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# WHEN THE GOVERNMENT TELLS LIES

Official deceptions, half-truths, and outright lies impose a heavy burden on the press. A veteran journalist surveys the scope of the problem — and suggests ways reporters can cope with it

by ANTHONY MARRO

NOVEMBER 25, 1957 — Dwight Eisenhower, sixty-seven years old and recently recovered from both a heart attack and abdominal surgery, is in his office. He tries to pick up a document, and can't. He tries to read it, and fails. The words, he later says, "seemed literally to run off the top of the page." He tries to get up, and nearly falls down. He tries to tell his secretary what is wrong, but she can't make any sense of what he is saying. His physician realizes almost immediately that Eisenhower has suffered some sort of a stroke.

*The president has developed "a chill," the press office tells reporters. It is not until twenty-four hours later that the nation is told that its president is seriously ill.*

DECEMBER 7, 1971 — Henry Kissinger is briefing the press on the government's position on the India-Pakistan war. "First of all, let's get a number of things straight," he begins. "There have been some comments that the administration is anti-Indian. This is totally inaccurate." A briefing paper has been handed out at the start of the session. The first sentence reads: "The policy of this administration towards South Asia must be understood. It is neither anti-Indian nor pro-Pakistan."

*A month later, Jack Anderson publishes the transcript of a meeting attended by Kissinger on December 3, just four days before the briefing for the press. "I am getting hell every half-hour from the president that we are not being tough enough on India. . .," Kissinger is quoted as saying. "He wants to tilt in favor of Pakistan."*

APRIL 22, 1980 — Jody Powell, President Carter's chief

spokesman, is talking with Jack Nelson, Washington bureau chief for the *Los Angeles Times*. No military operation is being planned to rescue the hostages in Iran. Powell tells him. A blockade might be feasible, somewhere down the road, but a rescue mission just wouldn't make any sense.

*The newspapers with Nelson's story, which says that the Carter White House considers a rescue operation impractical, are still scattered around in living rooms all over Los Angeles when the members of Delta Team board airplanes for the raid on Teheran.*

OCTOBER 24, 1983 — Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, is asked by reporters whether U.S. troops have landed on Grenada. He checks with a member of President Reagan's national security staff, and relays the response. "Preposterous," he says, and goes on to deny that any invasion is planned.

*The landing takes place the next day.*

**F**or starters, Stephen Hess probably is right. The Brookings Institution scholar, who has studied both Washington reporters and government press operations, says that most government spokespersons don't like to lie. For one thing, telling the truth is official U.S. government policy. For another, they prefer telling the truth. To lie, he says, is to "fail to play fair with reporters and the public, to diminish their self-esteem, and to complicate their work."

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*Anthony Marro, managing editor of Newsday, was a Washington correspondent for ten years.*

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White House reporters wait for news on Ike's health (above), then run to call in their stories.

**'The president [Eisenhower] has developed "a chill," the press office tells reporters. Not until twenty-four hours later is the nation told that its president is seriously ill'**

But complications and crises are of the essence of government, and trying to put the best face on a sensitive situation also is part of the job. Political posturing, face-saving, honest error, bad judgment, and legitimate national security concerns also play a role, and so, to different degrees in different administrations, do arrogance, deceit, disregard for the public, high-handedness, and attempts to cover up stupidity and criminal conduct. The result is that reporters have come to accept some level of deception as part of the routine, and to expect, as Hess delicately phrases it, "less than full candor" on the part of their government.

In fact, Washington reporters over the years have had to deal with a steady barrage of deceptions, half-truths, and outright lies — deceptions about national security operations that were so sensitive that they probably wouldn't have published the information even if they had been able to obtain it, and deceptions so petty that they wondered why anyone would bother to lie in the first place.

There was the time in 1960 when Lincoln White tried to explain away the crash of the U-2 airplane in the Soviet Union. It had been on a weather mission and had just strayed off course, the State Department's chief spokesman said. "Now, our assumption is that the [pilot] blacked out. There was absolutely no — N-O, no — deliberate attempt to violate Soviet air space. There never has been." Within days it became clear that the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, was alive, that the Soviets had him, and that he was talking. The principal attachment to the airplane was not a thermometer but a camera, and its mission was not weather reconnaissance but spying.

There was the time in 1966 that Lyndon Johnson claimed that one of his great-great-grandfathers had died at the Alamo (not true), and the time in 1971 that the White House claimed that Tricia Nixon's wedding cake had been based

on an old family recipe (it apparently had been created by a White House chef).

There was the time in 1975 when FBI Director Clarence Kelley said that while there had been some warrantless break-ins by FBI agents in the past, they had been confined by and large to foreign espionage and counterintelligence matters, and had been ended by J. Edgar Hoover in 1966. In truth, there had been thousands, all of them illegal, most of them against American citizens, many of them against people never charged with any crime, and some as recently as 1972. Kelley's aides were left to explain that the head of the nation's most sophisticated police agency had been misinformed.

There was the time in 1954 when Henry Cabot Lodge, ambassador to the UN, described fighting in Guatemala as "a revolt of Guatemalans against Guatemalans," despite the fact the uprising was being orchestrated, in large part, by Frank Wisner, the deputy director for plans for the CIA. There was the time in 1981 when the Reagan administration released a white paper on Central America that attributed authorship of key documents to several guerrilla leaders who clearly had not written them. There was the time, during the Bay of Pigs invasion, when the government lied in saying that the bombings were being conducted by defectors from Castro's own air force, and then, when reporters discovered the lie, groused because the reporters did not create lies of their own to help protect the government's lie.

There was the time in a televised debate last October when President Reagan insisted that more people were receiving food stamps than ever before (actually the number had dropped by about 400,000 since he had become president), and when Walter Mondale claimed that Reagan had sought to "terminate" a housing program for the elderly (in fact, the Reagan administration had made major cuts in the program, but hadn't tried to abolish it).

There was the time that John Mitchell, the former attorney general, was indicted for lying about Watergate, the time that Richard Helms, the former head of the CIA, was indicted for lying about Chile, and the time that Rita Lavelle, a former official with the Environmental Protection Agency, was indicted for lying about the EPA's handling of toxic waste.

There was the time that Ron Nessen, President Ford's press secretary, began a response to a question by saying "To tell you the truth . . ." only to be overwhelmed by sarcastic applause.

### The manifold forms of deception

I. F. Stone has said that "Every government is run by liars, and nothing they say should be believed."

James Deakin, who covered the White House for many years for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, pretty much agreed with Stone, but worded it differently. "Every government is run by people who seek to wield and retain power," he wrote in *Straight Stuff*, his brilliantly witty book on Washington journalism. "To do this, they must convince the public of certain things: That their policies are correct. That their facts and explanations should be accepted. That they are in control of events and situations. That sounds nicer

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[than Stone]. And it comes out at the same place."

