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IS TV NEWS REVEALING TOO MANY GOVERNMENT SECRETS?

Network correspondents on the intelligence beat walk a fine line between informing the public and jeopardizing national security

By John Weisman

February 1983: The U.S. secretly deployed four AWACS early-warning aircraft to Egypt and made other clandestine moves in order to monitor a Libyan military buildup on the Sudanese border. ABC national-security correspondent John McWethy learned about the U.S. moves. But at the request of high-ranking Pentagon officials, who told him that if he broadcast it, American intelligence sources and methods would be compromised, McWethy sat on the story for 24 hours. "The assessment," says former State Department spokesman Alan Romberg, "is that [McWethy] perhaps helped save somebody's life."

May 1983: CBS correspondent David Martin, citing "Administration sources," reported that U.S. intelligence intercepted a series of cables sent from Tehran to Damascus: cables that implicated the government of Ayatollah Khomeini in the April 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in which 17 Americans died. CIA spokesman George Lauder says Martin's report "caused us to lose the manner in which the intercept was made within 10 days after the story ran."

"If that's true," says Martin, "I cost CIA a source. Not a human source, a source which I'm sure they have replaced by now. But it probably cost them some money to do it. If, in fact, that is true, then obviously that is a story I shouldn't have done."

During the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 last June, all three networks reported on the movement of Delta Force, the U.S.'s elite counterterror strike force, to the Mediterranean. Even though CBS, ABC and NBC's reporting was nonspecific, Secretary of State George Shultz and other Administration officials accused the press of jeopardizing the hostages.

NBC correspondent Fred Francis says that before airing his

report he called "a ranking officer in the Army" for confirmation about Delta's movements. The officer, says Francis, "told me flatly . . . 'we'd rather you didn't [report] it, but frankly [Delta] isn't going anywhere near that plane.'" Francis claims U.S. intelligence knew TWA Flight 847 was going back to Beirut before Delta could stage a rescue operation at Algiers, and the press disclosures jeopardized nothing.

According to a high-ranking intelligence official, at one point during the seajacking of the Achille Lauro by PLO terrorists, CBS's David Martin gathered information for a report about "'SIGINT' [signals intelligence] information on the methods we were using" to learn what was taking place aboard the ship. According to the official, CIA director William Casey placed a personal call to then-CBS News president Edward Joyce and convinced Joyce (who declined to be interviewed for this article) not to televise Martin's exclusive. (Martin says he decided independently not to broadcast the spot.)

There is a constant battle over sensitive information going on these days. In one camp are the networks, whose news operations want to inform viewers about developments within the intelligence and national-security areas. In the other are officials at the CIA, the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon.

"The press," says CIA spokesman George Lauder, "says that the public has a right to know everything. That's a load of garbage. The public has a need to know that it is being protected, but there is a constant tension between that need to know and what the press so often decides to report."

How responsible is television when it comes to reporting national-security and intelligence-based stories? A good percentage of those charged with keeping the Nation's secrets will tell you that often it is not responsible at all. "There is a lot of reporting of classified information that is damaging to us, which we don't know about until we see it on the air," says chief Pentagon spokesman Robert Sims. →

But those who cover the beat say that the Government tends to overreact when it comes to intelligence reporting, crying wolf too often to protect, not national security, but incompetence and embarrassing intelligence failures. ABC's John Scali, who has covered the national-security and intelligence beat for more than 40 years, says, "News organizations have a responsibility to help maintain the Nation's vital secrets in a world where nuclear weapons can incinerate a hemisphere. But this doesn't mean we have to stand mute and salute every time somebody demands a story be killed."

"I don't know how strong I can be on this," says NBC's Fred Francis. "They classify too much. They scream too much about what they read in the papers or see on television, when in fact most of what they see or read has already been published before, or reported in testimony before some Senate committee."

As evidence, Francis cites a two-part report he did in January 1985 on the Pentagon's special-operations forces. He and his producer, Bob Windrem, came across an article in the periodical *Naval Proceedings* that reported about two nuclear submarines, the John Marshall and the Sam Houston, which were being converted by the Navy for special-operations commando use.

Francis says when he went to the Navy to ask about the program, which had also been discussed on Capitol Hill, he was told it was classified. "I said, 'Nah, guys, it's not classified. Look at May 1984 *Naval Proceedings*.' But they refused to talk about it. Well, the day they refused, we were flying over the two submarines on the West Coast, filming them."

Mark Brender, a former Naval officer who is the Washington national-security assignment editor for ABC News, cites another example. "I'm dealing with the USS Samuel Rayburn, which, under the SALT agreement, is now dismantled—its hatches are lying open and the missiles are out. The sub is sitting at the Charleston, South Carolina, Naval Shipyard right now—sitting in the water alongside a pier, no tent

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over it, so the Soviets can fly over and verify, through their national technical means that yes, the Rayburn is in fact dismantled. I asked the Navy to let us go in with a camera and shoot a picture of the sub. Their response has been, 'No—it's a controlled area, no photography allowed.'

