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Security breach buffoonery

Funny guy, that Ben Bradlee, executive editor of *The Washington Post*. How funny? Well, let me tell you about one of his jokes.

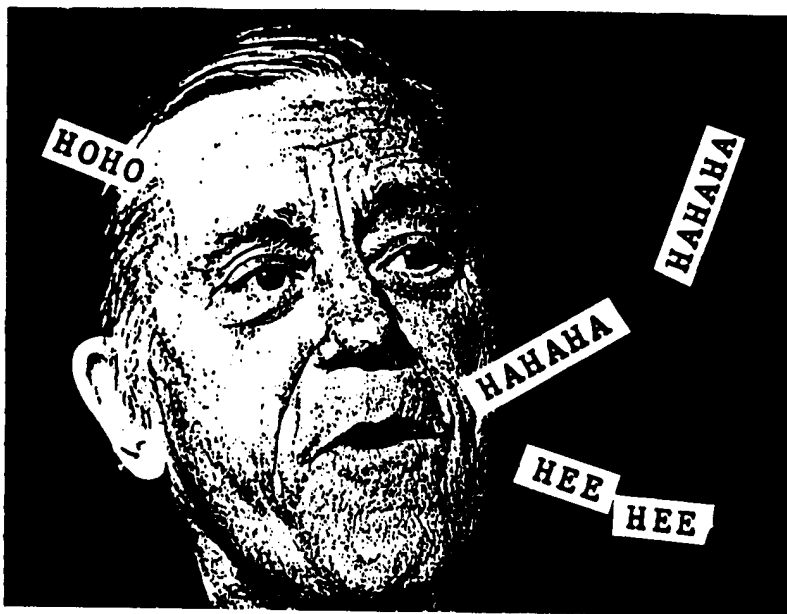
In May of last year, laugh-a-minute-Ben wrote Attorney General William French Smith to complain about an "apparent national security violation" allegedly committed by Republican Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina — the revelation that the CIA bought the election in El Salvador for Jose Napoleon Duarte. Writing as one who has "long had an interest in national security violations," Mr. B. wondered if the attorney general knew of any security breach as "significant" as that committed by Mr. Helms?

Treating this inquiry with the disdain it so richly deserved — because it was hogwash — the attorney general replied with five paragraphs of gobbledegook that ran in *The Post* under the headline: "Perfectly Clear? Smith 'responds' on Helms 'leak.'"

A real thigh-slapper, right?

OK. Now, comes a front-page story in the Nov. 3, 1985, *Post*, by Bob Woodward, headlined: "CIA Anti-Qaddafi Plan Backed. Reagan Authorizes Covert Operation to Undermine Libyan Regime." Quoting from "a top-secret" 29-page "Vulnerability Assessment" done by the CIA and other intelligence agencies, dated June 18, 1984, this story reported that Mr. Reagan had authorized a CIA covert operation designed to undermine the Libyan regime headed by Col. Muammar Qaddafi, according to "informed government sources."

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Ben Bradlee

So, remembering Gentle Ben's letter to the A.G. last year, Mr. Helms wrote Mr. B. about his paper's recent anti-Qaddafi-plot story. And what the senator wanted to know was this: have you turned yourself in to the A.G., since this story quotes from "top-secret" intelligence documents and is, thus, a national security violation? To which Mr. B. replied:

"Dear Sen. Helms: I had to refresh my memory about that letter written 15 months ago. You must understand that I am on your side in this matter. My letter was meant as a joke; hence the quotes around 'responds' and 'leak.' I thought then, and I think now, that your revelation that the CIA bought the election of El Salvador for Duarte should have been published, and had we had it before you,

we would have published it before you.

Sincerely,
Ben Bradlee."

Ha-ha. A real laugh riot, right?

But *The Post's* story about the CIA's alleged anti-Qaddafi covert operation ain't quite as humorous.

For openers, in an interview broadcast by the Tripoli Voice of Greater Arab Homeland in Arabic, Col. Qaddafi said that if *The Post* story is true, "then we will have to move and we will have to fight ourselves. From a point of self-defense, we shall move the battle inside America, and we shall subvert from inside." An action calls for an action on a reciprocal basis, he said.

And in *The Post* itself, Democratic Rep. Lee Hamilton of Indiana, chairman of the House Permanent

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Select Committee on Intelligence, was quoted as saying that *The Post* story about the alleged anti-Qaddafi operation is "a very serious leak of a different magnitude than the others."

Furthermore, *The Post* also reported that several senior U.S. officials have questioned the wisdom of the paper's decision to publish this article, a decision they say has compromised U.S. diplomacy and seriously embarrassed the opposition to Col. Qaddafi and his Arab backers.

Incredible as it may sound, *Post* Managing Editor Leonard Downie was quoted in this same *Post* story as saying that the whole question of what kinds of covert operations the CIA should engage in "is one suitable for public scrutiny" (emphasis mine). Mr. Downie said *The Post* disclosed no precise details of what the CIA was planning to do, "which we

should not and did not do."

And this is not the first time *The Post* has run dangerous information damaging to the effort to get rid of Muammar Qaddafi. In a recently published book *Intelligence Requirements for the 1980s*, Herbert Romerstein, a former professional staff member of the House Committee on Intelligence, says *The Post* helped incite Col. Qaddafi to a fever pitch in 1981 when it reported that several members of the House Intelligence Committee had sent a letter to the CIA protesting a certain covert operation against Libya.

Newsweek magazine, which is owned by *The Post*, falsely asserted — according to Mr. Romerstein — that this alleged covert operation was "a plot to kill Libyan dictator Qaddafi. The so-called Free Officers Association, Qaddafi's supporters in Libya, then threatened to murder President Reagan. Thus was born the 'Libyan hit team' threat...."

And in May this year, our intel-

ligence community was sharply critical of another Bob Woodward/*Post* story which left a totally erroneous impression that the CIA was somehow connected with the March 8 bombing in a Beirut suburb that killed more than 80 Shi'ite Moslems. This implication was so off-base that even the Democrat-dominated House Select Intelligence Committee dismissed it. And a Reagan administration official said of this *Post* story:

"(It) put the lives of every American in Lebanon in jeopardy. ... I find it utterly contemptible. It invites retaliation against every American in Beirut, including women and children."

Indeed, one of the terrorists who hijacked TWA Flight 847 reportedly cited this *Post* story to justify his brutal murder of Robert Stethem, the Navy diver who was aboard this aircraft.

At a Jonathan Institute conference on international terrorism last

year, when asked whether the news media should share information with an international agency to combat terrorism, *The Post's* Bob Woodward replied: "It's not our job. Our job, simply and happily, is to find out what's going on and publish it."

Well, this may be a simple approach, but it is not always a happy one. Ask the surviving friends and relatives of Bob Stethem. He's dead. And it's not because of any information disclosed by Jesse Helms, Mr. Bradley.

But then, no hard feelings. Maybe these stories were also a joke, right? Ha-ha.

Footnote: In a Nov. 26 letter to Mr. Bradley, Sen. Helms writes: "I am obliged to ask if you would be willing to publish, even belatedly, that *The Post* never believed that I 'leaked classified information.' The 1984 election is behind us, and *The Post* didn't succeed in its efforts to unseat me. So it would not do harm to *The Post's* political purpose to set this record straight."