To achieve these things, it's necessary not only for governments to deceive, but also to hype, slant, tilt, and gloss over, trying at the same time to present a situation in its most favorable light, while hiding, or hedging on, or deflecting reporters away from any information that might conflict with its version. Indeed, Stephen Hess has written, "It is hard to find a discussion of modern government's relations with the press that does not include the words 'manage,' 'manipulate,' and 'control.'"

It probably is a fool's errand to try to measure degrees of deception from one administration to the next, or to try to show whether Democrats are more or less deceptive than Republicans. Clearly, much misinformation was produced by the Reagan administration during its first four years, on such matters as the invasion of Grenada, revolution in Central America, its concern for the handicapped, and its commitment to civil rights. But there is no way of assessing how it compares with, or whether it's even in the same league with, the massive amounts of misinformation put out by the Johnson administration during the Vietnam War, for example, or by the Nixon administration during the Watergate years.

For one thing, it often takes years for deceptions to surface. It took congressional hearings, criminal prosecutions, and serious reporting by people like Nicholas Horrock and John Crewdson, both then working for *The New York Times*, to expose the degree to which the FBI had been staging illegal break-ins against American citizens. And even in 1985, fifteen years after the fact, we were still learning in the libel trial of General Westmoreland against CBS about the degree to which key officials in the Johnson administration knew that, despite their public statements to the contrary, there wasn't any light at the end of the tunnel.

**'Kelley said warrantless break-ins by FBI agents had been largely confined to foreign espionage. In truth, there had been thousands, most against American citizens'**

*Clarence Kelley being sworn in as director of the FBI in 1973*



UPI Beilmann

For another thing, there is the question of degree, and the issue of whether, and at what point, numerous small deceptions begin to equal major ones.

There was a time, early in the Reagan administration, when the president's aides argued that it didn't matter whether some of his stories were literally true — his numerous misstatements of fact, his confusion about detail, and his repeated anecdotes about supposed welfare cheats that no one was ever able to confirm, for example — because they contained a larger truth.

"We've been dealing with four years of an administration that freely states — and stated early — that literal truth was not a concern," says Bill Kovach, the Washington news editor of *The New York Times*. "This is the first time I've heard that literal truth is not important to the presidency."

**T**here also is the matter of attitude. "This administration is much more arrogant with the press," says one career government official who has served through several administrations. "The attitude is, 'Screw you, we don't need you. The Reagan administration is going to be successful despite the editorials in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, and the cartoons in the *Los Angeles Times*.'" "

And Morton Halperin, the director of the left-leaning Center for National Security Studies, says that many key officials in the Reagan administration have a philosophy of government that doesn't include public discussion and debate. "These guys came here straight out of nineteen forty-six," he says. "They came out of World War Two, when the government lied all the time, and it was all right to lie. The whole Normandy invasion, and the covert operations that surrounded it, are an important part of that mind-set. . . . They still think fundamentally that foreign policy should be left to the executive branch and that people shouldn't even try to find out what they're up to."

Deceptions by government officials take many forms, and it's not always easy to show what they amount to. They can include simple face-saving, such as Geraldine Ferraro claiming she felt "vindicated" by a House report critical of her failure to disclose her husband's financial interests, and routine political posturing, such as the White House announcing full support for people like Anne Burford and James Watt, when both had clearly become major liabilities and were on their way out of the government. And there is the endless, predictable attempt by administrations to portray themselves in the best light, as Reagan did in a speech to the National Council of Negro Women in July 1983. "We have authorized for filing three school desegregation cases, more than were authorized by the previous administration during its first thirty months in office," he said.

At first blush, this looks like a simple statement of fact. But when James Nathan Miller took a look at the numbers, he concluded in an article in *The Atlantic* on Reagan's civil rights record that "This seemingly straightforward twenty-four-word sentence contains three carefully crafted semantic deceptions."

To begin with, Reagan's administration hadn't actually filed more cases than Carter's. His Justice Department had

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filed only one, while Carter's had filed two. Secondly, while Reagan seemed to be saying that he had filed more cases, he hadn't really said that. What he had said was that his administration had *authorized* that the suits be filed. And thirdly, while he implied that he was talking about his record and Carter's on the same terms, in truth he was using an apples and oranges comparison of legal suits his people had authorized (but not yet acted on), with suits that Carter actually had taken to court.

The fact that it took Miller about twelve hours' worth of digging just to deal with that one sentence gives some notion of the problem at hand.

### The Reagan twist — and John Mitchell's maxim

The problem, in the view of many, is very real, not necessarily because face-saving and political posturing are outrageous in themselves, but because a pattern of routine and systematic deception has very real costs, both in terms of loss of confidence by people in their government, and in terms of citizens not learning until it is too late just what it is that their government is up to. And while it is not clear that the Reagan administration is any more duplicitous than others, it unquestionably has gone well beyond other recent administrations in its attempts to bottle up information, to prevent public access to government officials and records, to threaten and intimidate the bureaucracy in order to dry up sources of information, and to prevent the press and the public from learning how their government is functioning.

This goes well beyond just shielding the president from questions (Reagan has had fewer official news conferences than any president in modern times), and doing silly things like revving up the helicopters while he's getting ready to leave for Camp David, so that reporters won't be able to make themselves heard over the din. The administration's proposals for limiting the Freedom of Information Act, censoring the public statements of government officials even

**'Many citizens actually were shocked to learn at the time of the U-2 incident that their government would tell such a lie'**

*U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 1962*



UPI/Bettmann

after they leave office, and using polygraphs to search out people who talk to the press all have the effect of restricting access to information, and of making it harder for reporters to report on the way Reagan is running the government.

Jack Landau, who heads the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, goes so far as to say that such actions by the Reagan administration constitute the greatest restrictions on public access to government information since World War II. There is no question but that the Reagan administration is seeking restrictions and kinds of censorship in peacetime that Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and even Richard Nixon didn't ask for in times of war.

There is a temptation to shrug that politicians have always lied and that the Republic nonetheless has survived. But David Wise, in *The Politics of Lying*, argues that to dwell on historical examples of lying is to miss the point entirely, because it was only in the 1960s that government deception came to be *perceived* by large numbers of citizens. Many actually were shocked to learn at the time of the U-2 incident that their government would tell such a lie. And once large numbers of people come to distrust their government, he says, a new political environment is created in which the president can no longer assume that most people believe what he says.

According to Wise, a former bureau chief for the *New York Herald Tribune*, this is a dangerous situation in a society in which the government is supposed to operate with the consent of the governed. Indeed, writing in 1972, he termed the erosion of confidence between people and government — an erosion that was documented by University of Michigan studies — "perhaps the single most significant political development in America in the past decade."

