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Despite the centrality of the ocean research vessel *Glomar Explorer* to this fascinating story, this is not a book intended for an audience of environmental historians. It is, however, a first-rate account of the Herculean effort of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to covertly raise a sunken Soviet submarine to glean precious military secrets at the height of the Cold War. *Neither Confirm nor Deny* will not add much to one’s knowledge of oceanic research or exploration, but it will certainly impress its readers with a story that might seem too outrageous for Hollywood imaginations to concoct.

If ever there was a work of history that validated Walter Scott’s lines on weaving tangled webs in efforts to deceive, this is it. M. Todd Bennett, a history professor at East Carolina University and a former historian at the US State Department, puts his considerable skills as a researcher and writer to good use in unraveling a complex snarl of deceptions and coincidences that threatened a presidency, détente with the Soviet Union, the future of the CIA, and congressional oversight of that agency, as well as the American public’s right to know. Indeed, the full title of the book alerts readers that this story will end with the CIA emerging less subject to scrutiny than it would have been if not for the extremely bold operation known by its planners as AZORIAN. It is an unbelievable story that is made credible and interesting by the efforts of Bennett.

The story begins in 1968 with a discussion of the CIA’s interest in raising from the sea floor a Soviet submarine, the Golf-Class K-129. Although it was a conventional submarine (as distinguished from submarines employing nuclear propulsion) and was commissioned a decade earlier, the prospect of examining the submarine’s nuclear weapons and communications apparatus, with accompanying code books, made it a potential gold mine to some at the CIA. Fortunately for the CIA, the United States had a system of sonar buoys that
had pinpointed the sub’s location. Unfortunately, no nation possessed the equipment necessary to reach three miles beneath the Pacific Ocean and haul an estimated four-million-pound submarine to the surface. That challenge is what prompted the development of the giant recovery vessel 

Glo‐mar Explorer.

The Explorer was a massive ship, too big to pass through the Panama Canal. Its size and unique appearance were hidden from scrutiny by being branded a research vessel designed to explore the ocean floor for valuable mineral deposits. The construction of such a large and oddly configured ship seemed credible as it was ostensibly undertaken by the eccentric billionaire Howard Hughes to reap significant financial rewards. While the Hughes connection provided the CIA with an element of protection against inquiring minds, it was also fraught with political dangers that are the focus of Bennett’s story.

As this is a spy story gone wrong and not an examination of oceanic exploration, it is first and foremost about people. In this regard, Bennett does a wonderful job of introducing readers to the characters making the decisions concerning AZORIAN and its intended successor, MATADOR. The author takes great care to illuminate the qualities of the men and the plans that brought a seemingly impossible mission to near successful completion. His is not a cold and impersonal narrative; it is brimming with insights. He also offers the same sort of detail-oriented storytelling to bring the challenges of keeping such an ambitious undertaking secret and following the loss of secrecy to control fallout and avoid the erosion of the CIA’s autonomy.

The book contains a wealth of information on the connections between intelligence professionals at the CIA and in the Nixon and Ford administrations and the shadowy underworld of independent contractors who clandestinely served their purposes. In particular, the story delves into the CIA’s connection to the enigmatic Hughes and his mysterious assortment of associates. Indeed, Hughes and his underlings are at the heart of a story that connects the billionaire to Richard Nixon and the Watergate break-in. Bennett’s history of AZORIAN/MATADOR has many significant turns, and if any Hollywood scriptwriter needs a fantastic story, they would do well to consider reading Neither Confirm nor Deny.
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