

IN THE NATION

By Tom Wicker

PITTSBURGH — More remarkable than the raising of the sunken Russian submarine is the reaction of the American press to the efforts of the Central Intelligence Agency to suppress the story. Coming on the heels of what is widely supposed to be the press's "triumph" in the Watergate matter, the submarine case suggests how inadequate it is to curse or bless the newspapers and television in easy generalities.

The extraordinary fact is that, despite all the revelations of recent years as to how Government officials routinely erect the screen of "national security" to shield themselves from political embarrassment, the C.I.A. was able to use that pretext to prevent publication of the submarine story in virtually a complete roster of what is usually referred to as the "Eastern press establishment."

So is the press, as frequently charged, so swollen with self-importance by the Watergate case that it is now a more aggressive power center than the Government? On the other hand, as also alleged, is the press really more aware than ever before of its function of disclosure, its role as a check and balance on Government? Is The Washington Post after all a bolder organ of "investigative journalism" than The New York Times? And when even the inimitable Jack Anderson—who forced disclosure of the submarine story—concedes that he has "withheld other stories at the behest of the C.I.A.," can it be said that to do so is in every case a dereliction of journalistic duty? Or that to "publish and be damned" should be the unvarying rule?

Several points seem worth making. All the news organizations involved appear to have made their own decisions to withhold what they knew of the story. That is, none seems auto-

matically to have acceded to the wishes of the C.I.A., and in some cases, William E. Colby, the agency's director, apparently had to work hard to gain his objective. In the end, like the boy at the dike, he did not have enough fingers to plug all the leaks, and the story could not be contained.

Yet, all these major news organizations for a time took the same attitude. They accepted the contention that national security was involved in the raising of an obsolete Soviet submarine, and they agreed to withhold publication of the story until the operation either was completed or abandoned. The unanimity of the response seems to lend support to those who suggest that the press "establishment," if it is not really a conspiracy, still is so consistently of one general attitude that it is a monolith. But the nature of the response does not support those who claim that this monolithic press is anti-Government, anti-security, anti-conservative or "pro-leftist."

Reports suggest, moreover, that most of the news organizations were determined to publish the story if anyone else did. This is a variation of the old newspaper rule-of-thumb that if something is known "off the record" it can't be published; but if someone else publishes the same information, it is no longer "off the record." Can this be applied to "national security"? If a newspaper is withholding information in genuine fear of damaging the national security, is it then justified in publishing the information just because someone else does so?

Does publication damage the national security less, in such an event? And in fact, major elements of the submarine story had been published, in The Los Angeles Times of Feb. 8.

Mr. Anderson suggested that one reason the story had been withheld was that the press itself was "shaken" by the fact that it had been instrumental in forcing the resignation of Richard Nixon, and that editors were trying hard, as a result, "to prove how patriotic and responsible we are, that we're not against the establishment, the Government, that we're not all gadflies."

That is plausible, even likely. So is the concern of an editor who is weighing journalistic duty and the public's right to know against a high claim of national security interest. Such decisions are not easily made and no responsible person should wish to abandon them to abstract rules.

Still—here was more money (\$350 million) being spent on a project of dubious value than President Ford now says would "save" Cambodia. Here was an exploit that could have been—and might yet prove—a provocation to the Soviets, without necessarily yielding vital intelligence information. Here was a linkage between the shadowy C.I.A. and the shadowy Howard Hughes, with the C.I.A. going to extraordinary lengths to suppress the story. Here, too, at a time of international dispute on the law of the sea, was a clandestine enterprise that potentially could give the United States an enormous, if not exactly proper, advantage in undersea mining techniques. As is almost always the case with "national security" stories, in retrospect it is hard to see how a news organization—let alone so many—could have thought such a story ought to be withheld.