Wise laid much of the blame for this erosion on official deception, and he in turn laid the blame for much of the deception on the growth of the nation's intelligence-gathering agencies since World War II. Once the government began running covert operations it had to have cover stories to hide them, and that required government-sanctioned lies. The chief criterion thus was not truth, but just the opposite — developing lies that would be plausible enough to be accepted as truth. "Thus the standard is not truth," Wise wrote, "but fashioning lies that will be believed."

Sissela Bok, in *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, argues that it is dangerous to let public officials get away with even minor lies, or lies that they feel are for the public good. "Some come to believe that any lie can be told so long as they can convince themselves that people will be better off in the long run," she writes. "From there, it is a short step to the conclusion that, even if people will not be better off from a particular lie, they will benefit by all maneuvers to keep the right people in office. Once public servants lose their bearings in this way, all the shabby deceptions of Watergate — the fake telegrams, the erased tapes, the elaborate cover-ups, the bribing of witnesses to make them lie, the televised pleas for trust — become possible."

And Jody Powell, President Carter's press secretary and a man who admits to at least one lie that he still believes was in the national interest, argues that while there are long-range problems for a democracy if people don't trust their

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Defense Department spokesman Arthur Sylvester (below) at a press conference on the 1962 Cuban missile crisis; and (right) President Kennedy conferring with his cabinet and advisers during the crisis



both UPI/Bettmann

**'It is not known who first argued that the government has a right to lie to its citizens, but the person who touched off the greatest furor by saying it was Arthur Sylvester'**

government. there can be more immediate consequences, too. "An administration that has a reputation for being not credible, for evoking 'national security' to cover political embarrassments and things that don't involve any real national security matters at all, that sort of administration is going to have a harder time protecting national security secrets when there's a need," he said in a recent interview. In short, if reporters come to distrust an administration's officials, they won't believe them even when the matter is serious and the officials are telling the truth.

All three — a former journalist, an academic, and a former press secretary — would argue that it is important that the press not shrug off lies as just part of the routine, but must, instead, set out aggressively to expose them, and to hold officials accountable for them. The reason is not just to expose deceptions for the sake of exposure (although Bok, more than the others, would argue that this is an important goal in itself), but to make it possible for people to know how their government is working.

To this end, the best piece of advice for reporters was offered by John Mitchell, the former attorney general and no particular friend of the press. His words: "Watch what we do instead of what we say." In truth, he wasn't talking to reporters at the time (he was talking with a group of people concerned about the direction of civil rights law enforcement under Nixon), and he never did much to help reporters learn what his department was doing. But sorting out the difference between what a person, or a government, is saying and doing is at the heart of reporting, and central to the role of the press in a democracy. Among other things, this means getting access to information about the process, about alternatives that were debated and discarded, about how a decision came to be made, and about all the predicted results of the decision, not just those that the government sees fit to release.

This also means being able to report on the decision-making process while it is still under way, and while it is possible to show what the alternatives are. On this point,

Deakin says, the press is very much like Lyndon Johnson, who when he was Senate majority leader used to complain to the White House that Congress wanted to be "in on the takeoffs as well as the crash landings."

Letting the public in on the takeoffs means telling it what an administration really is up to — whether it really has a commitment to enforcement of civil rights laws, whether it really is providing a "safety net" for the helpless, and how far it really is prepared to go in trying to prop up allies in Central America, for example — and what the likely consequence of its actions will be. And the single biggest complaint of many reporters now working in Washington is not just that the government has deceived them in major ways, but that it has taken unprecedented moves to try to prevent them from getting behind the deceptions.

### Does government have a 'right to lie'?

It is not known who first argued that the government has a right to lie to its citizens, but the person who touched off the greatest furor by saying it was Arthur Sylvester, a Defense Department spokesman during the Kennedy administration. On December 6, 1962, during a dinner meeting of the New York chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, Sylvester was asked by Jack Fox of UPI what he thought about half-truths and deceptions by government spokesmen.

This was in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, and many reporters were still fuming about some of the misinformation that had been released during the crisis. For one thing, Kennedy had cut short a political trip to Chicago, and had rushed back to Washington to deal with the evidence that the Soviets had placed offensive missiles in Cuba. Instead of telling the nation that a major confrontation with the Soviets was brewing, however, Kennedy's aides explained the sudden return to the capital by saying that the president had come down with a cold.

Later in that same week, with tensions rising and questions flying thick and fast, Sylvester had authorized a press release from the Pentagon that read: "A Pentagon spokes-

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man denied tonight that any alert has been ordered or that any emergency military measures have been set in motion against Communist-ruled Cuba. Further, the spokesman said, the Pentagon has no information indicating the presence of offensive weapons in Cuba."

The first sentence may have been technically correct. The second was false, a government-planted lie at a time when Kennedy had made the decision to confront Khrushchev, but before all the strategy for the confrontation had been worked out.

In authorizing the release, Sylvester later said, he had come down on the side of the "Lying Baptists" and against the "Truthful Baptists." His reference was to a dispute between two groups of Baptists that had erupted at Long Run, Kentucky, back in 1804. The issue was whether a man with three children who had been captured by marauding Indians was justified in lying to the Indians in order to conceal the fact that a fourth child was hiding nearby. The "Lying Baptists" argued that the father had the right to lie, and thus save the child. The "Truthful Baptists" disagreed, saying that, no matter what the consequences, the truth should be told.

This is a philosophical and ethical debate that far predates Arthur Sylvester, the Cuban missile crisis, or even the 1804 dispute among the Baptists of Long Run, Kentucky. Discussing a similar hypothetical situation, albeit one without Indians or the possibility of nuclear holocaust, Immanuel Kant argued that truthfulness cannot be avoided by any person, no matter how serious "may be the disadvantage accruing to himself or another." Samuel Johnson's view was more in line with that of the "Lying Baptists" and Sylvester. "The general rule is, that truth should never be violated; there must, however, be some exception," he said. "If, for instance, a murderer should ask you which way a man has gone."

Others have argued that the key question is whether the person seeking the information — a murderer in Sam Johnson's London or a Miami resident who suddenly has Soviet missiles aimed at him, for example — has any right to it. At what point did the American people have a right to know that their president was wrestling with a major crisis, not just a cold, and that Soviet missiles had been placed in Cuba?

Sylvester's argument was that the stakes were so high that deception, both of the Soviets and of the American people, was necessary, at least until the president had decided on his next move.

Jack Fox, in his story for UPI, gave what Sylvester later said was a fair summary of his statement at the Sigma Delta Chi dinner. "He [Sylvester] said that the government must not put out false information, but later added, 'I think the inherent right of the government to lie to save itself when faced with nuclear disaster is basic,'" Fox wrote.

