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White House Reported Acting To Stem Information Leaks

The following article was written by Nicholas M. Horrock on the basis of his reporting and that of Anthony Marro and Richard Burt.

WASHINGTON, May 13—The Carter Administration is moving to tighten its control over the flow of unauthorized information from the Government, according to defense, intelligence and White House officials.

These sources report that high-level concern over the flow of information has become as great as it was in the early months of the Nixon Administration.

They add that there is the same tendency to lump together all forms of unauthorized disclosure, ranging from so-called "news leaks" that embarrass the Administration to unapproved books and articles by former officials, including intelligence officials, and release of sensitive national security information.

There is no evidence that the Carter Administration, which came to Washington 15 months ago pledging "open" government, has taken measures similar to those used in the Nixon Administration, which ordered the Federal Bureau of Investigation to tap the telephones of 17 Government officials and reporters in an attempt to choke off information.

Embarrassment a Cause

But the Carter Administration has mounted a range of internal inquiries, tightened National Security Council regulations on interviews, opened the prosecution of one espionage case and filed a breach of contract suit against a former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency who wrote an unauthorized book.

At first, the Carter Administration did seem more open but, like previous administrations, including those of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, it moved to tighten control over the flow of information when officials were increasingly embarrassed by public disclosures of internal debate, disputes and policy decisions.

So far, the Carter Administration has apparently refrained from directing any inquiry against a news organization or a reporter, but several inquiries have had a chilling effect on some Government sources. Moreover, several Justice Department lawyers now required to sign affidavits about their contacts with reporters as a part of leak inquiries, have become unwilling to talk with reporters.

Problem Is Diverse

Internal investigation experts in two departments said that the Government has been looking for a case that would be, as one put it, "an example—a case that would really slam an employee and possibly embarrass the news organization that dealt with him."

At the moment, government sources said, there are two important investigations of alleged security breaches under way that appear to blur the line between efforts to cope with news leaks and more serious counter-espionage measures.

If the countermeasures to leaks are diverse, so is the problem. There are, of course, traditional types of disclosures that have plagued most modern presidents: those designed to force them to adopt a policy position and those by Government agencies lobbying for budget preference.

But interviews with various officials isolated two forms of disclosure that appear to have grown more troublesome in the last year—the unauthorized publication of books or articles by former government employees and leaked documents.

In one continuing investigation a leaked document is a key factor. On April 14 a Defense Department official prepared a memorandum urging that the Administration develop a missile that could be used on land or on submarines.

Two key government sources said that on the same day the memorandum was prepared it appeared in the West Coast office of a defense contractor, which suggested that it might have been transmitted by either a telephone or telegraph device that uses a microwave system and thus might be vulnerable to eavesdropping by the Soviet Union.

What complicates the matter is that the contents of the memorandum became part of a news article several days later. The inquiry into the document's transmission, described as a national security investigation, has now become a search for a news source as well.

According to one well-placed Government official, the dual nature of this case further confuses the distinction between investigations based on assertions of national security and efforts to control the flow of news to the public.

There is a similar dual potential for Government investigators in a recently ordered F.B.I. investigation. Several weeks ago, The New York Times queried Government officials about a potentially critical national security investigation of

a Government official. The reporters were assured, after several days, that the matter had been closed and no wrongdoing had been found.

But other well placed Government sources said that the F.B.I. had opened an inquiry to discover how information about the investigation leaked to The Times. The result of a security inquiry could be disclosure to the Government of confidential news sources.

With the traditional maneuvering among the armed services for the defense dollar, leaks from the Department of Defense have been particularly numerous in the last few months.

Why Brown Is Concerned

A top-level Pentagon official said that this back door lobbying for shares of the defense budget was not unusual, but that Harold Brown, the Secretary of Defense, and others were concerned because the leaks so often took the form of secret memorandums and other documents.

"I can remember when a reporter wouldn't touch a secret document," he said. Another top-level defense official said he understood that the leaking of documents is so brisk that reporters "get unsolicited documents in the mail."

These officials and other security experts argued that leaking whole documents sharply increased the possibility that true national security information might be compromised. While the public might need to know the main thrust of a memorandum, the officials said, they contended that leaking the whole document needlessly exposed details.

What has severely complicated the Government's ability to halt the unauthorized disclosure of documents is that there has been little attempt to revamp the security classification system. Under the system, millions of documents containing innocuous information are stamped "secret" and "top secret" and given other restrictions.

Disagreement Over Secrets

For example, in a trial of a United States Information Agency officer charged under the espionage act with giving secret documents to an alleged agent for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, government officials disagreed over whether disclosure of certain classified documents had actually been harmful to the national defense.

As in other administrations, another major source of news leaks are the Administration officials who are trying to covertly publicize their position on a policy question in an effort to manipulate President Carter's decisions.