

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C6.

WASHINGTON POST
5 October 1986

Joseph Laitin

Web of Lies

The reader outrage over The Post's publishing Bob Woodward's revelation last week that our government has been conducting a carefully planned program to give false information to the American people matched the anger of those in the past month who were offended at some ethnic and religious articles carried in this paper.

But in this new outpouring of anger, it is odd that the vehement reaction was to The Post's printing things that were true. There was not a shred of indignation that The Post, along with other news media, had unknowingly printed lies. It is also interesting to note that both the truth and the lies were provided by government officials.

What it boils down to is that the government was telling big fibs and The Post was telling big truths. So who gets castigated? It is a sorry state of affairs.

Every day, government spokesmen put a "spin" on the facts to make the administration look good. I imagine that's been standard operating procedure since George Washington's ad-

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ministration. As for the government's slicing the truth a little thin, in day-to-day operations, that's what newsmen get paid for—they're not stenographers simply taking down what's told them. Their job is to ask questions, panning for nuggets of gold.

But when the government tells outright lies that are sometimes impossible to disprove, this requires a whole new look at government.

In contemporary times, all administrations have been guilty of lying. A Pentagon spokesman in the Kennedy-Johnson era said the government had a right to lie to defend itself. The president who made it a campaign issue that he would never lie to the American people had his press secretary mislead the press when he felt the occasion demanded it. The Nixon administration was laced with untruths foisted on the American people, and it paid the heaviest price for it.

In this recent exercise in official government deceit, it was a case of amateur night: grown men acting like children, but playing with a dangerous toy, which is disinformation—a word, incidentally, coined by the Soviets that refers to the practice of slipping into the system negative stories for the purpose of confusing the enemy. (Moscow's speedy advice to the United States of its disabled nuclear sub off the East Coast may well have been an inspired effort to capitalize on Washington's embarrassment by showing how the Kremlin levels with the American people.)

Secretary of State Shultz, no friend of the Russians, defends the employment of the carefully planned web of lies, which is an effort, intentional or otherwise, to corrupt the press. He quotes Winston Churchill's World War II observation that "in time of war, the truth is so precious it must be attended by a bodyguard of lies." Secretary Shultz thus compares a desert rat like Moammar Gadhafi with a monster like Adolf Hitler.

This is a situation impossible to defend, even for so honorable a man as George Shultz. It is curious that Secretary Shultz's defense did achieve one purpose he hardly intended: unequivocal confirmation of Bob Woodward's story, which the White House was ineptly denying. And where will all this leave government officials who do tell the truth?

There are only two criticisms I have of Bob Woodward's story. He was too hard on The Wall Street Journal, which carried the first "disinformation" article; after all, it was the victim, not the perpetrator. And he should have raised the question of whether the disinformation gang had been testing the waters for some months prior to The Journal article and perhaps planted one or two fabricated stories in The Post.

It is desirable that we do not return in the wake of this unfortunate affair to the post-Watergate era, when the Woodward-Bernstein school of journalism spawned a new breed of correspondent who cruelly cross-examined, rather than skillfully interviewed, who considered government officials guilty until they proved themselves innocent. This unproductive syndrome had just about worn off in Washington, but here we are again.

The American people are best served when there exists a healthy arm's-length relationship between government and the news media.

I hope and pray for the sake of the American people that, in this uneasy balance between government and the news media, neither side ever wins a decisive victory.