

## PART I

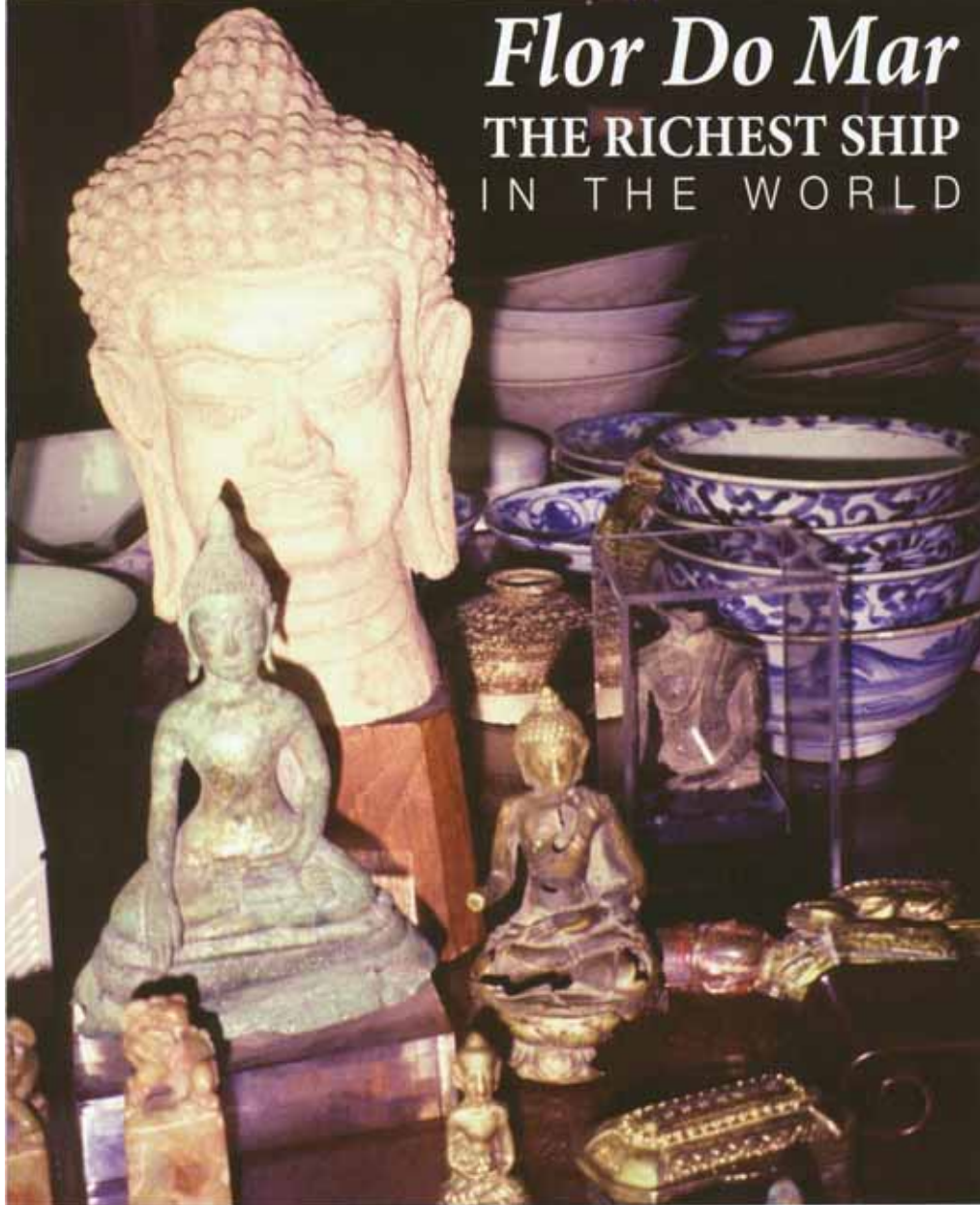
Text by Robert Marx

Photographs by Jenifer G. Marx

Ever since the introduction of SCUBA in the early 1950's, rarely a month has passed that the media hasn't covered a feature on shipwrecks – almost all of them described as the “Richest Ship Ever Lost” or the “Richest Ship Ever Found.” Well, they all can't fit that billing and in fact there is only one that can truly hold this distinction and that is the *FLOR DO MAR*.