Others made more of the "right to lie" part of the statement and less of the caveats, to the point where Sylvester, in an article written for *The Washington Star* in 1967, complained that they had "distorted my remarks beyond recognition, howling that they were proof that the government was not to be believed, under any circumstances."

"He got a raw deal on that," Hess said recently. "It's always been taken out of context, as though he said the government has a right to lie, period. He said a lot more than that."

In his article in the *Star*, Sylvester said that as assistant secretary of defense for public affairs he had always taken the position that the prime requisite for a government information program was that it be truthful. And he went on to argue that it was totally wrong for any press aide to lie for personal or political reasons.

Many press secretaries would agree. There is considerable evidence to back up Hess's contention that most of them don't like to lie, not just because it makes them feel bad — Lincoln White, who lied about the U-2 flight in 1960, later told Patrick Sloyan, then working for UPI, that it was "my darkest moment" — but because credibility is important to their job. To be effective, a press aide not only has to be able to generate favorable stories, but has to be able to stop bad ones. And a press aide who isn't trusted will have a whole lot more trouble trying to head off a bad story than one who is trusted. "All you need is one lie, and five years of credibility goes right down the drain," says Homer Boynton, who acted as chief spokesman for the FBI from 1973 until 1980. "So when you're giving it out, you goddamn better be right."

**S**ylvester's statement touched off an angry debate at the time. But the fact is that many reporters and editors agree with it, at least in principle. Philip Geyelin, for example, complained in a recent article in *The Washington Post* that the Reagan administration seemed to be squandering its credibility with a pattern of deception in its statements about Central America. But he began the piece by saying, "We will get nowhere without first stipulating that, while circumstances alter almost any case you can think of, the president has an inherent right — perhaps even an obligation in particular situations — to deceive." And he went on to argue that, when it comes to troop movements and placement of weapons, a certain ambiguity of purpose is, as John Foster Dulles used to say, "a necessary art."

Bill Kovach, who runs *The New York Times's* Washington bureau, says that, "as a rational human being, I'd have to say yes, if lives really are at stake. But [the occasions] should be so few and far between that we talk about them for years. And it's better for [press aides] to try to avoid answering the question than to give out real misinformation, because the next time they won't be believed."

Even Jack Landau, the head of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and one of the most vocal advocates of the public's right to know, says that in some legitimate national security cases "I would guess . . . [lying] would be all right." And Jack Nelson, who was lied to by Jody Powell during the Iran hostage crisis, also thinks there are times when a government can justify some forms of deception. "I didn't like being lied to. I didn't like being used. But I didn't have a great deal of problem with [Powell's] doing it," he says. "If it was a real matter of life and death, and he thought it was, I can't argue with what he did."

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What Powell did was to tell Nelson flat-out that there was no chance that a rescue mission would be launched in the near future — a lie that Powell still argues was proper, given the circumstances. At the time he told the lie the preparations for the raid were well under way, and in less than forty-eight hours the U.S. planes would be entering Iranian air space. Not only was he fearful that a story suggesting a raid was possible would alert the Iranians, but he felt that a flat statement to the contrary would "reinforce the web of deception" that had been constructed to protect the mission.

In *The Other Side of the Story*, his book on his years as President Carter's press secretary, Powell argues that there are two reasons why the government can, and sometimes should, lie. The first is that the "government has a legitimate right to secrecy in certain matters because the welfare of the nation requires it." The second is that the press, for the most part, has a right to print what it knows. Freedom of the press is so important to democracy, he says, that when there is a conflict with legitimate national security needs, it is probably better for the government to simply lie to the press than to try to limit it, censor it, or restrict it through prior restraint.

But Powell admits to at least one other lie that had nothing to do with national security or life-and-death matters. It was a question that, as Powell put it, "involved the personal life of a colleague and that of his family." Powell says he decided to lie because to respond with the truth would have resulted in "great pain and embarrassment for a number of perfectly innocent people." And, besides, he didn't think that the matter was of any legitimate public interest to begin with. Powell thus goes a step beyond Sylvester, and argues that it is sometimes permissible for a government to lie to protect the privacy of public figures, as well as to protect the security of the nation.

Powell, now a Washington columnist, says he has come to understand more clearly than he used to why it is that "journalists get so damn skeptical about what people [in

government] tell them." He says he has no doubts at all that he acted properly in the Iran situation, but has mixed feelings about the second lie. "That's harder to defend without getting into the details, which I won't do," he says, adding that he would probably lie again in that situation, too.

"The minimal line you can draw there is that you can absolutely say that lying to cover up your own embarrassments is not permissible," says Powell. "Once you get past that, you get into areas where, unfortunately, things tend to be mixed. Then you have to weigh in the sort of long-term impact, not just in terms of the credibility of a particular administration, but the credibility of the government over the long haul. If you contribute to the idea that people can't believe anything their government tells them, that's awful. It's also dangerous."

In his book, Powell cites other cases in which he thinks a government sometimes might have a right to lie, including protection of intelligence sources and methods, protection of an innocent person whose name had cropped up during a Justice Department investigation, and a pending decision by the Treasury Department that could have major financial consequences to individuals and to the nation.

And it is here that he runs into conflict with many others, including Hess, who argue that there is a big difference between lying to protect legitimate national security matters and lying to protect anything less. "It's very easy to slip over into other areas . . . and I'm less sympathetic when it does," says Hess. "Just because something might concern the 'public good,' that isn't enough" to justify government lying. "It has to be to save lives, as in the Iranian hostage thing, or similar wartime activities."

But while many people in government and in the media agree that, in some circumstances, the government has a right to lie, they also agree that the people have a right to know what their government is really up to. And they argue that a chief reason that the government gets away with as much deception as it does is that the press, for all of its

**'What Powell did was to tell Jack Nelson [of the *Los Angeles Times*] flat-out that there was no chance that a rescue mission would be launched in the near future'**



J. L. Altan/Sygma



UPI/Beitmann

Press secretary Jody Powell, and (left) charred bodies and smashed aircraft left behind after the attempt to free hostages in Iran

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**'The "objective reporting" standards of the day held that if a senator was going to make charges of treason, espionage, and communists in high places, that in itself was news'**

*Reporters question Senator Joseph McCarthy during 1954 hearings*



bluster and all its professed skepticism, is far too willing to take the government at its word.

Sylvester, for example, placed much of the blame for misinformation about government activities on the laziness and ineptitude of reporters, saying that they relied too much on handouts and failed to ask the right questions. "Every sophisticated [reporter] knows the federal government puts its best, not its worst, foot forward . . .," he said. "That being so, it is [the reporter's] function to penetrate this protective coloration behind which all men attempt to mask their errors. If there is a credibility gap, it measures the failure of newsmen to do their job."

