

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 19, *Sec 1*

19 November 1985

# Burying the Greenpeace affair

PARIS—When the two French spies held in New Zealand pleaded guilty to reduced charges of manslaughter Nov. 4, the French government reasonably hoped the Greenpeace affair was about to be buried for good. Paris expects the two to be expelled after sentencing, to return to France.

Formal interment of the scandal, however, cannot undo the damage done to the Socialist government. It is the Socialists who live under suspended sentence—suspended until elections next year.

The full story of what happened reveals not only the Socialists' maladroit handling of the affair but the obligation they now are under to the army, which has saved the government, at a price.

The idea of sinking Greenpeace vessels, which for years have been protesting France's nuclear tests in the Pacific, turns out to be an old one, put forward by the French intelligence service as early as 1968-69. It was proposed again in 1973. Both times the conservative governments in power turned it down.

This year the operation was again proposed, and authorized. Who authorized it remains, of course, at the center of controversy. It is admitted that an interministerial group met at the presidential palace early this year to consider the Rainbow Warrior operation, and that the chief of President Francois Mitterrand's personal military staff, Gen. Jean Saulnier, now chief of the combined French general staff, authorized an allocation of funds to pay for it.

The official position is that Gen. Saulnier believed this a mere matter of expanded intelligence-gathering, not of sabotage. The official story is that Minister of Defense Charles Hernu ordered the Rainbow Warrior sunk, or at least gave an order ambiguous enough to have been so interpreted. The official story is that neither president nor prime minister knew a thing about it.

Such is the version of events put out in a series of leaked stories to *Le Monde*, the leading Paris daily, which in the guise of providing new information on the mechanics of the operation carefully exculpated the president and prime minister, and laid the responsibility on Hernu. Laurent Fabius, the prime minister, then went on television to reiterate his innocence, to fire the head of the intelligence service and to demand Hernu's resignation. Hernu promptly gave it—with a sardonic smile.

Fabius then announced the affair closed. It was all

## William Pfaff

over, nothing to see, move along. Interestingly enough, it was all over [in Paris, that is; the unfortunate pair of spies remained in New Zealand jails]. The Paris newspapers mostly fell silent. Only *Le Figaro*, of the leading papers, implacable enemy of the Socialists, went on insisting that of course the president had to have known, the prime minister had known, or was guilty of dereliction if he had not—and that Hernu had been flung from the sleigh to save the others.

No one reacted. Why? The explanation would seem to be patriotism. Government, most of the press and the public seem to have reached the conclusion that this affair had gone on too long and was damaging France in the eyes of the world.

Nobody wanted it to become a French Watergate. The reason for that would seem to have been a sense of national vulnerability. The United States could go to the bitter end in the Watergate affair because Americans believe that the United States is invulnerable. No one considers the costs of pursuing an abstract justice to whatever end. This is a luxury which, it seems, the French collectively concluded they cannot afford.

It does not mean, however, that the French have forgiven or forgotten. Hernu, exiled from Paris, has soared in popularity, and murmurs about the possibility of running for president, if Mitterrand retires in 1988. Fabius, who followed his Greenpeace intervention with an arrogant and graceless television debate with Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac, double damaging his reputation, now sees his hitherto brilliant career abruptly checked. Such hopes as the Socialists had of escaping defeat in next year's elections have vanished.

Lastly, ironically, the Socialists find themselves with an unwelcome debt to the army, which is now saying to the government: We have sacrificed a cabinet minister, for whom we had high regard, and the chief of the intelligence service, in order to save you. Two of our officers remain in prison in Auckland. Now it is your turn to do a few things for us.

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