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Why I Tell Secrets

by Jack Anderson

As a confessed muckraker, I hold no security clearance. Most government officials, if possible, avoid me. The mere mention of my name has caused them to shut their doors and lock their files. Yet I am privy to some of the most sensitive information in their security vaults. I have regular access to documents so secret that the classification stamps are themselves classified.

PARADE has asked me why I seek out the secrets of government. There are, I believe, sufficient reasons. But first a word of orientation.

One of the seemingly irreversible currents I have observed during 32 years of covering Washington politics is the hankering of our leaders to transform themselves from servants into sovereigns, to replace Abraham Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people and for the people" with a government of privilege, majesty and omnipotence.

There is still an occasional tribune who lives simply in some Washington hostel and goes about his business with a minimum of pomp, presumption and freeloading. But the common practice has been to pursue aggrandizement and usurpation, often with mock humility.

Permeating it all is the aura of pseudo-divinity with which government these days surrounds itself—its denial, whenever it can get away with it, of the right of the citizen to know or of the press to publish; its hostility toward any attempt to hold it to account or question its motives.

At the center is the President with his battalions of courtiers, programmatic lying to the public, seduction of the press. Around the President are grouped the bureaucratic princes, ever more impervious to public control. And ensconced on Capitol Hill are the Congressional barons, continually building their private fiefdoms while surrendering the legitimate powers of the people to the Executive Branch.

Our modern Hohenzollerns reveal themselves most characteristically when a reporter charges the government with deceit or dishonesty, or presumes to give the public news that does not come from palace sources. Then our elected leaders, instead of rushing to correct the abuses, are concerned more with chastening the reporter and exposing the identity of the varlets who squealed.

Most of the information that is funneled into the White House is protectively classified. This leaves the President free to manipulate the news, to release selectively those facts that make him look good. Through his press spokesmen, he controls most of the news that emanates from the White House. Even the leaks are usually orchestrated by his news managers.

I have a duty to report what the government is doing, which is not always what the authorized spokesmen say it is doing. They will say only what the President wants them to say. I have learned to rely, therefore, on unauthorized sources. They are the professional civil servants whom the public never sees. They know what the intelligence reports really show and what the Administration's policies really are. Some are willing to tell the truth, at great risk to themselves, because they believe their first loyalty should be to the citizens who pay them. The information these sources possess—and the documents, mostly classified, they produce to back it up—is often the opposite of the kind of news that is officially leaked or passed out at press conferences or printed in press releases.

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The people in power do not relish having their cozy relationships exposed, their blunders, waste and wrongdoing brought to light. But given our democratic traditions, they cannot properly censor the news—so they simply classify it, using the cloak of official secrecy to cover up their embarrassments.

Yet the President does not hesitate to release classified information if it will win him support. Few military developments were more secret, for example, than the "invisible plane" which can elude enemy radar by absorbing its rays. Technicians had to agree to let the government tap their telephones before they were allowed to work on the project. But President Carter, under fire for letting our military defenses lag, needed a dramatic headline to persuade voters that he had not neglected national security. He got the headline, thanks to some suspiciously opportune leaks about the new technology.

Undesirable leaks are abhorred by the Administration. To stop them, Jimmy Carter required two dozen of his top administrators to sign unprecedented, gratuitous affidavits. But if the leaks benefit the Administration, they are embraced by the abhorers. In the matter of the ghostly flying machine, for example, Defense Secretary Harold Brown not only confirmed the leaks but added triumphant details.

Admittedly, reporters are not security experts, and the publication of military secrets is always a thorny question. What qualifies a lowly reporter to judge whether a bold military venture is bound to end in catastrophe and whether to publish the plan before it becomes a *fait accompli*? Certainly I am not competent to outguess the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But I am in close touch with military experts whom the Joint Chiefs themselves consult. At the risk of appearing immodest, let me briefly review my record:

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson decided to draw a line in Vietnam. But he needed an incident to build national solidarity. The opportunity came when Communist patrol boats, looking for ships that raided the North Vietnamese coast, made a run against American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. No one was hurt; no damage was done. A second dark-of-night "attack" probably never even occurred but was the result of faulty radar. With these dubious ingredients, Johnson created a phony incident and stepped firmly onto one of history's great banana peels.

I reported, citing secret naval documents, that the incident had been contrived. The Senate, nevertheless, gave President Johnson the resolution he sought as a license to expand America's role in a stalemated war from which there was no satisfactory exit.

I tried, with a journalist's presumption, to influence the Vietnam decisions by hoisting a number of alarms based on classified information. But the war turned into a debacle so gloom-laden as to spoil the I-told-you-sos.