This is a charge that not only was valid when it was made, and remains so today, but also had been a particular matter of controversy just a decade before, when Joe McCarthy was at the height of his influence and there was much debate within the media over the lengths to which reporters should go to try to unmask deception and lies.

#### **Joe McCarthy: testing the limits of 'objective reporting'**

To understand the controversy that surrounded McCarthy and the press, it is necessary to understand not just that many of the charges by the Wisconsin senator were considered by many reporters to be reckless, but also that the press in the early 1950s was very different from what it is today. There was much less analysis and interpretative reporting in news sections (analysis and most forms of comment being reserved for the editorial pages), and almost none was provided by the wire services. The "objective reporting" standards of the day held that if a U.S. senator was going to make charges of treason, espionage, and communists in high places, that in itself was news, and it wasn't necessarily the job of a reporter to determine the validity of the charges, or to hold the senator accountable for them.

"We let Joe get away with murder, reporting it as he said it, not doing the kind of critical analysis we'd do today," William Theis, a former reporter for International News Service, told Edwin Bayley, whose book *Joe McCarthy and the Press* analyzes the coverage and finds much of it lacking. George Reedy, who covered McCarthy for United Press and later became a press secretary to Lyndon

Johnson, told Bayley that his frustration at trying to cope with McCarthy's charges was a major consideration in his decision to quit newspaper work. "We had to take what McCarthy said at face value," he told Bayley. "Joe couldn't find a communist in Red Square — he didn't know Karl Marx from Groucho — but he was a United States senator. . . . It was a shattering experience, and I couldn't stand it."

As McCarthy's influence grew, the debate over how to cover him and his charges grew also. Much of the debate was over the nature of "objective" reporting, but the debate itself tended to be partisan in the extreme. Editors and publishers who approved of McCarthy tended to argue that they wanted his statements reported as they were made, without heavy doses of analysis or perspective. And they, in turn, put pressure on the wire services, which provided the bulk of the daily coverage, to report the charges in a straightforward way.

Others, including many who disapproved of McCarthy's politics as well as his tactics, argued that reporters who simply wrote down what he said, along with the subsequent rebuttals and denials, were playing into his hands, because they were not addressing the large number of inconsistencies and proven inaccuracies that marked his attacks on supposed communists.

Some papers developed strategies specifically for McCarthy. *The Milwaukee Journal*, for example, began adding bracketed inserts to stories about McCarthy's charges, using the brackets to add explanatory information. Here is an excerpt from a May 8, 1950, article about McCarthy and Owen Lattimore, whom the senator had accused of helping to shape foreign policy to the benefit of communist governments:

McCarthy said that Lattimore has "long been referred to as the architect of the State Department's Asiatic policy."

[State Department officials and three former secretaries of state have denied that Lattimore played any part in forming policy.]

The Young Republicans guffawed as McCarthy joked about "individuals with peculiar mental aberrations as far as sex is concerned."

[The individual referred to by Mr. McCarthy here is no longer in government service.]

**Continued**



According to Bayley, this got to the point where, in September 1952, the *Journal* had bracketed thirteen inches' worth of such inserts into a fifty-two-inch story. "McCarthy's tactics produced lasting changes in the media," Bayley observes in his book. "Newspaper people realized that it was not enough simply to tell what had happened and what was said, but that they had to tell what it meant and whether or not it was true. By 1954, interpretative reporting and news analysis had become standard practice; these functions were no longer left to the editorial writers."

And these devices were to become more important in the following decades, not just because of the massive amounts of misinformation released by the government during Vietnam and Watergate, but because, as Wise argues effectively in *The Politics of Lying*, cover stories and deception became a significant part of government operations.

#### Four kinds of lies — and the problems they pose for the press

Not all deceptions are equal, of course. There is a big difference between a Joe McCarthy making harsh, and often groundless, charges of treason, and the sort of political posturing that causes a president to defend an aide who has done something dumb. After several years of studying the press-government relationship from both sides, Hess has concluded that some reporters tolerate, even welcome, minor deceptions, because exposing deceptions helps them to display their skills. While studying the State Department press operations during Reagan's first term, he says, he found many examples of deception, most of them minor, and didn't detect much outrage on the part of the reporters there. "It is only the Big Lie, the deliberate and consistent pattern of misstatement on a matter of importance, that turns Washington reporters into inflamed civil libertarians," Hess writes in *The Government/Press Connection*.

**H**ess cites four broad categories of government deceptions. On a scale of decreasing acceptability to the press, he says, are so-called "honest lies," inadvertent lies, half-truths (which include many forms of political posturing and selective release of data), and flat-out lies. An "honest lie," for Hess, is a legitimate national security matter, such as Powell lying about the raid on Teheran. Even if they don't approve of such a lie, most reporters can understand the need for it, he says.

Reporters also tend to forgive inadvertent lies, because they know from their own work that mistakes happen when things are done in a hurry. Bill Beecher, a former Defense Department information officer and now a reporter for *The Boston Globe*, has said that "half the initial internal reporting within government in a crisis is wrong."

It is with half-truths, a specialty at the State Department, that some reporters begin to get resentful. The chief technique here is for a press officer to define the question as narrowly as possible and then answer it that way. Here are two examples Hess cites in *The Government/Press Connection*. Both, he said in an interview, are real examples, with the facts altered just slightly "to protect the guilty."

Q — Has the assistant secretary of state been invited to China?  
A — No. (Meaning: He will go to China as an adviser to the vice president. It is the vice president who has been invited. Therefore, I am not lying. Rationale: I have to say this because protocol requires that the Chinese must first publicly extend the invitation.)

Q — Will the ambassador-at-large go to Egypt?  
A — No decision has been made. (Meaning: A "decision" is made when the Secretary of State signs the cable. The cable will be signed tomorrow. Therefore, I am not lying. Rationale: I do not have the authority to give a premature confirmation.)

In the Reagan administration, examples of all four types of deception can be found in the invasion of Grenada. Larry Speakes himself may not have known that he was telling a lie when he said that it was "preposterous" to think U.S. forces had invaded, and that no invasion would take place. But Rear Admiral John Poindexter, who told Speakes it was preposterous, knew that the landing would take place the next day, and kept Speakes and other press aides in the dark about it. Speakes did not respond to a request for an interview, but Hess and Powell and a number of the journalists interviewed for this article argued that, even if he had known and then told the lie, it might have been justifiable.

The initial claim by the government that there were no civilian casualties appears to have been inadvertent. The Pentagon says that it didn't know about the bombing of a mental hospital by a Navy plane (at least seventeen persons were killed) until several days after it occurred, and no one has yet proven otherwise.

