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Battle for the Oceans

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, March 20—The big, splashy Howard Hughes submarine mystery sounds a little goofy—sort of a Class B movie scenario—but it may be a symbol of a historic event.

It was odd of God to choose Mr. Hughes for this rescue mission on the floor of the Pacific. Somehow he managed to put together an exploration that could survive the pressures of three miles of water and fetch up parts of the Soviet submarine at the bottom. Looking to the future, it was quite an achievement.

The coming battleground of the nations may not be Southeast Asia, Europe or the Middle East—though they are all involved—but the oceans of the world, and the economic and military possibilities of the underwater world.

Last March 4, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim, sent a message to the U.N. Committee on Disarmament in Geneva, in which he said the following:

"Environmental warfare might soon pass from the realm of imagination to terrifying reality unless preventive action is taken promptly. The technology might soon exist to trigger earthquakes, steer hurricanes or release tidal waves. The General Assembly [of the U.N.] has recently gone on record in favor of a convention prohibiting the uses of nature as an instrument of war. . . ."

Nobody paid any attention. Even the most serious newspapers ignored his warning, and now we have a front-page mystery involving the C.I.A. and the Soviets on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Suddenly everybody is paying attention, but not necessarily to the main thing.

The main point is the struggle for mastery of the seas, and the economic and military exploitation of the bottom of the waters of the earth. Back of all this Buck Rogers and scientific fiction stuff about broken Soviet submarines, dead sailors, and the efforts of the C.I.A. to recover the Soviet missiles and codes, there is the much larger strategic question of who can operate effectively on the ocean bed.

The salt-water seas and oceans cover 72 per cent of the globe. They contain not only oil but precious metals and food—nobody knows how much—but maybe enough to drive the machines and feed the recklessly fertile human family in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Moscow has been very quiet about the disclosure that one of its nuclear submarines went down. It concealed this fact from its own people, as usual, and it probably doesn't believe that the

C.I.A. got the bodies of its sailors but not its missiles and codes. This doesn't matter very much. The missiles of 1968 are obsolete, and old codes, hooked into computers, can be changed every hour.

But the fact that the C.I.A. produced a ship that could recover a submarine three miles down, while the Russians couldn't fish up their own secrets and their own dead, dramatizes the more important fact that they are far behind in the science of underwater exploration.

Washington is in trouble these days on the ground that it can't run an economy, that it has no imagination, no leaders and no vision of the future. Maybe it's not as unimaginative or crippled as it looks. It still has devices that can hear a bump on the bottom of the ocean thousands of miles away, and find a submarine on the vast floor

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of the Pacific, and is increasingly demonstrating that it can operate effectively under the sea.

The mind of this city now, of course, is on other things. It is worrying about whether the C.I.A. should have spent all that money on finding the Soviet submarine, about whether the C.I.A. was right in trying to suppress the news of its operation, and whether the C.I.A. itself is out of control and beyond the reach of Congressional supervision.

William Colby, the director of the C.I.A., is very unhappy that this whole story came out, and he did his best to suppress it, but maybe publication was all to the good. It dramatized the problem of taking the oceans out of the international battlefield, which was what the Secretary General of the United Nations was suggesting in the first place.

There was, he insisted, an urgent need for a convention or agreement among the major nations, to rule out the oceans, as they had ruled out outer space, as a platform for war. Maybe now the rulers of Moscow will agree.

For if the Glomar Explorer can fetch up a Soviet submarine three miles under water, it can explore the ocean bottom for minerals, or even establish underwater platforms for nuclear explosions that could produce new forms of warfare including earthquakes, hurricanes and tidal waves.

This was what Secretary General Waldheim was talking about, when nobody was listening. He was saying we need a new law of the seas, and after the tragedy of the Soviet submarine, even the Soviets may now agree to compromise.