## Flor Do Mar

### THE RICHEST SHIP IN THE WORLD



The diversity of the plundered booty is seen here with goodies from 12 different nations from Mozambique to Indonesia.

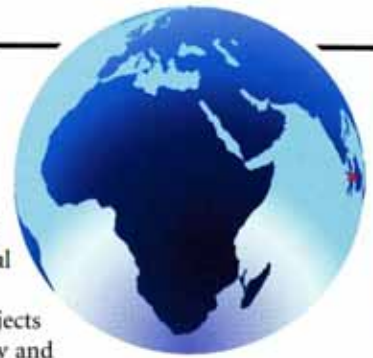
During the Age of Discovery, while the Spanish were exploring the New World and ranging as far into the Pacific as the Philippines, the Portuguese were extending dominion over remaining far-flung areas of the world which Pope Alexander VI had divided between the two Iberian kingdoms with the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494. The Portuguese, inspired by Marco Polo's tales of golden-roofed palaces and evidence of the marvelous treasures of the Orient, began to explore an ocean route to the East even earlier than Columbus. In 1488 Bartholomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope and a few years later Vasco da Gama reached India.

In 1503, almost five hundred years ago, Captain General Afonso de Albuquerque set sail from Lisbon with a fleet of twenty-two ships on a mission to secure the riches of the East Indies for Portugal. As his flagship, Albuquerque, scion of one of Portugal's most illustrious families, selected the *Flor do Mar*, a galleon of seven hundred tons. This famous ship served as his home for the next eight years as he conquered and plundered country after country. Starting his conquests at Mozambique on the southeast coast of Africa,

Albuquerque and his fleet systematically worked their way up the continent, prevailing over and pillaging every place they anchored. Then they preyed on settlements along the Red Sea, striking India and working their way along the coasts of Siam and Burma, which also fell to the Portuguese swords. The conquerors amassed a staggering amount of treasure - gold specie, porcelains, marvelously wrought gold and silver objects, jewelry, gems, ivory, spices, silks, and even beautiful girls. From several ports on the Red Sea, he seized over 200,000 priceless pearls, which were recovered by free divers – many capable of reaching depths in excess of 100 feet and holding their breath for over five minutes. These divers were doing this type of diving long before the time of Christ and were used throughout the known world in recovering treasures and other cargoes from sunken vessels.

In 1509 while Albuquerque was still in the Red Sea, he dispatched one of his ships, under the command of Diego Lopes de Sequeira, to Malacca to reconnoiter this renowned seaport. Malacca

was celebrated as the Emporium of the East, the richest city in the world. It was the Singapore of the period; the harbor filled with ships from as far away as Japan, China, Arabia, India and Africa. From elephants to Ming dynasty porcelains, every type of luxury and exotic merchandise was traded at Malacca. Gold was so abundant that traders exchanged gold coins by weight rather than by count. One of the Portuguese who came with Sequeira, Duarte Barbosa, wrote: "Many of the Malay nobles and merchants of Malacca were so rich that they possessed six thousand pounds of gold and upwards and precious stones were as plentiful as rain drops."



When Sequeira and his unruly followers arrived at Malacca, the Sultan of Malacca and his subjects initially offered them hospitality. The Portuguese were permitted to establish a trading factory and things went well for a short time. However, it soon became apparent to the Sultan that their visit was the prelude for a future invasion of his city. He had the Portuguese imprisoned and their ship seized. In February 1510, Ruy de Araujo, one of the Portuguese officers with Sequeira, managed to smuggle out a letter, which eventually reached Albuquerque, telling him of the ill treatment they had received. He sent a full description of Malacca and elaborated on its great wealth, urging Albuquerque to attack.

When Araujo's letter reached Albuquerque, he had just returned to India from looting Siam and Burma. He was incensed when he learned how his men had been treated in Malacca and rushed preparations to outfit the fleet.