The claim by the administration that leaders of other Caribbean countries urged it to take action appears to be in the nature of a half-truth. The administration said that the urging from other leaders came after the assassination of

**'The inflation of the number of Cubans  
in Grenada was part of the data used to  
argue that a Cuban takeover was at hand  
and that "We got there just in time"'**

*Cuban prisoners captured by the U.S.-led Grenada invasion force*



UPI/Bettmann

Continued

Maurice Bishop, the Marxist prime minister of Grenada, on October 19. But Stuart Taylor, Jr., in a lengthy piece in *The New York Times* on some of the misinformation put out by the U.S. government during and immediately after the invasion, quotes the prime minister of Barbados as saying that U.S. officials had been talking about possible action at least as early as October 15, four days before the killing.

And while it's hard to determine whether the government was telling an outright lie when it said it had prevented reporters from accompanying the troops because of concern for the safety of the journalists, subsequent comments by Secretary of State George Shultz seem to give some sense of the real reason for the ban. "These days, in the advocacy journalism that's been adopted, it seems as though the reporters are always against us and so they're always trying to screw things up," he said. "And when you're trying to conduct a military operation, you don't need that."

It is difficult to know whether some of the most important misinformation was deliberate or inadvertent because the degree of the deception depends on whether there was any intent to deceive. Reagan, in a television speech to the nation, said there were an estimated 400 to 600 Cubans on the island, and that they were "a military force," rather than construction workers. The next day, Admiral Wesley L. McDonald said that captured documents showed that there were at least 1,100 Cubans on Grenada, and that they were all "well-trained professional soldiers."

Eventually, the State Department said that the Cuban government's own figure probably was right — that there had been 784 Cubans on the island. Still later, U.S. military authorities on Grenada said that, after interrogating them, they had concluded that most of the Cubans really had been construction workers, and that only about 100 had been combatants. "Thus, over three days the Pentagon estimate of the number of Cuban fighters who had met the invading force seems to have plunged from more than 1,000 to fewer than 200, including the estimated 30 to 70 Cubans who were killed," Taylor wrote.

What difference does it make whether there were 784 Cubans on Grenada or 1,100, and whether they were "well-trained professional soldiers," as Admiral McDonald insisted, or construction workers, as the Cuban government claimed? One answer, of course, is that one version suggests an attempt to take over a country and perhaps export revolution (which the Reagan administration said was the case), while the other version suggests that Cuba might only have been providing economic aid to a government that it considered an ally.

The inflation of the number of Cubans, and the initial characterization of them as a military force, was a part of the data that were used by the Reagan administration to argue that a Cuban takeover was at hand, that American students were in danger, and that, as many newspapers repeated in their headlines, "We got there just in time."

**G**renada also highlighted a major problem in trying to counter deception and misinformation. The president was able to give his version on national television, to a huge audience, and was backed up by carefully selected and edited television film clips. The challenges to the official version came over a period of days and weeks, and they were fragmented and uncoordinated. One paper would challenge one statement, a second paper would challenge a second one, and a television report would challenge a third. A large number of Americans heard the president say, "We got there just in time." But it was only in a disjointed and scattershot way, over a period of weeks following the invasion, that the press raised the two immediate and obvious questions, neither of them yet fully answered.

Did we?

In time for what?

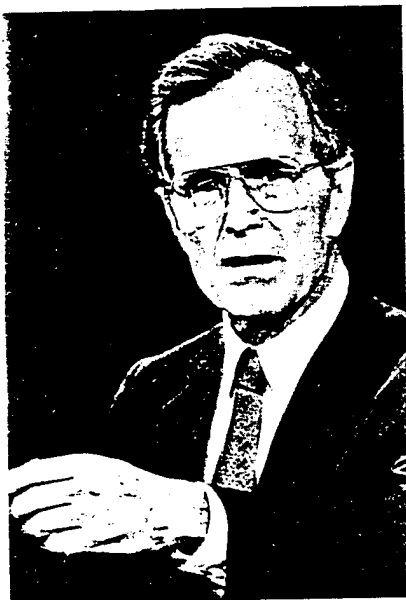
This issue arose again during the presidential campaign, when George Bush claimed in his television debate with Geraldine Ferraro that Mondale had said that the American Marines who had died in the bombing of the embassy in Beirut had died in "shame." Mondale denied this, and pressed Bush for a retraction. And in the process Peter Teeley, Bush's press secretary, brought the whole problem into focus.

"You can say anything you want in a debate, and eighty million people hear it," he told reporters. "If reporters then document that a candidate spoke untruthfully, so what? Maybe two hundred people read it, or two thousand or twenty thousand."

Which makes the point that, particularly in the television age, reporters need to be aggressive in documenting and pointing out deceptions, half-truths, and outright lies, unless governments and officials are going to be allowed to lie with impunity.

#### How some journalists cope with official misinformation

There are some kinds of misinformation that quickly become apparent on their own. For example, there was Tricia Nixon's wedding cake. According to the White House, it had been based on a recipe for old-fashioned pound cake, a



UPI/Bettmann

**"You can say anything you want in a debate and 80 million people hear it," Bush's press secretary said. "If reporters then document that a candidate spoke untruthfully, so what? Maybe 200 people read it"**

*George Bush during his October 1984 debate with Geraldine Ferraro*

**Continued**



Tricia Nixon and Edward Finch Cox cutting their wedding cake

**'The whole wedding cake episode suggested that a White House that would put out misinformation about a recipe probably couldn't be expected to tell the truth about the war in Cambodia. Which it didn't'**

favorite of Tricia's, that had been in Mrs. Nixon's recipe box for years. But when the White House released a recipe for the wedding cake, scaled back down to family size, there was a problem. Housewives and amateur cooks all over the country, including food writers for several newspapers and magazines, rushed to test it. The result in many cases was a porridge-like glob that overflowed the baking pans and messed up the ovens.

When asked for an explanation, the White House first said there must have been a miscalculation in the attempt to scale down the recipe. There was hemming and hawing when it was suggested that the White House should simply produce the original recipe, from Mrs. Nixon's recipe box. There was bobbing and weaving when it was noted that most recipes for pound cake call for whole eggs (this one called only for the whites), while the White House chef was quoted as saying that his pastry chef had gotten the recipe, "where I don't know." This in itself was of no great import, except that the whole episode suggested that a White House that would put out misinformation about the origins of a cake recipe probably couldn't be expected to tell the truth about the war in Cambodia. Which it didn't.

