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Freedom of the Press And National Security

PRESIDENT KENNEDY has broached one of the most perplexing problems arising from the Cold War in his appeal to the press for more "self restraint" in dealing with news disclosures which he feels have been damaging to national security.

What Mr. Kennedy has done is to obliquely turn attention to one large phase of a great issue of the times: How a free society can combat a totalitarian society without becoming totalitarian itself. The free society, in its inherent reliance upon a free press, yields to the totalitarian foe some advantage in the competition for military intelligence. Yet if the press should become controlled by the government then the totalitarian method would have been adopted in a critical area of freedom.

Mr. Kennedy recognized this principle fully in the admonition which he delivered this week to the American Newspaper Publishers Association. He ruled out, at the outset, "any new forms of censorship or any new types of security classification." Government censorship is indeed out of the question and so it is that Mr. Kennedy is hanging his thesis on self-discipline. In this light, he has raised a fair question: whether or not all his conclusions are warranted.

THE PRESIDENT, nevertheless, has stated his case in what we consider exaggerated terms and in too broad an area. He asserted that the size, strength, location and nature of our armed forces and weapons, along with plans and strategy, have been disclosed "to a degree sufficient to satisfy any foreign power." If such a grave assessment were in fact accurate, then Mr. Kennedy might best begin by putting some new enforcement behind the rules against loose talk in the armed forces. He might also direct his admonitions at the outset to ranking, and sometimes indiscreet, members of Congress, who have privileged access to information.

Mr. Kennedy's message might have been worth more if it had been directed specifically to the extraordinary situation attending the Cuban fiasco, which presumably prompted him to call upon the publishers for restraint. The ill-fated Cuban invasion was handicapped, at least in some degree, by the running news stories about the invasion preparations which were going on in this country. This publicity was a secondary factor, especially compared with the critical failure of Central Intelligence to assess the strength of Castro and the readiness of the Cuban people to revolt. Even so, the insurgents' cause was hardly helped by detailed news stories about the preparations.

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THE QUESTION now before the press is how to handle the news about new preparations if a second (and larger) invasion is planned. What to do about the issue, however, is not easily defined.

There is no easy way to an effective self-discipline. For example, Florida newspapers had by agreement withheld a great deal of what they knew about the Cuban invasion preparations until, one morning, a detailed story was broken by a newspaper in the Northeast.

In any case the newspapers and other media should keep under close, individual examination their policies in areas affecting national security. Even though the president's conclusions reach too far, the press would do better to mind its responsibilities than to occupy itself inordinately with fiery defenses against the president's criticism. Mr. Kennedy has proposed no restraints on press freedom, and in this light the press should give dispassionate attention to what he has to say.