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White House Said to Be in Talks With Washington Post on Data

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WASHINGTON, May 15 — The White House and The Washington Post have been engaged in "negotiations" over the last several weeks about the publication of information classified as secret that the newspaper has received, White House officials said today.

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A White House official said Edward P. Djerejian, a deputy White House press secretary who deals with national security matters, and Bob Woodward, an assistant managing editor of the newspaper, were "in the middle of negotiations" about the publication of the article. The official declined several times to discuss the nature or details of the negotiations.

Administration officials have said the information obtained by The Washington Post might have included some of the classified data provided to the Soviet Union by Ronald W. Pelton, a former employee of the National Security Agency, who has been charged with espionage. Mr. Pelton, who is in jail awaiting trial, is said to have told the Russians about American systems used to intercept communications.

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William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, has sought a commitment from the Justice Department to prosecute the paper if it published the information. Administration officials said last week that the Justice Department was resisting the request to prosecute The Post, as well as other newspapers and magazines that may have published information classified as secret.

A White House official declined to discuss the details of the White House negotiations with The Post, except to say, "We are discussing the proposed publication of an article, and our serious reservations on the publication for national security reasons."

The official said the White House "categorically opposes publication," of the article, adding that "there is an ongoing discussion."

Mr. Casey has met in recent weeks with two senior editors of The Post and warned them the newspaper could be prosecuted if it went ahead with its report. Both the Administration and Congress are seeking stiffer sanctions against those who disclose secrets. Earlier this month, the Pentagon dismissed a senior official on grounds that he had been the source of a news article on a sensitive matter.

Mr. Casey has said that he believed The Post as well as The New York Times, The Washington Times, and Time and Newsweek magazines had violated the law by publishing classified material on the raid against Libya.

Government officials have said that the information that The Post had obtained covered a broad range of activities of the National Security Agency.

White House officials said that they had "no idea" when The Post intended to print its article and that the Administration opposed any publication of the information that has been under discussion between Mr. Djerejian and Mr. Woodward.