It's not possible to test all government statements as easily as a cake recipe, of course. Some deceptions are so major and so long-running and so tightly held that it takes the combination of Congress, the courts, and the media, working over a period of years, to unravel them. But Patrick Sloyan, a Washington reporter for two decades and now *Newsday's* London bureau chief, argues that basic reporting, common sense, and "simple math on a pocket calculator can often deflate the biggest government lies."

One of the easiest and most obvious ways to challenge official statements is simply to go to the opposition. When Reagan claimed that his administration had made "great progress" in its efforts to protect the environment, Francis X. Clines, of *The New York Times*, made clear that officials of some of the nation's leading environmental groups didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the statement. For specifics, he went to Representative James L. Florio of New Jersey, who noted that of 22,000 hazardous waste sites identified by the EPA, only six had been cleaned up by the Reagan administration in four years, and that even as the president was trumpeting his record on the environment, he was opposing proposals in Congress to combat acid rain.

Many such claims are more a matter of opinion than fact, of course, and going to the other side is a first lesson of journalism. But some of the most basic kinds of reporting can be used to provide a second, often different, view of events and issues. And in covering an administration that works as hard as Reagan's does to control and shape the information being released, basic reporting is particularly important.

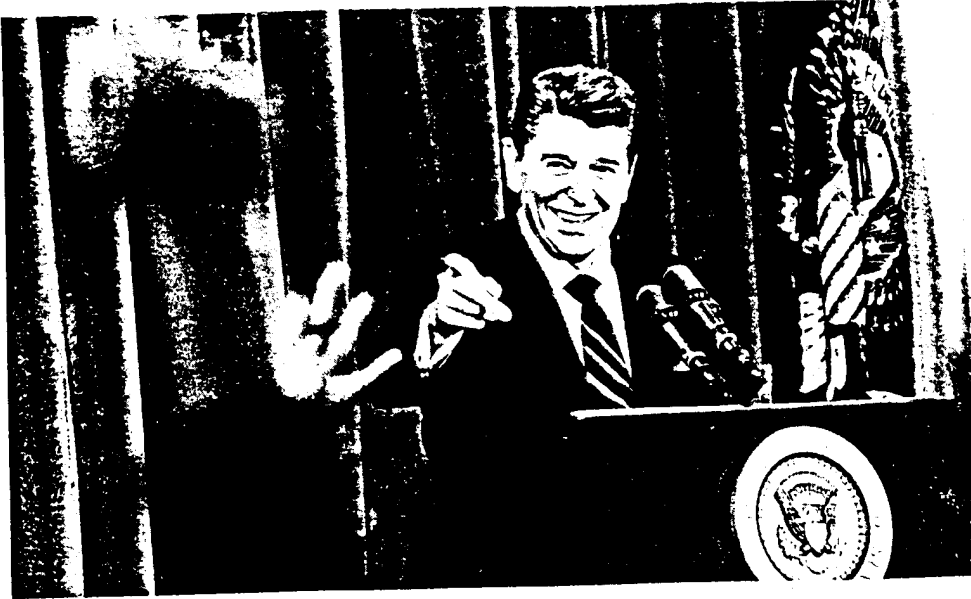
**Go to the scene:** During the invasion of Grenada, Reagan and the Pentagon camera crews combined to show American television viewers warehouses on the island that seemingly were stacked to the rafters with automatic weapons. The president said there were enough of them to "supply thousands of terrorists." But when reporters themselves got to the sites they found some of the warehouses half-empty, some of them stacked with cases of sardines, and many of the weapons antiquated, possibly more suited for defense by an island militia than for the export of terrorism and revolution.

**Go to the people affected:** The Reagan administration insisted that its changes in the Social Security Disability law were intended only to get rid of people who had no right to the government aid in the first place. The people being removed, it said, were able-bodied people who had managed to slip through loopholes and get themselves into the program because of lax monitoring and ambiguous standards. But it turned out that a third of a million persons, including many with serious physical handicaps and mental disorders, had been cut off from the payments in a massive purge of the rolls, often on the basis of reviews of their health records by doctors who had never examined them in person.

Here is how Bob Wyrick and Patrick Owens of *Newsday* began a series that grew out of a months-long study of persons whose benefits had been taken away:

"Lyle Ely was blind in one eye and had tunnel vision in the other. He could not, as he complained in one of the many forms he filled out in the last years of his life, see well enough to read, drive a car, or watch television. His partial blindness, along with the convulsive seizures that also plagued him, was caused by a tumor that grew to the size of a large orange in the front part of his brain. But claims examiners and reviewing physicians who had never seen him found him well enough to work, cancelled his Social Security disability pension, and reaffirmed the cancellation when Ely applied for reconsideration."

*Continued*



12.  
 'In covering an administration that works as hard as Reagan's does to control and shape the information being released, basic reporting is particularly important'

*President Reagan  
 at a 1982 White House  
 press conference*

**Go to the documents:** In February 1981, the State Department issued a white paper on El Salvador, which it said "presents definitive evidence of the clandestine military support given by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and their Communist allies to the Marxist-Leninist guerrillas now fighting to overthrow the established government of El Salvador." It said that the evidence was drawn from captured guerrilla documents and war material, and had been "corroborated by intelligence reports."

The white paper was accepted by much of the nation's press, was used by State Department officials to drum up support in Europe for Reagan's Central America policy, and was used on the Hill by White House lobbyists to persuade Congress that more funds were needed to help counter the outside aid being given to Salvadoran guerrillas. But when Jonathan Kwitney of *The Wall Street Journal* began a study of the documents a few months later, and went back to the people who had drafted the white paper, he found the evidence something less than it had been made out to be.

"Several of the most important documents, it's obvious, were attributed to guerrilla leaders who didn't write them. And it's unknown who did," he wrote in the *Journal*. "Statistics of armament shipments into El Salvador, supposedly drawn directly from the documents, were extrapolated . . . and in questionable ways, it seems. Much information in the white paper can't be found in the documents at all. This information now is attributed by the State Department to other, still-secret sources."

Kwitney's article did not totally discredit the conclusion of the white paper, which was that some weapons and supplies were being sent to the rebels by communist governments overseas. But it made clear that the evidence cited by the State Department, which had been accepted at face value by much of the press, wasn't as clear or as precise or as unambiguous as the government had claimed.

So, too, with Grenada. Admiral McDonald said on October 28 that captured documents showed that "341 more officers and 4,000 more reservists" had been scheduled to arrive from Cuba as part of a plan for "the Cubans to come in and take over the island. . . ." But Stuart Taylor of *The New York Times* reported that the captured documents, when

finally released, showed an agreement by the Soviet Union and North Korea to provide Grenada with \$37 million worth of equipment; the only reference to more Cuban soldiers was a promise by the Cubans to provide twenty-seven military advisers to train Grenadian troops.