On April 20, 1511, he set sail with eighteen ships, eight hundred Portuguese and two hundred Malabar auxiliaries, but contrary winds prevented him from reaching Malacca until the first of July. Sending an emissary ashore to meet with the Sultan, Albuquerque demanded the immediate release of his countrymen and restoration of their property as well as payment for the loss of their ship. The Sultan refused unless Albuquerque first signed a treaty of peace. The Portuguese Captain General refused this offer. A few days later, Albuquerque burned several merchant ships in the harbor and threatened to burn many more if his men were not released. He vowed all the Portuguese would immediately leave Malacca once Sequeira and his men were freed. The Sultan took him at his word and sent the Portuguese prisoners to Albuquerque - a move he was to bitterly regret.

The prospect of Portuguese attack seemed remote since there were over one hundred thousand inhabitants in Malacca, thirty thousand of them capable of bearing arms, whereas the Portuguese had a mere thousand fighting men. Albuquerque, heedless of such overwhelming odds and the protestations of most of his officers, decided to attack Malacca. On July twenty-fourth the Portuguese laid siege to the city. For twelve days a bloody battle raged on and thousands of Malays were slaughtered, even after they surrendered. The Sultan, his court, and most of the inhabitants fled into the hills, eventually taking refuge on the other side of the peninsula in Johor. Because of its strategic importance Albuquerque established Malacca as a Portuguese possession and it remained so until it was captured by the Dutch in 1641. During that period over 100 treasure-laden ships were lost during pirate attacks and storms. Today they remain lost forever as they were covered over by landfill and modern buildings.

Albuquerque gave his soldiers three days to plunder the deserted city. The spoils the Portuguese took from Malacca stagger the imagination; more than sixty tons of gold booty in the form of animals, birds, gilded furniture, the Sultan's throne, ingots and coinage of precious metals valued at 15,370,265 crowns came from the Sultan's palace alone. An equal amount of gold was robbed from the homes and



**Far Left:** Marx in red & yellow suit examining large water storage ceramic sherds on site of the *Flor do Mar*.

**Left:** During the search for the *Flor do Mar* eight older shipwrecks were found nearby, such as one yielding this multi-colored Chinese female figurine and dating around 500 AD.

**Above:** Portuguese wine bottle with coat-of-arms of of Gomes family of Lisbon, recovered on another wreck near the *Flor do Mar*.





**Inset:** Drawing of the *Flor do Mar* when she ran aground. The vessel in the foreground is the *Trinidad*, which were waiting to pick up survivors off the *Flor do Mar*.

Ivory elephant tusk recovered from a Portuguese East Indiaman lost off Mozambique.



A Portuguese drinking canteen with a relief of a soldier on it.



Diver using a metal detector on top of the reef where the *Flor do Mar* was lost.

warehouses of Malacca's rich merchants. The Portuguese filled more than two hundred large chests containing diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires and other precious stones, valued at over thirty million crowns. Another two and a half million crowns value was obtained from the covering clothes for elephants and horses embroidered with gold, silver, precious stones and pearls. The spoils also included two thousand bronze cannon and one thousand iron cannon - which had failed to protect the city. For himself, or so he claimed, Albuquerque only took some gilded furniture from the Sultan's palace and six bronze lion statues from a sultan's grave, which he wanted to eventually adorn his own tomb. Never has a conqueror amassed such fabulous booty.

Interestingly, Albuquerque's greed was responsible for the first minting of tin coins in the world. Because he was adamant that all the gold and silver treasures be sent to the Portuguese King in Lisbon, there were no precious metals for the Portuguese colonists in Malacca to mint for commerce.



Clockwise from top left: Another Portuguese galleon the *Sao Paulo* (St. Paul) was lost on the very same reef as the *Flor do Mar* 24 years later. This is how the *Flor do Mar* would have looked after running aground and before breaking up.

The port of Malacca (now in Malaysia) where the Portuguese captured and seized the bulk of the treasures put on the *Flor do Mar*.

One of thousands of Chinese porcelain dishes recovered from the *Flor do Mar*.

Gold and bronze statues and a Buddha head found on the *Flor do Mar*.

