

Undersea Land Grab

by David Domke

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"No one owns the abyss", according to a recent *New York Times* article on mining rights and the ocean floor, an "unclaimed wilderness" rich in valuable deposits of ores and exotic flora and fauna. In November of this year a UN treaty entitled "The Law of the Sea" will go into effect. One of its many clauses proclaims the ocean floor to be "the common heritage of mankind." None of the industrial nations, however, including the United States, has ratified the treaty — for the most part because of that very clause. The Clinton administration says it may ratify the treaty if it could be modified more in favor of "free enterprise and American interests," two terms it apparently believes to be synonymous.

The Law of the Sea Treaty considers all natural resources on or below the sea bed as belonging to the people of the world, and one of its proposals is that the UN establish an agency to oversee the development and distribution of these resources. While intensive exploration and mining of the sea floor is still a decade or more in the future, the industrial powers are already scrambling to map out and claim huge underwater territories as their exclusive domain. The same *Times* article quotes Senator Daniel Akaka of Hawaii, who recently chaired a Senate hearing on such mining, as saying "The potential payoffs are vast, the race is on."

At stake are billions of tons of "nodules" lying scattered on the ocean floor. Rich in copper, cobalt and nickel, these nodules are so plentiful in places and so densely packed "they look like cobblestones."

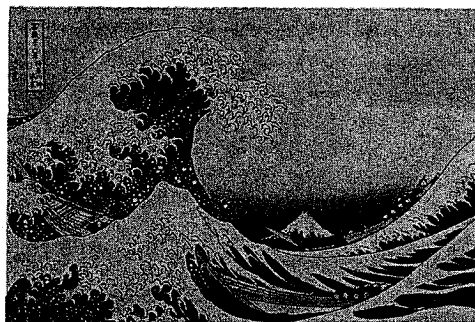
Four American consortiums have already been formed to take advantage of about 190,000 square miles of nodule-rich underwater land, specific claims to which have already been staked out by the United States. Because the US has not yet signed the treaty, these consortiums would have exclusive privilege to mine in those areas — without paying any rent for the value of those resources.

In a March 31st *New York Times* column, William Safire characterizes those who are in favor of the treaty as a "collectivist cartel" who are bent on "conflicting with

our national interests" and are betrayers "of the spirit of capitalism." Safire simultaneously raises the flag of nationalism and the specter of communism (saying that the UN Law of the Sea is based on a "Marx-ian collec-

tivist philosophy.") He dubiously drags in Locke to justify all this: "John Locke, on whose writings Thomas Jefferson drew, held that when a person mixed his labor with a material resource, the person acquired a property right to that resource." Safire ignores the fact that Locke went on to say that a person has the right to that resource only so long as there is land of comparable value freely available to the entire community. And Locke begins the statement (to be found in his "Essay on Civil Government") by saying that the earth and all its resources are "common to all mankind."

The apparatus by which the UN intends to collect what is essentially ground rent is to create a UN entity called the Enterprise, which (continued on back page)



Katsushika Hokusai, "The Great Wave of Kanagawa"

would collect half of the proceeds from any country's mining of the sea floor. These proceeds would then be distributed on behalf of the world's peoples. Meanwhile, the Clinton administration is seeking a compromise and wants to negotiate, according to the *New York Times* article, "a workable accord [that would] streamline the Sea Bed Authority, eliminate provisions forcing the transfer of mining technology to the Enterprise, create a grandfather clause for American claims ... and increase American influence in the governing process." The *Times* goes on to quote a State Department document that says the United States is seeking a clause that would allow it "and a few other industrialized nations acting in concert to block decisions inimical to our interest."

The underlying assumption in the arguments of those who oppose the treaty as it now stands is that the terms "free enterprise" and "American interests" are somehow interchangeable; the subtext of this argument is, of course, that "American interests" are really the interests of large land-owning corporations who have the means to collect, and therefore the access to, this sunken treasure.

In her pamphlet *Financing Planet Management; Sovereignty, World Order and the Earth Rights Imperative*, Alanna Hartzok has a chapter entitled "Common Heritage Funding: Local to Global," in which she presents a well thought out mapping of the collection of ground rent from the local community level to world level. "The ground rent of certain specific types of land resources can be collected by clearly delineated governing bodies from the local to the global level," Ms. Hartzok writes. "Thus, cities and counties would draw their funding from the ground rent of surface lands, regional authorities would collect the ground rent of oil and minerals, and global governing agencies would be funded by a percentage from these two levels as well as that of deep sea resources... and other transnational resources." If such a setup is not implemented, Ms. Hartzok says, "the concentrated control of earth in the hands of the few will continue unmitigated, thus advancing the conditions of social turmoil.... Unless a reformed or empowered United Nations or other world government is built firmly upon the principle of equal rights for all to our planet, then both the government and the planet will be controlled by a handful of vested interests."

In contrast to William Safire, whose rhetoric seems merely designed to reheat the cold war over this crucial issue, Alanna Hartzok presents a well-reasoned and coherent strategy based on the principle of common heritage, a principle by which, she says, we can "protect and fairly share our common body Mother Earth."