"Well, here the Soviets are, [satellites] flying over, making passes all the time, taking all the pictures they want, but I can't get in with a camera to get an establishing picture of the ship, even though it really epitomizes what arms control is all about."

According to the correspondents who cover national security, many of the stories they do have already been made public, either in testimony on Capitol Hill, or in one of the defense-related publications such as Aviation Week. If it hasn't, they insist they are cautious. "Here's the bottom line," says NBC's Francis: "If I get information that I can't find as a matter of public information anywhere—if it's not buried in some staff report from some obscure committee in Congress, or in a scholarly dissertation from one of the think tanks—and it's a national-security issue, we don't go with it. That's the bottom line: we don't go with it."

Even so, stories such as those about the space shuttle Discovery's military payload drew fire from Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who tried to pressure the networks not to report about the shuttle's top-secret cargo despite the fact that articles on the subject had appeared prior to the spacecraft's launch. NBC, at Weinberger's behest, held the story.

Intelligence professionals, however, disagree with Francis's point of view. "Just because the other fellow did it' is a lousy argument," says William Coenen, a retired Marine officer with strong ties to the intelligence community. "This sort of thing gives a tremendous advantage to our Soviet adversaries. It enables them to spend a hell of a lot less money than we for the same facts."

Adds former deputy CIA director Ray S. Cline, "The freedom we give the press . . . does assist the Soviet Union and other

hostile nations in collecting information. . . . The intelligence agencies accept that. It's the price you pay for living in an open society. . . . But if you wrap everything together and put it on a silver platter on the front page of The Washington Post, you can be very sure that every aspect of that problem will be [discussed] in Moscow the next day."

Correspondents dispute Coenen and Cline. "In my pieces on the TWA 847 hijacking," says ABC's McWethy, "I referred to the fact that the U.S. dispatched the Delta team to the Mediterranean. I did not say where they were. I knew where they were. David Martin knew where they were. Neither one of us put it on the air."

There have been a number of stories known to intelligence correspondents that were not reported at the time because they would have endangered lives. All three networks knew about the six Americans who took refuge in the Canadian Embassy in Tehran when the U.S. Embassy was taken over in November 1979. The identity of a National Security Agency employee who became a hostage of Shiite terrorists on TWA Flight 847 also was known but not reported.

And one retired Army officer, who has extensive experience in clandestine operations, says that when he worked for a television network as a consultant during the TWA Flight 847 crisis, the network had a folder full of sensitive information that it did not put on the air.

ABC's John Scali says that in fact the biggest problem with intelligence reporting is not the press, but the intelligence community itself. "William Casey has tried to build a no-information wilderness around the agency," he says. "This approach is failing. It's an outdated view of a fast-moving world." Indeed, argues Scali, Casey's "ancient no-comment policy" actually encourages irresponsible leaks. "There's not too little information," says Scali, "there's too much—just too little of the responsible kind."

David Martin adds that sensitive material is often leaked for political reasons. "Like the Carter White House leaking the

fact that they were supporting the rebels in Afghanistan at a time when Carter was under widespread accusations of being a wimp." Reporters who cover national security believe the Reagan Administration selectively leaked information from the debriefings of Soviet defector Vitaly Yurchenko to bolster the image of American intelligence in the wake of a number of embarrassing spy scandals.

"Sometimes," says McWethy, "the people who provide you with information have huge axes to grind—against the Administration, or against other countries—and they're giving you information to grind that ax. You have to be careful."

But, say intelligence professionals, more than care is needed. When security is at stake, reporters should remain silent. "The responsibility of the media is to tell the truth," says William Coenen. "We all agree with that. But sometimes the situation demands that—for the safety of the citizens of this country—the media keep things quiet for a certain amount of time. I think there has to be responsibility on the part of the fourth estate to recognize that and handle it appropriately."

Most journalists, however, are uncomfortable with the role Coenen proposes for them. Says John McWethy: "We're all citizens of the United States. The job of the Government is to deal with national crises and dispatch military forces, and collect intelligence and so forth. My job as a responsible citizen and as a responsible journalist is to chronicle what the Government is doing."

Which is why career intelligence officers like George Lauder throw up their hands in frustration. "We're trying to protect this country, not screw it," he says. "All too often I get the idea journalists are out to screw this country, not protect it."

Will this often bitter relationship ever change? Neither reporters nor intelligence professionals think so. As former CIA director William Colby puts it: "People in the national-security area have a responsibility to protect secrets. News guys have the responsibility to find them out. They're natural antagonists." ☞