Small golden goodies found with detector.

the *Flor do Mar*, with four hundred souls on board and the greatest treasure ever carried on a single ship, struck on a reef off the northeastern tip of the island of Sumatra

By late December Albuquerque was satisfied that the fledgling colony was on its feet. So he had all of the booty loaded on four ships - the *Trinidad*, *Enxobregas*, an unnamed Chinese junk, and his *Flor do Mar*, which carried the lion's share of the treasure. The other ships were to stay and protect the city of Malacca and explore the surrounding region. Albuquerque embarked, promising those who stayed behind that he would send supplies and reinforcements.

Against the advice of his pilots, who predicted that it was too late in the year for a safe voyage back to Portugal, Albuquerque and his four heavily-laden vessels set sail. Two days after leaving Malacca, a fierce storm overtook his little fleet and the *Enxobregas* and Chinese junk went to the bottom without any trace of survivors. Several hours later, the *Flor do Mar*, with four hundred souls on board and the greatest treasure ever carried on a single ship, struck on a reef off the northeastern tip of the island of Sumatra, near the entrance to the Straits of Malacca. The *Trinidad*, which was sailing nearby, dropped anchor to assist but the waves were so high that all of her small boats were smashed to pieces. Albuquerque then had his men make a small raft and he and five of the ship's officers jumped aboard telling the others that they would soon be back with assistance from the *Trinidad*.

However, instead of returning to his stricken ship, Albuquerque ordered the captain of the *Trinidad* to cut the anchor cable and set sail for India. Several hours later, the *Flor do Mar*, broke up and sank in deep water. Only three men survived by swimming to shore. After reaching India, Albuquerque wrote to the King, "We have lost the richest treasure on earth that I have ever seen."

As soon as the storm abated, Sumatran divers and fishermen were on the site, salvaging what they could. However, most of the precious cargo sank in thirty-seven meters of water where the main section of the hull had settled after slipping off the reef. The pilot of the *Flor do Mar* was one of those who abandoned the sinking ship with Albuquerque. Although he later made a chart indicating

where the ship was lost, the shipwreck, lying in a remote spot on the globe, was soon forgotten.

In 1961 I located this treasure chart as well as numerous accounts of the disaster and became obsessed with finding this shipwreck, which lies in Indonesian waters. Year after year I applied in vain to the Indonesian Government for permission to find and salvage the *Flor do Mar*. Once again this famous ship came into the spotlight in June of 1988 when two would-be treasure hunters, Bruno de Vincentiis, an Italian, and Paul Anzel, an Australian, announced that they had discovered the *Flor do Mar* using sophisticated electronic scanning equipment from a United States NASA satellite. Claiming they had agreements with both the Malaysian and Indonesian Governments, they proceeded to raise substantial amounts of capital from investors in many nations. When it became known that neither government had concluded an agreement with them and in fact doubted the veracity of their discovery, the two men vanished. However, their declaration that the *Flor do Mar*'s treasure was valued at more than eighty million dollars (US), (erroneously reported as eighty billion dollars in one magazine), created a stir around the world and within weeks, more than sixty salvage companies were pounding on the doors of officials in both Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur.

Since the *Flor do Mar* lies in Indonesian waters, it is legally the property of that country. However, the Malaysian Government asserts that a substantial part of the treasure belongs to Malaysia since it was plundered from Malacca. A series of high level meetings took place with former President Suharto of Indonesia, Malacca's Chief Minister Datuk Seri Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik and Malaysia's Foreign



**Left to Right:**  
Life on board a crowded Portuguese explorer's vessel.

Original drawing of the *Flor do Mar* in 1501.

The conquistador Alfonso de Albuquerque who opened up the Orient to the Portuguese and other European nations by his conquests.

Minister Datuk Abu Hassan Omar - who represented the Prime Minister of Malaysia. In the end the Indonesian Government only agreed to return to Malaysia those treasures which had belonged to the Malaccan Malay Sultanate and for which there was documentary proof of ownership.

In January of 1989, the Indonesian Government awarded an exclusive permit to P.T. Jayatama Istikacipta, a subsidiary of the powerful Salim Group in Jakarta. They in turn formed a salvage company in Singapore, South East Asia Salvage, led by a businessman named Tjetty, who had previous salvage experience in the Riau Islands. He organized a team of commercial American and Australian divers from the petroleum industry and the expedition got underway in April of 1989. They had three vessels and the latest in detection equipment but, after spending a year and eight million dollars (U.S.), they still had not found Albuquerque's treasure ship.

