

# **THE WASHINGTON POST COMPANY**

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Secrecy and the Press

Remarks by

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Good afternoon. I'm delighted that so many of you have come to hear about secrecy and the press. And by that, I don't suppose you mean Ben Bradlee's retirement date or the subject of Bob Woodward's next book! I confess I haven't been able to learn the answer to either question.

Rather, I'm here to discuss serious issues of fundamental concern to you -- and to the American people. I'd like to introduce them by recalling a tragic episode in the country's recent history.

You no doubt remember that in April 1983, 63 people were killed in a bomb attack on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, including the CIA station chief, his deputy and other key CIA personnel.

At the time, there were coded communications between Syria, where the terrorist operation was being run, and Iran, which was supporting it.

One television network and a newspaper columnist reported that the U.S. government had intercepted the communications traffic. Shortly thereafter the traffic ceased. This undermined U.S. efforts to capture the terrorist leaders and eliminated a source of information about future attacks.

Six months later, apparently the same terrorists struck again, this time at the Marine barracks in Beirut; 241 servicemen were killed. No one is absolutely sure the news reports caused the traffic blackout. Some suspect they did. Whatever the answer, the detailed news reports didn't help.

This tragic episode raises, in an extreme way, the basic questions that arise when freedom of the press and official secrecy intersect. How can national security be preserved -- and national interests advanced -- when the press decides what to print, even about the most sensitive government secrets? Why is the press insistent about preserving this right, when mistakes can be made that potentially harm national security?

Today I'd like to share our viewpoint on these questions, which I realize are complex and difficult -- and subject to intense debate. I'd like to tell you how we go about deciding what, when and how much to publish -- and why. I'll touch on both our decision-making process and the criteria we use when making judgments about what and what not to print.

Let me begin by saying that I have the greatest admiration and respect for the dedication and courage with which you do your work, under difficult, dangerous and even life-threatening circumstances.

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Moreover -- and I hope this does not surprise you -- I firmly believe the government has a right, and an obligation, to keep certain information secret.

It's an inescapable irony of democratic government that official secrecy is necessary to preserve liberty. We live in a dirty and dangerous world. There are some things the general public does not need to know and shouldn't. The government must have a classification system and should discipline employees who violate security regulations.

At the same time, deciding what and what not to print is the nature of journalism, underlying every subject about which we write. Every day, we have to make judgments about what is or is not accurate, what is or is not fair, what is or is not complete, what is or is not good journalism on stories ranging from a drug-related homicide to a politician's personal life.

National security issues are part of this decision-making process, but in a heightened, more sensitive, more critical way. It begins when we obtain information that might affect the country's security.

Let me state emphatically: the press is not in the business of stealing information. And rarely, if ever, do people appear in the newsroom armed with briefcases full of classified documents.

Some of the information we print that causes trouble is there for the taking in public documents. One of the more prominent examples occurred in 1977. A Washington Post reporter, Walter Pincus, was covering water projects, which fell under the purview of a certain House Appropriations Subcommittee. It happened that this same subcommittee also was responsible for nuclear weapons.

One day while Pincus was waiting for a subcommittee meeting to start, he was reading through records of previous hearings. Buried in the middle of an enormous document was a hearing on the building of nuclear weapons. Much of it was classified, but one sentence in particular was not. It said that the United States was going to begin production of "enhanced radiation warheads" for the Lance missile. That is how The Post discovered the neutron bomb story.

The story was easily, indeed eagerly, confirmed by the Pentagon, Hill sources and the Lawrence Livermore Laboratories, all of whom were proud of this technological achievement. However, the story caused an uproar and had great consequences, which some of you will remember.

Careful screening of public documents is not the only obligation of good reporters, although it is an important and frequently overlooked one. Good reporters also have a sense of what information means and how to piece it together. And they know and can find people and -- this is critical -- are contacted by people who want to reveal information to the press.

We do ask ourselves about the motives of our sources. They vary. Some sources are just trying to win an argument they lost inside, get an enemy in trouble, show off or ingratiate themselves with reporters. Others are conscientious people who want to influence the way a particular program or project is being formulated, positioned or carried out. They believe that by telling journalists carefully selected information, a higher purpose can be served.

The important point here is that someone inside or outside the government, with legitimate access to the information, has chosen to give it to the press to help inform the public debate.

I believe the reluctance our sources might feel to take the frequently risky step of leaking information is diminished by the fact that too much material is classified. Almost 7,000 government officials in 29 agencies have the authority to classify information. In 1987 alone, the government generated nearly 12 million secret documents. When material that clearly is not worthy of being withheld from the public is classified, it devalues the case for secrecy about truly sensitive data.

