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# Getting High on Secrecy



Knowing secrets is the ultimate chic here, a better status symbol than social class or even money

**N**ow there is talk of a post-disclosure cover-up attempt by some of those most deeply involved in the Iran-contra arms deals. There is also increasing talk about who, within the top ranks of government, lied to whom. There is talk as well about who may have been precisely how closed out and for how long. In a way, this whole affair has been about one thing: secrecy. Secrecy—tempting, addictive and ruinous in the ever-larger doses that are required—is the drug of choice in Washington. It provides a pleasant little buzz of self-esteem at first, a mild high; it has a way of eventually taking over, though, of disorienting and, at last, of deranging.

Let's get the exceptions and distinctions out of the way first. There is such a thing as privacy, and it should be respected: some things are nobody else's business and their disclosure should be up to the individuals whose business they are. There is also such a thing as confidentiality which is necessary in getting things done. It can spare people gratuitous embarrassment or reprisal or hurt, and its cost is fairly low. Sunshine laws have their value, but they often just lead to the opening up of a new "backroom" where things may be said that are neither evil nor corrupt, only more easily expressed outside of camera range. This is as true of international diplomacy as it is of city-council meetings. Finally there is what we in the press have come to think of as the "troopship examples"—the truly justifiable secrets affecting national security, the kind of stuff that the Walker-family spies dealt in.

But of course all of these categories of legitimate secrecy are subject to abuse. Public figures habitually create their own political need to keep certain things quiet, for example, by shamelessly campaigning on the other side of an issue because they want so badly to be loved and/or elected. Half a journalist's time in Washington is spent listening to these folks explain "off the record" that they are well aware that something opposite to what they have been saying must be done, but that the people whom they have been exhorting to go in the other direction! just "aren't ready." So here you have the groundwork for the preliminary and all-but-inevitable slide into the lie, secrecy's No. 1 byproduct.

Our officials tell us they will never recognize China or unrecognize Taiwan or deal with the Great Iranian Satans or negotiate away this program or that—and then they start down the road to doing it and they need their cover stories at first and one thing leads to another. And precisely because there *are* some things that deserve to be kept quiet and even to be cagey about, the idea of the justifi-

able lie, the lie for the greater public good, is born.

What I am struck by, reading the record available so far on the Iran-contra deals, is the intellectual ease, even self-satisfaction, with which so many public servants and their quasi-public partners in these particular doings lied to one another and to us, happily certain that they were sacrificing a lesser, even trivial, public duty to a larger one. And I believe some of that is still going on. Secrecy then, in the worst case, makes not just liars out of these people, but a rare and truly intolerable breed: *smug, unrepentant* liars. Why should they tell the truth to the committee of Congress that is charged with monitoring their activities or to the other members of the administration who disapprove or to the ambassador who comes in and asks just what we are up to in his country? There are overriding reasons of state not to—and these, of course, are secret, cannot be shared.

But there is more than the slippery slope involved here. There is the intoxication, the high. The White House person, whoever it was, who ordered certain intelligence intercepts formerly routinely received by Secretaries Weinberger and Shultz to be withheld from them as the Iran affair progressed had in a way reached the high point of Washington experience. He can have no more Everests to climb. For knowing more secrets than others know is the ultimate chic here, taking precedence as a status symbol over money, social class and all the rest. I remember during the Cuban missile crisis when we were all scratching around for closely guarded information how a Kennedy administration aide, whom we hadn't even called, got in touch with a colleague and me to volunteer some secrets—frantic, as I reflected on it later, that his friends in the press might have concluded he wasn't in the know.

**Final payoff:** Secret knowledge is a commodity we are always looking for and, one way and another, always heavily hinting that we have. Hubert Humphrey, when he was vice president, used to joke about how the fellow would arrive at his apartment every morning with the topmost-secret White House intelligence report, more or less chained or handcuffed to his arm, and how, after reading it in appropriately guarded circumstances, Humphrey would ride to the office and read almost all of it over again in the morning paper. His point was not that the paper was full of secrets, but that the report was full of things that only affected to be.

The real danger is that people at the top will in fact create so many secrets and dissemble so routinely about them and be so unencumbered by misgivings that they will finally go through the looking glass. They will have created another reality and they will live in it. Their assumptions and certitudes will be different from ours, and they will be contemptuous of us because they will always know something we don't know and will thus find our arguments wholly irrelevant. People not in the know will not be, in their opinion, fit to argue with, let alone to take seriously. The contempt and arrogance are the final payoff of this drug incautiously taken. The users lose touch and run amok. That is why invariably it is so hard, when these things are exposed, to figure out what on earth the participants could have been thinking of and why we are always marveling at how "dumb" it was, how crazy.

Secrecy can't be outlawed in government; there can be no prohibition of this heady stuff. And there doesn't have to be: true grown-ups in government can handle it. Such persons are always the ones who are called in to deal with the mess—witness the Tower Commission, the utterly responsible investigators on the Hill. There are not a lot of these grown-ups in the picture, but there are enough. What you are seeing now is their long-suffering effort to sweep up the broken glass and restore order after a binge.