Their lack of success wasn't surprising since they had inaccurate historical data and were searching an area over one hundred miles from where the chart showed the ship had been lost. At this time South East Asia Salvage hired me as an archaeological consultant and director of salvage. Tommy Suharto, son of the dictator of the country, was named the co-director of the project and we got along fabulously, as long as we did everything his way. My offer to show them the exact reef where the disaster took place met with some skepticism but they accepted. On the second day of our expedition in February 1990, we found the *Flor do Mar*, or at least the reef where she struck. Scattered ballast rock and a variety of artifacts proved this was the offending reef. However, it appeared that, in



Drawings of late 15th century Portuguese explorers vessel found inside a cave near Puket Island Thailand, the home of survivors from a Portuguese shipwreck.

In addition to the sixteenth century salvors, modern day divers had plundered the site. The reef was pocked with hundreds of holes made by explosives. Later I learned that two American divers working for an oil exploration firm had recovered four ornate bronze cannon from the reef as well as an undisclosed amount of gold artifacts. Fortunately, they left some for us. We recovered several gold figurines, hundreds of exquisite pieces of gold, precious stone-studded jewelry, dozens of the tin coins minted in Malacca, swords and other weapons, and hundreds of pieces of Ming dynasty porcelain and an array of other artifacts.

A thorough sonar and magnetometer survey revealed that the main section of the wreck lays in an area the size of five football fields and at a depth of thirty-seven meters. Unfortunately, the site is covered by fifteen to eighteen meters of concrete-like mud. The mud is so hard that none of the conventional methods of excavating a shipwreck has proven successful. In the course of removing some of the overburden with a clam-shell bucket, a number of artifacts including ceramic and glass bottles, resin, and wooden remains of the ship's hull were recovered. However, in order to protect the treasures and other artifacts from damage, the excavation was halted until a safer and more efficient method of salvage could be developed.

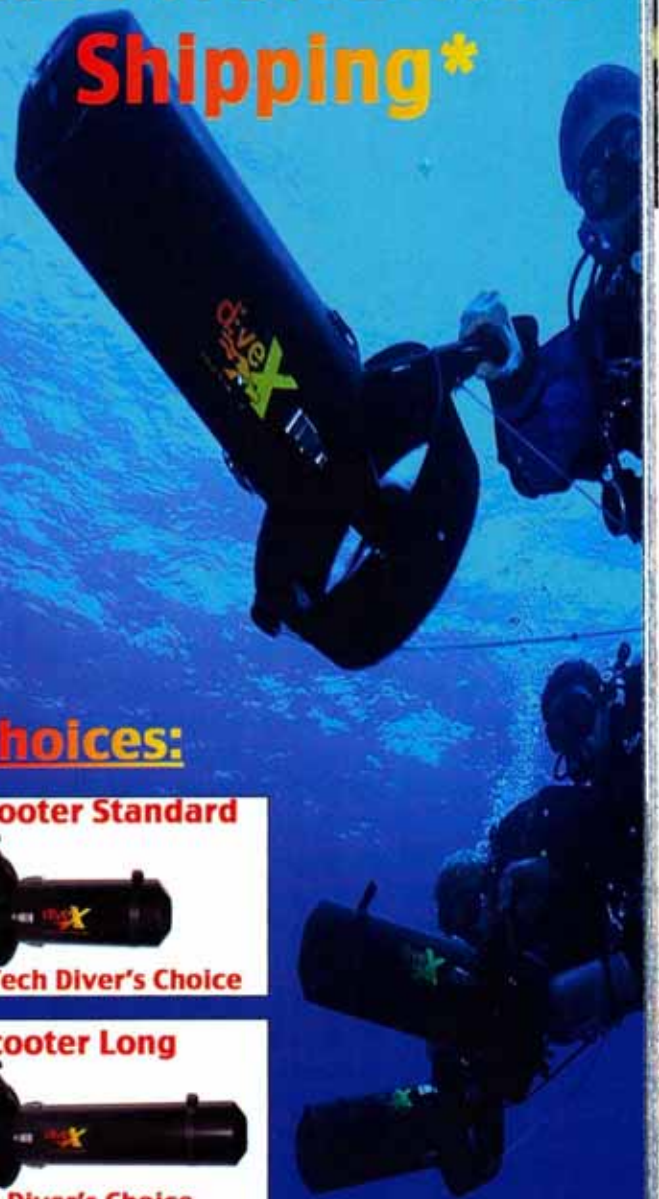
While I was busy searching for better excavation equipment, an international injunction was placed on the site by the World Court in The Hague, Holland, halting all further work from being done. Some of the 28 different nations plundered by Albuquerque and his men decided that they wanted a share of the shipwreck's booty and filed a lawsuit. Despite 18 frustrating years of litigation, nothing has been determined as to the continuation of the excavation and ownership of the objects recovered. As I always say, "TREASURE IS TROUBLE AND THE MORE THE TREASURE, THE MORE THE TROUBLE."