Moreover, the government itself regularly uses declassification as a tool to advance its own policy interests. The government is the biggest leaker of all -- from background briefing sessions to anonymous sources, including the president himself on occasion. When the government routinely declassifies information to achieve policy goals, it's not surprising that news sources consider themselves more savvy than sinful.

Once the press acquires classified information, we need to determine its accuracy, its true meaning and its possible impact on national security. These are hard questions, but we do our best to answer them before we decide whether, when and in what form we should make the information known to the public.

Many people -- including, I suspect, many of you here -- believe the government should make this decision, not the press. If the government believes publishing something would endanger national security, the argument goes, the press should fall in line. This is the law in some democracies, like Great Britain.

Why don't the American media agree with this line of reasoning? Why do we listen to government explanations in general -- and claims of national security in particular -- with a great deal of skepticism? There are two reasons.

First, our founding fathers wanted the press to be an aggressive and unfettered critic of government activity. That is the reason for the First Amendment.

Meg Greenfield, editor of The Post's editorial pages, explained it this way:

"Our cynicism is easy to account for. We would be crazy to approach public life in any other way. The political history of our time has been, it seems to me, a chain of surprises and inversion of accepted truth."



Second, the government has been too quick to use "national security" as an excuse to keep secrets when, in fact, it only wants to protect itself from embarrassment, make its job easier, stifle debate, or carry out a policy or program that could not win Congressional or public support.

In 1971, the government, citing national security concerns, went to court to keep the Pentagon Papers secret. In fact only a few paragraphs in 47 volumes were truly sensitive, and they were never considered for publication.

Since then, there have been many cases in which the government has wielded national security to avoid explaining or justifying its actions to the American people or to carry out programs that could not survive public scrutiny -- and in which, as it turned out, the classification was not warranted but was being used to cover an embarrassing situation.

Most recently, Oliver North told a number of journalists that his covert operations were authorized and legitimate -- and then pledged the reporters to secrecy in the interests of national security. The real story turned out to be quite different, and North is under indictment for what he did.

I can't say journalism ended up looking very good in the Iran-contra affair, either. We failed to live up to our responsibilities, before the story broke in a Lebanese magazine.

So experience makes it clear that it's unwise to take official explanations at face value. Our professional obligation is to go beyond private assurances and, to the best of our abilities, weigh the evidence independently.

Several of our reporters and editors have knowledge and experience that come from dealing with intelligence matters for many years.

We also consult with experts outside the government, or at least not directly involved in the matter at hand. They can help piece together seemingly unrelated information.

However, before publication, The Post's policy is always to go to the government officials responsible for the particular issue for their official views and comments. We do this to help determine accuracy and also to know how they regard the information we have, what their concerns might be about the possible impact of our information on national security.

Some officials cooperate and others don't. Some, even when they are unhappy that we are working on a story, are willing to help us do our jobs as journalists and believe they can help make the story less risky.

For example, in The Post's Outlook section two weeks ago, a story by two free-lance journalists appeared about U.S. covert aid to rebels in Cambodia. The story was based on documents and other information obtained by the writers. We talked to government officials about the contents, to hear if they were concerned that any details might be genuinely harmful to national security.

Following these discussions, we concluded that publishing certain verbatim quotes could, in fact, help someone trying to break our codes. So we eliminated those direct quotes. We also left out other information, because the government official made a good case that disclosure would be harmful.

The Post's publisher, Don Graham, is informed when stories with national security implications are in the works, and Don participates in the decision-making process, as do I on occasion.

The ultimate responsibility for what is printed lies with the newspaper's owners. But editors decide what and what not to publish. Over the years, I have never told Ben Bradlee to put something in, or take something out of the paper. But I have expressed my views and concerns. I have wanted to make sure that proper, professional journalistic procedures are followed.

Instead of rushing to print everything we discover, an opposite tendency more often is at work: the tendency to proceed cautiously, deliberately and, when there is substantial doubt about the potential impact of our information, to delay publishing or not publish at all.

We want to do all we can to ensure that the information we have meets three standards, or criteria, before it is printed.

First, the press wants to publish nothing that would endanger human life.

For example, we learned in 1984 that William Buckley, who had been taken hostage in Beirut, was in fact the CIA station chief. We prepared a story about his identity, but Director Casey told us that publication could get Buckley killed. We knew that many people were aware of Buckley's true job, but we were told that the terrorists holding him may not have known. Therefore, we held the story for many months.

