General Information

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Description

Conservative author and commentator William F. Buckley defends the right of a French expedition team to salvage artifacts from the wreckage of the RMS Titanic. While U.S. law forbids salvaging at the site under the 1986 RMS Titanic Maritime Memorial Act, the wreckage sits in international waters.

Keywords

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CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

Transcript
William F. Buckley Supports Salvaging Items from Titanic

BRYANT GUMBEL, anchor:

Two years ago, the wreck of the ill-fated Titanic was finally located 73 years after it went down. It was found by a joint French-American expedition team led by Dr. Robert B. Ballard of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. The Argo submersible robot, called the swimming eye ball, brought us our first pictures of the final resting place of the liner, whose demise resulted the loss of over fifteen hundred lives. Last year a return expedition organized by Dr. Ballard this time utilizing the Jason, Jr. robot eye, showed us a safe, refusing to be reopened, a once glittery chandelier now studded with sea fans, and a still-delicate china cup. For Ballard those pictures marked a mission accomplished, but at that very moment the members of a French team he worked with were already positioning themselves for a major salvaging expedition, an expedition backed by American investors. Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut, called that adventure the crassness of commercial ventures, and last month lead the way as the Senate outlawed the sales or display for profit of any Titanic relics. Well last week a discharge of grave robbing the French expedition surfaced after 32 days with 300 relics intact and a special TV show in the works featuring a grand safe opening. The French just last month picked up a notable ally in William F. Buckley. He not only put pen to paper in their defense but as a guest of the French divers, he has just surfaced form the deepest dive of his life for a firsthand look at the Titanic. Welcome back.
WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY: Well thanks, it’s nice to be here.
GUMBEL: Let me, I’m going to get your dive later.
BUCKLEY: OK
GUMBEL: Let’s first talk about the controversy. Why did you get involved?
BUCKLEY: Well uh, it seems to me that, the Congress has gotten into the habit, in my lifetime and yours, of occupying itself with concerns that aren’t legitimately it. I really don’t know why Lowell Weicker needs to tell me, or you, what you or I can purchase from a willing seller. Nobody disputes that this is salvaged property belongs to nobody and irrespective of whether you desire a piece of the 
Titanic 
or don’t, why should you be forbidden it? It’s not an explosive, it’s not a drug, and therefore it seems to me that this-- this is kind of a congressional imperialistic sentimentality that I, as a free man, ought to object to, irrespective of any feelings I have about the enterprise.
GUMBEL: Should those be the long criteria, governing whether or not we should be able to buy something?
BUCKLEY: Sure. This is a free society.
GUMBEL: Why can’t-- why is the Reagan Administration then telling me that I can’t buy a Havana cigar?
BUCKLEY: Ah well, that’s part of a political embargo.
GUMBEL: It’s not detrimental to my health.
BUCKLEY: Well on first place, it probably is. But second place, the foreign policy is vested by the Constitution in the Chief Executive and this is a part of a political enterprise needed to guard the nation’s health, or so it is thought, they may be wrong.
GUMBEL: Oh, come on. You’re guarding the nation health because I can’t buy a Nicaraguan or Cuban cigar?
BUCKLEY: No, by hurting Cuba.
GUMBEL: What’s the difference--
BUCKLEY: Because Cuba tends to bring in things like nuclear weapons.
GUMBEL: Dr. Ballard left what he found intact because he said it should be a final resting place.
BUCKLEY: Why?
GUMBEL: Well let me ask you, what’s the difference between bringing up stuff from there and grave robbing?
BUCKLEY: Well, in the first place, you’re not robbing graves, you begin with that difference. And in the second place, I don’t see why a piece of cutlery made in Liverpool, and sitting two and a half miles below-- beneath the ocean floor is more sacrosanct than sitting in a museum, or for that matter, sitting in your living room. There’s no reason at all, having gone through considerable pains to see this stuff, to suppose that in its isolation there it is attracting the kind of venerable attention than it would, say, in a museum.