Little did I realize when I found the wreck that I would be fighting real pirates, commie guerrillas, government officials and in the end, instead of being a hero, I ended up being thrown out of the country. ☹

**About the Author:** Robert Marx, in his many years as an underwater archaeologist, has discovered and excavated ancient shipwrecks in over 60 sites worldwide. He has written more than 50 books, several hundred scientific reports and popular articles, and produced or shot over 50 documentary films.

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## Part II

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Photographs by Jenifer G. Marx

Ever since the introduction of SCUBA in the early 1950's, rarely a month has passed that the media hasn't covered a feature on shipwrecks – almost all of them described as the "Richest Ship Ever Lost" or the "Richest Ship Ever Found." Well, they all can't fit that billing and in fact there is only one that can truly hold this distinction and that is the *FLOR DO MAR*.

The province of Aceh at the northern tip of Indonesia's Sumatra Island was a sleepy backwater little known to the outside world until December 26, 2004. That day a cataclysmic Indian Ocean earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale spawned a tsunami, which devastated the capital city of Banda Aceh and much of the area's western region. Tsunamis wreaked havoc as far away as Somalia and Thailand, but Aceh lay closest to the epicenter and some 170,000 people were killed and 500,000 made homeless. With the exception of a newly-constructed mosque, not a single building was left standing in the once prosperous city. The warehouse I had used for 15 years and its contents: boats, dive and excavation equipment and a large number of artifacts from nearby wrecks disappeared without a trace.

Not even the tsunamis triggered by the 1883 eruption of the Krakatoa Volcano in the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra wreaked such havoc on the city. Every one of the port's hundreds of boats was crushed to pieces or swept away; several were found off the Philippines, one with a live dog in it.

The majority of these vessels were not your everyday fishing boats but, rather, craft engaged in modern-day piracy. Jamaica's Port Royal may be better known for piracy but its heyday lasted less than two hundred years (see *Wreck Diving Magazine* issues 13 and 14). Aceh, where Islam got its foothold in Southeast Asia, has been a pirate stronghold for more than 2,500 years. In fact more acts of piracy have originated in Aceh than anywhere else. In the early seventeenth century the powerful Sultanate of Aceh was renowned for its wealth and sophisticated culture. The region declined but remained a center of conservative Islam and of piracy. Despite being in the middle of some of the best fishing grounds in the area, surrounded by rich farmland and nearby mountains full of gold and other important mineral mines, Aceh's main source of income was derived from piracy, until Mobil Oil began producing liquid gas in 1973 at nearby Lhokseumawe.

Strategically situated where the important Straits of Malacca enters the Indian Ocean, this maritime crossroad was and still is a "cash cow" for any enterprising cutthroat after booty. In 1984 over 500 ships, not fishing boats or yachts, were attacked and plundered within a 100-mile radius of nearby Singapore; over 95% of them were prey of Acehese pirates. Some of these pirates ranged as far as the southern Philippines to attack small towns. This eventually led Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia to form a joint maritime force of ships, planes and helicopters to fight this scourge on the high seas. But it is like shoveling sand against the tide. The pirates always are warned as to the whereabouts of their pursuers and continue their depredations with impunity.

Within days of the 2004 disaster, international aid began pouring into Aceh. The United States

