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Opinion • Commentary

Secrets

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FOLLOWING the news that an American family of espionage agents had been routinely selling secrets to the Soviet Union for 18 years, almost everybody in Washington who claims to be anybody re-

By Lewis H. Lapham

leased thunderous statements to the press about the need to get a firmer grip on the national security. Mr. Caspar Weinberger, the secretary of Defense, even has called for the execution of those found guilty of spying during peacetime.

The official alarm strikes me as excessive, and I suspect that the military secret has become as obsolete a weapon of war as the crossbow. Consider the tonnage of secrets lugged across international frontiers during the last 40 years. Legions of agents working two or three sides of every rumor have copied, transcribed, edited, collated and sold enough information to take up all the space on all the shelves in the Library of Congress.

And what has been the result of this immense labor? How has the exchange of classified news impinged, even slightly, on the course of events? When pressed by questions, they would rather not answer, the gentlemen in Washington invariably make some kind of specious case for the incalculable significance of a particular scrap of paper.

But the knowledge of what secret could have prevented the United States from blundering into Vietnam? The makers of policy for both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations already knew what they thought, and no amount of contrary evidence could have dissuaded them from embracing the beauty of their geopolitical romance.

The acquisition or loss of what secret could prevent the United States from building its arsenal of nuclear weapons as necessary to the American economy as to the American theory of reality? What seven perfect secrets could have rescued the shah of Iran or changed Nicaragua into a democratic suburb of Los Angeles? Assume that the Soviet Union could track every American submarine or that the United States could decipher the launch codes of every missile on the Siberian steppe. What then? Somebody still has to decide to touch a match to the nuclear fire.

The history of the world's wars suggests that the fateful decisions have little or nothing to do with facts, whether overt or covert. They

arise instead from passionate illusions, from dreams and the fear of the dark.

When presented with the discovery of spies, the national media (as enthralled by their love of secrets as any secretary of Defense) broadcast melodramatic reports of their exploits, outfitting even the least among them with vast and mysterious powers.

Together with the buyers and sellers of secrets, the media like to say that governments without perfect knowledge of other governments take actions that otherwise they might not have taken — with grave, far-reaching ironic consequences. Precisely the same observation holds true for any government or individual at any time under any set of circumstances. The available evidence is never sufficient, the information always sketchy or compromised.

Only people fool enough to play at being gods imagine that they can obtain an impregnable state of omniscience. Malcolm Muggeridge made the point in his memoirs, with reference to his employment during World War II with the British secret service.

"Secrecy," Muggeridge observed, "is as essential to intelligence as vestments and incense to a mass, as darkness to a spiritualist seance, and must at all costs be preserved whether or not it serves any purpose . . . With old hands it becomes second nature to communicate in codes and to use an accommodation address for perfectly innocuous communications: to prefer a cache in a potting shed to a normal letter box and a diplomatic bag to a suitcase for carrying blameless personal effects."

Muggeridge remembered that Kim Philby, the notorious double agent, sent his wife love notes on tiny fragments of tissue paper that could be easily swallowed in the interests of security. John Walker appears to have operated under the cover of an analogous fantasy. He was fond of disguises, carried a sword-cane, styled himself with a code name, "Jaws," and thought himself engaged in "damn glamorous work." At least one of his associates regarded him as a deluded fool, a man almost as inept in his paranoid cleverness as the antic Inspector Clouseau.

During the period of his service for the KGB, Walker also belonged to the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan. All three organizations place as much emphasis on secrecy as do Mr. Weinberger and the curators of the Pentagon who believe that by administering lie detector tests and limiting security clearances to a mere 2 million people they can lock the vagaries of human nature safely in a file cabinet.

2

Of the 19,607,736 new documents that the federal government last year classified as secret, it's probably safe to assume that the majority were granted their honorary status for one of two reasons: to conceal stupidity, irrelevance or chicanery from the embarrassment of disclosure to the American public; or to make the documents more precious, perhaps sacred, thus adding to the store of religious amulets with which to ward off the corruption of the unclassified world and the malevolence of the evil eye set in the head of an evil empire.