GUMBEL: If-- if one could locate and bring up parts of the Challenger shuttle, should they also be able to?
BUCKLEY: They have.
GUMBEL: OK, but I’m talking about for private venture.
BUCKLEY: Well, you have to ask yourself the question--
GUMBEL: Should they be able to?
BUCKLEY: Look, you got to ask yourself a question of perspective. I was thirteen years old when I went to Pompeii. And my guide didn’t say, “Oh, we’re not going to show you parts of Pompeii because after all, an awfully lot of people died there.” That historical perspective gradually tends to stress less the tragedy, which has been consummated, than the potential for historical and antiquarian curiosity. Our museums would be empty if the attitude of Lowell Weicker were even institutionalized.
GUMBEL: So what you are telling me, there’s a point at which it passes on?
BUCKLEY: Yeah, there is. Obviously.
GUMBEL: What’s the point? Where do you mark that point, though?
BUCKLEY: The point is, roughly speaking now, there are, I think, five survivors of the Titanic, but there is an immense interest in what’s lying down there. People make tremendous sacrifices, personal and economical, including the French government and the American government.
GUMBEL: Is that why you went down there? Or did you do it to get Weicker’s goat?
BUCKLEY: Well, getting Weicker’s goat is, I grant you a considerably satisfaction, but I don’t devote ten days a year to it.
GUMBEL: I figured as much. Lets-- we got a piece of tape here that shows you involved with the French expedition. Let me turn you into a show-and-tell artist if you might. As we roll the tape, you tell us what we’re about.
BUCKLEY: Oh, you want me to talk?
GUMBEL: Please.
BUCKLEY: Well, the man on the left is Ralph White who is, here you are required to rub any potential oil from the feet, you have-- you’re wearing a fireproof suit because any inflammation within this tiny submarine, is I guess lethal, is the best way to put it. Now, you climb down there about eight or ten vertical steps and find yourself in a claustrophobic little enclosure, it’s only six feet in diameter and three people have fit there for nine and one half hours. So that’s kind of cozy. Here you are being pulled out by a halyard and dropped into the sea, to be towed out by frogmen so that to be well cleared out the vessel before the decent begins. The Titanic went down and hit at a speed of approximately 50 to 60 miles per hour. We go down in 90 minutes at a speed of one and half miles per hour.
GUMBEL: Mm-hm.
BUCKLEY: This is sort of classified--
GUMBEL: You have never been in one of these before?
BUCKLEY: No, No, No. I have no tight to be in another one again either. The Titanic is three times lower than any submarine can reach. There was, just to give you some idea, fewer than 100 people have dived as deep as I will be diving here.
GUMBEL: This just the removal of the--
BUCKLEY: The placenta, yeah. Now, that’s the closest part of the Titanic. But that’s an hour and a half later before you get there.
GUMBEL: How did what you find compare to what you expected to find?
BUCKLEY: Well, there was a brilliance, a kind of, almost a spooky diaphanous quality in what you saw, white-yellow sand. The very first thing I saw was a human shoe, a man’s left suede foot and to the right was a tea cup. It was almost as though a canvas, a tableau had been prepared for Salvador Dali to paint. One had no idea that it was not missing the turbulence--
GUMBEL: I’m going to short circuit the tape, only because I know you brought back something that I want to show.
BUCKLEY: Yes, somebody gave me this, I don’t think he was supposed to, but he kept it from floating into the sea. It came up with my dive. As far as I know, it’s the first time anything from the Titanic has been publicly exposed. It is a pencil.
GUMBEL: My goodness. Is this in violation of the law?
BUCKLEY: No, as a matter of fact, if I sell it to you-- I tell you, pay me a hundred dollars for it and we’ll see if Lowell Weicker will sue us.
GUMBEL: No, I’m not going to do that. Your disputes are your own.
BUCKLEY: This is where the lead, of course, went. So that was down there for 75 years. It may be fossilized, I just don’t know. It may begin to disintegrate or in fact, may survive.
GUMBEL: Then I’ll keep my hands off it. William F. Buckley, again, welcome back.
BUCKLEY: Nice to see you.
GUMBEL: Take care will you.