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Paving the Way for Censorship

President Reagan seems relentlessly determined to control the flow of information to the American people. There is a word for this, and it isn't the word he chooses to use. He speaks of "security"; the correct word is "censorship."

The president has vowed to use "all legal methods" to bottle up the information that his administration decides the public should not have.

The restrictions he contemplates would impose tighter press control than even Richard Nixon dreamed about. Already, Reagan has issued a directive threatening "appropriate disciplinary measures" against any government employee who discusses classified matters with newsmen without the advance approval of an unspecified "senior official."

This missive will be followed by an executive order, which will have the force of law. I reported several weeks ago on the first draft of the proposed order. It would give the CIA something it has always considered its due: virtually total immunity from public scrutiny. It would also put "SECRET" stamps in the hands of a whole new horde of federal bureaucrats.

That first draft has now been revised. But my associate John Dillon has seen a copy of the latest draft. If anything, it's even worse than the original proposal. The new draft, which is being circulated under the signature of presidential counselor Edwin Meese, retains the CIA's blanket immunity from public disclosure and toughens up the language regarding classification.

For example, the original wording allowed defense material "vital to national security" to be classified and thus kept from the public. The new version allows the classification of material "relating to national security."

Thus a corrupt official could cover up, say, the purchase of paper clips for the Army from his brother-in-law's firm by identifying the transaction as "relating to national security."

While most bureaucrats probably welcome the protection from potential embarrassment that the new, much looser classification rules will give them, there are some who think the new regulations don't go far enough. They'd like to keep the public completely in the dark about their activities.

Internal Pentagon memos show how eager the generals and admirals are to take advantage of the secrecy that the Reagan administration advocates. They want a whole new category of "security" classification to cover everything that doesn't qualify under the rules for "CONFIDENTIAL," "SECRET" or "TOP SECRET."

The new catch-all classification would be "RESTRICTED," a stamp that has actually been around for years as an informal method of designating material that really isn't sensitive but is considered less essential for public edification than, say, a press release.

One Pentagon memo argues that the proposed classification is needed for "the effective safeguarding of a range of information that is not now generally classifiable." It goes on to describe this as information "the disclosure of which reasonably could be expected to cause the loss to the United States of a technological, diplomatic or military advantage..."

That could include everything from a report on recruiting difficulties to an off-the-cuff remark by a general at a Pentagon reception.

If Reagan wants to keep secrets from the Russians, he should speak to the FBI, not impose censorship upon the press. The truth is, of course, that he hopes to use the security issue to regulate the news. What he wants the public to know, he will communicate directly through television talks or other tightly controlled mechanisms. He has the open face and amiable manner that will help him to get away with managing the news. But inevitably, as he tightens the nozzle on the news, the official pipelines will spring multiple leaks.