page 18.

That article carried the general idea of the salvage operation, but was wrong in its details. Following its publication on Feb. 8, The New York Times investigated further. So did other publications, and it was after that date that the agency held its briefings for the news media, with the stipulation that the story would not now be published.

The Anderson disclosure, however, meant that the various stipulations were no longer operative. However, Mr. Thomas said that he decided to publish only after he learned that The New York Times had and that he decided that Mr. Anderson had not given enough details to warrant The Los Angeles Times publishing yesterday.

Benjamin Bradlee, executive editor of The Washington Post, said that his paper also decided that "in cases like this you weigh one side of the scale, which is responsibility to the national interest, with the other side of the scale, which is are you being conned by a Government agency?"

"Is the agency just trying to save itself embarrassment, and

the national interest is not really in the balance," he asked.

"We decide on an individual basis; we decided to hold the story, not to kill it."

'All Over Town'

Mr. Bradlee said, however, that The Post prepared its article "because it began to look increasingly like the story was getting all over town, and we would need it."

He said The Post missed the first edition because it waited to hear whether Mr. Anderson was in fact going to disclose the substance of the matter on the air.

At Time magazine Murray Gart, chief of correspondents, said that the magazine received a call from Mr. Colby last week. "He said 'this was a matter of high national security' and would we hold the story on the same basis that other members of the media had decided to hold it," he reported.

"We decided on his request to hold it, only until somebody else broke it," Mr. Gart said. He added that Time did not have a policy about alleged national security information and that it, too, considered each such case on its merits.