A senior Pentagon official was quoted by Taylor as saying that McDonald had been mistaken about the 4,341 additional troops — they were to have been Grenadians, not Cubans. And he went on to report that "there is no evidence . . . that the Cubans had planned to take over Grenada either in the documents released Friday or in any other materials made public by the administration."

**Check the numbers:** When James Nathan Miller set out to examine Reagan's civil rights record, he went to the data that Reagan himself had used to illustrate what he termed "our unbending commitment" to civil rights. What Miller found were not outright lies — he did not once use the word "lie" in his *Atlantic* article — but a selective use of information that told only a part of the story. For example, Reagan had touted the fact that his Justice Department had reviewed 25,000 proposed changes in the Voting Rights Act, and had vetoed 165 of them because it felt they would be discriminatory. When Miller looked at the actual record, however, he found that the veto of 165 proposed changes was not an unusually strong enforcement of the law but a dramatic reduction in the rate of objections. From 1965 until Reagan took office, the department had vetoed 2.4 out of every 100 proposed changes it had examined. But the figures that Reagan cited amounted to a veto rate of .7 per 100 — a decrease of 71 percent.

Again, in a speech to the American Bar Association, Reagan said that in his first thirty months in office the Justice Department had filed more than a hundred cases charging criminal violations of citizens' civil rights. This, he said, was not just a respectable number, but was "substantially more than any prior administration during a comparable period."

In terms of *criminal* cases, the Reagan administration actually was ahead of where the Carter administration was after the first thirty months. Reagan's Justice Department

**Continued**

had filed 114 criminal cases, while Carter's had filed 101. But the civil law has been a potent weapon for civil rights in recent decades, and when the number of *civil* cases was added, the Reagan administration fell well behind the record of the Carter administration at thirty months — a total of 225 civil and criminal suits filed by Carter, and only 156 filed by Reagan.

"Almost every one of the major points I made in the article was being made for the first time," Miller says. "The people in the daily press, even those covering civil rights, had simply printed the statements without any serious attempt to check their validity."

### The need for a more aggressive press

It is not necessary to challenge every statistic to make a point, and readers of most major newspapers have been told repeatedly that the Reagan administration has a philosophy about enforcement of civil rights laws that is very different from that of most recent administrations. But Miller nonetheless has a point when he says that for reporters to accept such numbers on their face is to allow themselves and their readers to be manipulated and deceived.

**T**he challenge is likely to become greater as Reagan, immensely popular and recently swept back into office by a landslide, moves ahead with his stated goals for limiting the flow of information to the public. Already, his administration has supported bills that would exempt the Secret Service, the CIA, and most FBI activities from the Freedom of Information Act, and has imposed a rule at the Defense Department that any person with access to classified information must submit to lie detector tests whenever asked to. It has reversed the Carter administration policy and now allows the FBI and CIA to infiltrate the media if the attorney general finds it in the interest of the national security to do so, and has set regulations that allow the FBI to infiltrate and monitor domestic groups, including the press, while conducting investigations of organized crime or terrorism. It has slashed the budget of the indexing staff of the National Archives, meaning that access to historical records, including the Nixon tapes, will be delayed for years. It has created mechanisms for monitoring contacts between White House staffers and reporters, and has issued guidelines telling officials handling FOIA requests to be stingy in giving fee reductions to journalists, scholars, and authors. It has rewritten the classification system to insure that more, rather than less, information will be classified. And it has made proposals — already implemented in some agencies — that would require all officials who have had access to classified information to come back to the government for the rest of their lives and submit for prior censorship any speeches, letters to the editor, news articles, or works of fiction.

Nick Horrock, of *Newsweek*, who has worked in Washington for most of the past two decades, says that some of the changes are atmospheric, and not entirely caused by Reagan. "There has been a shift back to an atmosphere much more like it was in the early 1960s," Horrock says. "During the Vietnam War and Watergate, a lot of dissidents

were in the government, and they were quick to speak out, to tell reporters that things weren't working the way they should. Now, there aren't so many dissidents. It's not popular to take risks. Being a whistle-blower is no longer popular."

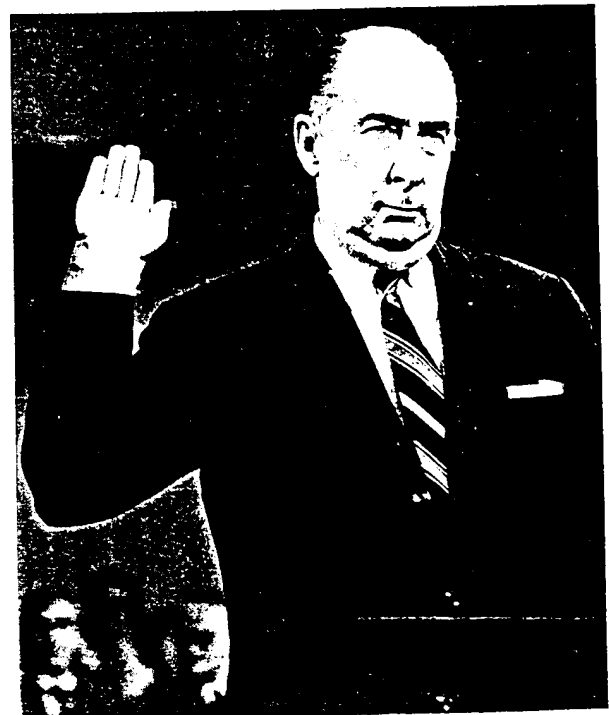
In a recent article, William Greider, the former assistant managing editor for national news at *The Washington Post* and now national editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine, argued that the press, too, seems to be in retreat. "It seems to be pulling in its lances, taking fewer risks, avoiding the hard and nasty confrontations it would have zealously pursued five or ten years ago . . .," he wrote. "The trend I see is deep and subtle — a shift toward 'hard news,' which means narrow splinters of unexamined fact, a turning away from more provocative explorations of subjects that have not been legitimized by official sources."

If he's right, and many in the media agree that he is, it is happening at a particularly bad time. The history of the press-government relationship since World War II shows that administrations have claimed a right to lie in some circumstances, and have been unable to resist the temptation to deceive in a great many others. And this particular administration, headed by a tremendously popular president, has made clear that it wants to make information about government operations harder to get, and, in terms of threats to their careers, more dangerous for civil servants to provide.

That means that the press needs to be even more aggressive, not less, if it is to follow the John Mitchell rule for covering government: Don't watch what we say. Watch what we do. ■

**'The press needs to be more aggressive if it is to follow the John Mitchell rule for covering government: Don't watch what we say. Watch what we do'**

*Attorney General John Mitchell appearing before a Senate subcommittee in 1971*



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