Then we heard that Buckley was, in fact, dead. Again we planned to run our story, but Director Casey said no one was absolutely sure that Buckley had died. This time, we held the story for many more months until Mr. Buckley's tragic death had been confirmed.

A second criterion is that we want to publish no national security secrets whose possession by the Soviet Union, or a third party, could damage American interests.

This includes, most obviously, technical data about our arms and defense systems, facts about troop movements or various intelligence operations and procedures.

I realize we may have made mistakes in this regard over the years. However, the reasons why some cases cause an uproar are harder to understand. I would include, in this category, the disclosure, in 1984, of the purpose of the first military satellite to be sent up in the space shuttle.

The Pentagon attempted to forbid those news organizations that attended a technical briefing on the launch to announce the function of the satellite. The official said that anyone who wrote or even guessed its purpose would be investigated for violating security.

This aroused the curiosity of our editors, who had not attended the briefing. In a rather offhand way, our national editor asked Walter Pincus what kind of satellite it was.

Pincus said he would make a few calls. In fact, he made two -- one to someone in the government and one to an outside expert. They both told him what kind of satellite was involved -- primarily because the government, more than a year before, had announced it was going to be an electronic listening device. This had been reported in Aviation Week.

Early on the day of The Post's story, before he had read it, Secretary of Defense Weinberger was asked at a CNN interview if The Post's story could give aid and comfort to the enemy. He said that it could. In fact, The Post reported no classified information that was not already available to the Russians, or any other readers of the magazine.

That brings me to a third criterion: keeping our readers informed.

We don't publish secrets just to publish secrets. However, when we discover bungling, incompetence, controversial or illegitimate activity, we believe the public has a right to know about it. The challenge -- and I admit it is a difficult one -- lies in knowing where to draw the line -- publishing enough to convey the import of what is taking place, without damaging the national security.

These were the issues we addressed in the Ivy Bells, or Pelton, spy case which began in 1985. This case has given birth to two opposing myths: one is that we published everything we knew and helped the Soviets. The other is that Director Casey talked us out of publishing anything.

After we had taken our information to a series of government officials, I personally received a telephone call from President Reagan, who told me that publication of the story would endanger national security.

I responded that I would tell the editors of his concern and my own, but that both he and I would be better off if the decision were made by the Executive Editor, Ben Bradlee, as it finally was, taking into consideration the reasons for concern.

We wound up publishing only that information which we thought necessary to convey to readers how serious the breach of security actually was.

And we raised what we thought were legitimate questions about how well the government was managing security issues: whether too many people have security clearances, whether they are cleared properly, whether their financial and psychological background is sufficiently examined, whether the government keeps track of them adequately. These issues are still the subject of a national debate.



We withheld from those stories the technical details about the electronic surveillance methods we knew, through our sources, that Pelton had given the Soviets, but which we did not know if they understood completely or if some other country might find useful. I might add that a lot more information was withheld than was eventually divulged by the government itself during Pelton's trial.

A final First-Amendment obligation of the press, as I see it, is to publish information that, without endangering legitimate security interests, bears on issues of public policy or public debate.

This is why, for example, we reported in 1982 that the Reagan Administration had secretly approved a 19 million dollar CIA plan to train the contras to wage a covert war against Nicaragua.

Again we left out the operational details but tried to inform the public of a major foreign policy decision. This country's positions and policies on Central America are among the most important and contentious we face. We believe the American people should know, if possible, what the government is doing or planning to do in that critical region.

In the final analysis, this is what the press is trying to do: to give people information so they can make their own judgments about critical issues -- and so that government action can and does reflect the desires of the people.

Once covert operations that involve legitimate public issues are revealed, one of two things almost inevitably occurs. Either there is public disapproval of the policy and it eventually ceases. This is what happened to the secret Contra funding. Or there is public support for the policy and it continues. This was the case, for example, when we reported covert aid to the Mujaheddin in Afghanistan. Either way, the people, through Congress, have a voice in determining the policy.

In closing, I believe democracy flourishes when the government can take legitimate steps to keep its secrets, and when the press can decide whether to print what it knows.

When national security issues are at stake, this is a humbling responsibility. Despite our best efforts, we never fulfill it as well as we would like. We do make mistakes, which we deeply regret. But the alternative casts a dark and dangerous shadow.

The record of history shows that a government that operates in secrecy, hidden from scrutiny, shielded from examination, is neither accountable nor ultimately faithful to the people it exists to serve.

Jefferson said: "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take control from them, but to inform their discretion."

Secrecy has its place. But I hope you agree it should not be at the expense of a vigorous, free and independent press.