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**RICH LOWRY**

# Save the enemy subs

**T**he famous, old environmentalist bumper sticker needs an update: "Save the whales — and the North Korean submarines."

The latest cause of the greens is attempting to deep-six a new Navy sonar system that, yes, might protect the nation's ships and shores, but at the unacceptably high price

of potentially startling whales.

A federal judge in San Francisco has issued an injunction stopping the Navy from deploying its new high-volume, low-frequency active sonar around the world because the system would impermissibly "harass" marine mammals.

It's not just blow-holers (whales) and whiskered nose-breathers (seals) that should rejoice at our tender regard for marine mammalian eardrums, but every tin-pot dictator and enemy of the United States.

Submarines offer to rogue states some of the same advantages as ballistic missiles — they are a cheap way to project power and to undermine a U.S. strength, in this case our Navy.

Subs are therefore of keen interest to all the usual bad global actors: the Chinese (58 diesel subs), the North Koreans (86) and the Iranians

(3). According to Adm. John B. Nathman, subs present "a clear and present danger in crucial parts of the world, including the Persian Gulf, along with the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait."

U.S. strategists no doubt remember how Britain — another global sea power dependent on commercial trade routes — twice in the 20th century was nearly starved by the work of German submarines off its shores.

Then there's the nightmare scenario of a rogue-state sub sneaking close to U.S. shores and launching a cruise missile or disgorging an operative to carry a suitcase nuke into a city.

Preventing this from happening depends largely on one factor — noise. Once you know where it is — in other words, once you hear it — a sub isn't quite as threatening anymore.

This is why the United States might feel a strange nostalgia for the old Soviet nuclear subs, which were big, lumbering and relatively noisy. Much quieter are today's diesel subs, especially those manufactured by the Germans (who, it's worth remembering, have a history of heedlessly spreading nuclear and other weapons technology around the Middle East).

As Sean Spoonts, a former anti-submarine warfare operator, points out, German subs can dive below 400 meters, stay submerged for 45 days and can cruise submerged for 500 miles at 3 knots. This is crucial — below 400 meters, running at 3 knots, a sub is basically "invisible."

Passive detection, i.e., listening really hard, won't pick it up. Instead, it's necessary to have active sonar, which means sending out a sound

wave — a "ping" — and listening for it to bounce back. The new Navy system is a powerful active sonar, capable of sending a sound wave for hundreds of miles.

The problem is that a whale might be irritated — and if close enough, even killed — by the sound. This runs afoul of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which prohibits "harassing" marine mammals, and the Natural Resources Defense Council is suing to scotch peacetime use of the system altogether.

Enviros point to the beaching of 16 whales in the Bahamas during naval exercises in 2000, although it's not certain sonar was responsible, and, even if it was, a totally different system was involved than the one now under attack.

The Navy has already agreed to use visual sighting and passive sonar

to keep from using the system when whales are nearby — a reasonable precaution to protect the beasts (which, by the way, have no compunction about using sound waves themselves to stun their prey).

Any further restrictions, or trashing the system altogether, would be a morally confused act: Preserving the convenience of whales — or even the lives of whales — is not worth the risk of losing one ship full of American sailors, let alone an entire city.

Liberals opposing the Cold War used to preach "Better Red than dead." Today's environmentalists apparently have their own color-coded truism about American security: "Better Green than safe."

*Rich Lowry is a nationally syndicated columnist.*