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ARTICLE APPEARED
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Putting the U.S. Government Up for Sale: Deals to Ponder

By LEWIS H. LAPHAM

Sooner or later it undoubtedly will occur to somebody in the Reagan Administration to put the federal government up for sale in a patriotic series of leveraged buy-outs. The deficit and the national debt would vanish as if in a magician's smoke. The Dow Jones stock averages would gain 4,000 points, and everybody lucky enough to command the necessary lines of credit and political patronage would make a truly American killing.

The deal makes sense once government is defined as a "smokestack industry," like the steel and shipbuilding industries that no longer can weather the storms of the free market. Government so defined meets all the specifications of an old and dying enterprise: heavy debt, inflated wages and pensions, incompetent management, non-competitive prices, dwindling markets for its product.

Government's decline into senescence and oblivion has been embarrassingly obvious for some time. It is the reason Ronald Reagan was twice elected President. Private companies now operate prisons, as well as aircraft control towers and fire departments. Relatively few people still take the trouble to vote, and last year the nation paid \$29 billion for the varieties of private security protection as opposed to \$15 billion for public law enforcement.

The Administration's current budget proposals lack the courage of its greed as well as its conviction. It isn't enough merely to eliminate Amtrak and the Job Corps, or to curtail payments of student loans and crop insurance. Although admirable as subtractions from the burden of loss, none of these adjustments supply the virtue of additional revenue. Nor do they come up to the rapacious standards of the Wall Street speculators who prey on the assets of undervalued oil or communication companies.

The simplicity of the leveraged buy-out complies with the norms of low cunning customary among the gentlemen so comfortably sealed in the board rooms of the Reagan Administration. The acquirers borrow the money to buy the property in question—a real-estate trust, an insurance company, a government, etc.—which holds assets worth a good deal more than the

purchase price. Instead of trying to preserve the entity, the acquirers dismember it, reducing its various productive organs to the liquid forms of cash and tax manipulation.

The process is not dissimilar to flensing, boiling and drying out the carcass of a sperm whale. The acquirers pay off the bank loans with the money distilled from the liquidation of the assets; they also pay off the company executives who agreed to the sale. After subtracting these opportunity costs, the acquirers divide the remainder of the spoils and issue a press release about the great blessing that they have conferred on the stockholders and the American future.

Before dissolving the federal conglomerate into its multiple elements, it first would be necessary to incorporate the entity in Delaware and to assign both a trading symbol (GVP or US) and an opening stock price. Some of the subsequent deals would be easier than others.

The government owns one-third of the nation's land mass, and the real-estate sales, especially along the California beaches, ought to attract syndicates organized by people like Frank Sinatra and Johnny Carson. It also ought to be a fairly simple matter to sell the federal inventory of trucks, office space (2.6 billion square feet) and hospitals.

The sophisticated deals would require a little more thought, but I can imagine at least a few of the possible buyers:

—Mount Rushmore, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials: The Disney and Marriott corpora-

tions might be inveigled into a ruinously competitive auction.

—The Internal Revenue Service: Either Merrill Lynch or American Express presumably would wish to extend their portfolios of "full financial services."

—The Postal Service: To the employees.

—The U.S. weapons arsenal: Obviously the Soviet Union would make a generous tender offer, but it is probable that the more parochial members of Congress would object for reasons of fear or conscience. This might mean selling the inventory, in odd lots and at less attractive prices, to the Germans, the Japanese or a consortium of South American colonels.

—The military services: They could be offered to the larger corporations, both domestic and foreign. Given the fact that most wars come about as a result of economic quarrels, the multinational corporations—like the princes of the Italian Renaissance—should pay their own *condottiere*. The troops could be fitted out in splendid uniforms bearing the insignia of Sony, CBS, Volvo, IBM and British Airways. (Some of the smaller military formations—the Marine Corps, say, or the Coast Guard—conceivably could be sold to individuals. Donald Trump or the Bass Brothers might enjoy the adulation of a household regiment.)

—The CIA: Both HBO and Warner Communications look on the intelligence agency as an archive of scripts. William J. Casey probably would require an office in Century City, as well as a percentage of the box-office receipts.

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