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White House shuns Casey's proposal to prosecute press

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J The White House yesterday put considerable distance between President Reagan and any attempt to prosecute the press for printing leaks.

P "I basically just know what I read in the paper, and we're not involved in it," said White House spokesman Larry Speakes. He said the president has not discussed the matter with Mr. Casey.

Mr. Speakes said if a violation has occurred or will occur, and the CIA director makes a recommendation to the Justice Department, then the Justice Department, not the White House, would decide whether to prosecute.

A Mr. Casey carried his complaints against The Washington Times and The Washington Post, Newsweek and Time magazines — and by some accounts, The New York Times — to a meeting last week with Deputy Attorney General D. Lowell Jensen, who oversees the Justice Department's criminal division.

Although Justice Department sources remain officially silent, one source said the department was acting "like a dog trying to shake itself loose from a swarm of fleas."

Mr. Speakes said Mr. Casey had a private conversation with Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of the Post, and Leonard Downie, Jr., the managing editor, parts of which were printed Wednesday in The Post. The CIA director was said to be angry that The Post printed U.S. intelligence intercepts of Libyan communications about terrorist acts between Tripoli and European embassies.

Mr. Casey was said to have threatened to take action against The Post if it published material relating to the Ronald Pelton spy case.

Mr. Speakes said the president knew nothing of the matter until he returned to Washington on Wednesday from Japan.

He reminded reporters "that a gentleman at the Defense Department ended his service there rather abruptly here about three or four days ago."

The reference was to Michael E. Pillsbury, former assistant undersecretary of Defense for policy planning, who was fired after failing a polygraph test. The government was in search of the source of a leak to the Post about a U.S. decision to supply Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Angolan rebels.