During the Richard Nixon regime, I continued to report war news that the President wanted to suppress. I reported in March 1971 that, despite White House assurances that the war was being wound down, the Pentagon had prepared detailed plans for bombing North Vietnam and mining Haiphong harbor. The story did not stop the final frenzy of warfare before the painful American withdrawal.

The following December, I reported that Richard Nixon was secretly supporting Pakistan in the India-Pakistan conflict and that he had ordered a carrier task force under wartime conditions into the battle zone. Top Soviet officials assured Indian leaders that any Chinese intervention would be offset by a Russian attack on China and that any moves by the American task force would be opposed by the Soviet fleet.

It seemed to me that Russia, China and the United States were maneuvering dangerously near the edge of world war. Yet President Nixon never told Congress of the dangers, instead putting out the word that America was keeping hands off. He personally advised the top leaders of the Senate and the House that his only interest was to bring peace. "We are neutral," he said to them. "We are not taking sides." This, I charged, was a lie. My stories hopefully helped to persuade Nixon to back away from this crisis.

The stakes are enormously higher in the Persian Gulf, where the oil price explosion has brought tensions to a boil. Secret documents reveal that the late Shah of Iran was "the dominant force" behind the ruinous price increases. Washington had the leverage to pressure the Shah to join Saudi Arabia in its repeated offers to stop the price leap, yet this was opposed by then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who hoped the oil revenue would finance the Shah's arms buildup.

When I broke this story in 1976, an anguished Kissinger requested the right to dispute my evidence. So I showed his aide, William Hyland, a folder full of top-secret documents backing up the allegations. Hyland was aghast: "Someone must have given you the whole computer print-out on this," he said. It was the last I heard from Kissinger on the subject.

With Jimmy Carter in the White House, trying to keep his equilibrium in the Iranian hostage crisis, I reported once again that the President was preparing for military action and that the Soviets had 23 divisions just across Iran's border ready to respond. The White House issued angry denials, though many of the details were later confirmed. My sources believe passionately that the United States doesn't have the military power to force a showdown in the Persian Gulf today, that now is a time to practice delicate diplomacy.

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The way an investigative reporter is compelled to operate, of course, is an imperfect system of news-gathering. Sometimes the sources do not have all the details. Sometimes the jigsaw pieces of information do not form a complete picture and the missing pieces are buried too deeply. Investigative reporters must work without the power of subpoena. They lack the money and manpower that the government can marshal to counter their efforts.

They must also work harder, dig deeper and verify their facts more carefully than reporters who follow the official line. Preposterous lies can be told to make the powerful look good; grievous blunders can be committed by officials in the name of the government; the public can be cheated by men sworn to uphold the public trust. But let an investigative reporter make a mistake, and there are howls of outrage.

From time to time, I have found myself the object of certain discomfiting attentions. My house has been under surveillance by men with binoculars sitting in parked cars. The CIA has dispatched radio cars to tail people from my office. A CIA camera crew has taken photographs of visitors at my door; an electronics crew has eavesdropped on my conversations; the FBI has seized records of my telephone calls; tax agents have combed through my financial records; the Pentagon has conducted one investigation of me after another.

Persons within the government suspected of having contact with me have been subjected to phone taps, lie detector tests and other indignities. In their zeal to discover my sources, federal agencies have not balked at violating U.S. law.

We in America have evolved an entire institution to undertake a mission that in a tyranny falls to the solitary genius and hero—to give the people an alternative to the official version of things, a measure by which to judge the efficacy of rulers and whether the truth is in them.

Long ago, the role of the village editor and dissenting pamphleteer—as monitor, critic and rival of the politician—was a fundamental part of the American system. It was of this role that Thomas Jefferson spoke when he declared that if he had to choose between a government without newspapers and newspapers without a government, he would take his morning paper.

Because our country was formed by a scattering of peoples with no common denominator of religion, geography or ethnic origin, American patriotism is grounded in common adherence to a distinct set of ideas. Expounded by Jefferson and popularized further by Lincoln, they concern the rights of the people—to know, to dissent, to be treated equally, to rule themselves, to run their government processes, to be the judges of government and not its subjects. It is this distinctively American ideal that lends nobility to the endeavor of the investigative reporter and raises it above its grubby appearances.

This concept of patriotism is in direct confrontation with the monarchic version we hear every day from on high—namely, that the national interest is embodied in the particular Administration in office, that it is damaged by the disparagement of government leaders and by exposing scandals, acts that create a spirit of cynicism about the government.

This alien "hands off" patriotism preached by government officials will lead only to the eventual collapse of an uncriticized, corrupt shell. But if the American idea is valid, an exposure once in a while can only make the nation stronger—just as the pruning of a rotten branch strengthens a great tree, one that grows not in darkness but in sunlight.