

ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT
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APO1|SPACE SHUTTLE|JENNINGS: Good evening. It is not easy in this day and age, in an open society, to keep a secret. Governments like to keep their military and intelligence operations secret and there is often tension on the subject between the government and a free press. The other day, the Pentagon held a news conference to say that a forthcoming mission of the space shuttle would be classified. And so, when details of the mission began to show up in the American press, there was almost bound to be a fight. Here's ABC's John McWethy.

MCWETHY: The secret of what the shuttle will be turning into space next month is no longer a secret. This morning, the Washington Post, followed immediately by the Associated Press, ran stories describing the classified payload of the shuttle as a new spy satellite. According to those stories, the satellite would be used to monitor Soviet missile tests, to intercept radio, telephone and satellite transmissions from the Soviet Union, so-called signal intelligence or sigint. The U.S. has used similar satellites for years. The new one, however, is more powerful and, therefore, bigger, too big to be carried into space atop an expendable rocket. Only the shuttle's cargo bay can do the job. The stories this morning touched off a bitter response from Defense Secretary Weinberger, who had personally headed a quiet telephone campaign over the last week to get various news organizations not to go with the story. CASPAR WEINBERGER (Secretary of Defense): I can confirm only that it's the height of journalistic irresponsibility to violate requests that are made. The Washington Post felt that they simply had to run the story, which a great many people had. They ran it with the typical, usual inaccuracies.

MCWETHY: The Washington Post issued a statement this afternoon claiming that it had revealed no secrets, that virtually every fact mentioned in its story is a matter of public record and that Weinberger's reaction is 'not justified.' The battle over keeping military flights of the space shuttle a secret boiled into public earlier this week with a tough Air Force statement.

BRIG. GEN. RICHARD ABEL (United States Air Force public affairs director): Publication or broadcast of such information, speculative or not, would harm our national security.

MCWETHY: But an expert on the U.S. intelligence community says the Air Force overstates its case. JAMES BAMFORD

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(author): Russians aren't getting their information on satellite systems from the press. The Russians have a far better source, and that's penetration of the U.S. intelligence community.

MCWETHY: So when does the media respond to pleas not to run a story? GEROGE WATSON (ABC News vice president): When the government calls and says information that we have may jeopardize national security, we listen very attentively. And if we are persuaded that that, in fact, is the case, then we may, and on occasion have, withheld information.

MCWETHY: That is exactly what the Associated Press did. It held the story until the Washington Post ran its version first. LOUIS BACCARDI (executive vice president, Associated Press): Time will tell whether the request made of us was legitimate. If it turns out not to have been, there is the cry wolf, cry of wolf problem, which is a very serious one.

MCWETHY: And the issue of credibility is especially important in this case, because a number of news organizations claim they have much more information about the shuttle, classified information they have not yet chosen to use. John McWethy, ABC News, the State Department.

APO2|SPACE SHUTTLE|JENNINGS: Joining us tonight from Washington is ABC's |2|George Will. George, you heard the arguments made in those pieces. Where do you stand?

WILL: Let's be clear, Peter, about what the Post did and did not do. The Washington Post did not accept the Pentagon's guidelines about what should be withheld. It did write its own guidelines and hold back information, the publication of which would, in the Post's judgment, not be in the national interest. Therefore, the Post's position is not the journalistic extremism we heard in the 1970s. Then, after Vietnam and Watergate, a lot of journalists said the government is an evil adversary, the news should be published and be damned, that there is an absolute public right to know everything and journalists have a duty not to consider the consequences of what they're doing.

JENNINGS: What do you think has led to this change in attitude?

WILL: Well, I think it's just a general reasonableness has come over the press, and I don't think the Post is every guilty, frankly, of that extreme position. The public has a right to government that can keep secrets that are in the national interest. Now, it is arguable

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that the Post should have shown more deference to the government, that it drew the line in the wrong place. It is also arguable that the dynamic of competition that you can now see developing with the AP story might lead to excessive disclosures. However, the Post has accepted the premise, as have other news organizations in this episode, that we journalists are citizens also. Indeed, that we are citizens first.

JENNINGS: George, in a very quick phrase, somebody suggested to me today the press is anti-American. What do you think of that?

WILL: I don't think that's so. I think the press sometimes likes the rule, 'I publish and be damned.' It spares it the torture of thinking. But journalists do, indeed, have to think as they work.

JENNINGS: George, thank you very much for joining us.