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Reporters Say They'll Use Data From Briefing

By JONATHAN FRIENDLY

Reporters who attended a Defense Department briefing Tuesday at which they were asked to sign a secrecy oath said yesterday that they would use information from that session in future reports.

None of the 13 reporters actually signed the oath, but they did agree orally to restrictions on how they could publish the information about Soviet military capacity. They also were barred from taking notes at the two-hour presentation at the Pentagon.

In interviews yesterday, the report-

ers provided differing explanations of what those rules were. The consensus was that they could not write an immediate report relying solely on the briefing but could use the material to fill out future articles.

They said they would conceal the source of the information with such phrases as "the Administration believes" or "intelligence officials think."

Some Had Expected Document

Some of the reporters who attended the briefing said they knew in advance they would be asked to sign something but had thought the document would be a routine statement of rules under which briefings are frequently held. Others said they knew they would be asked to sign a formal secrecy agreement but attended the meeting with plans to leave if they could not persuade the Pentagon to drop the requirement.

Richard Gross, a reporter for United Press International, left the meeting rather than agree even to the oral pledge that the information would be given "off the record," which usually means that a reporter may not publish the information ever in any form.

"What's the point of giving us classified information you can't use?" he said, adding that "you become a party" to the Administration and observing, "If I wanted classified information for myself, I could join the Government."

The New York Times was notified in advance of the meeting that reporters would be asked to sign a formal secrecy agreement. Seymour Topping, the managing editor, said The Times decided not to send a reporter because it did not accept such preconditions, which "tend to confuse the issues and consequently the public."

Assailed as 'Clumsy Effort'

The Washington Post's Pentagon reporter did not attend because he was working on another assignment. The newspaper's executive editor, Benja-

min C. Bradlee, called the affair "a clumsy effort" by military officials, adding, "I don't see much point in going if you can't use the information."

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger arranged Tuesday's briefing by the Defense Intelligence Agency to respond to reporters' challenges to him to document his assertions that Soviet weapons imperiled American security.

The document the reporters were asked to sign said, among other things:

"I agree that, unless specifically authorized in writing by the Secretary of Defense, I will neither divulge or reveal in writing, broadcast, or any verbal discourse the actual information presented at this briefing nor the generic source upon which this D.I.A. briefing is based. Should an attempt be made by any person to solicit from me this defense information, I agree to report without delay any such incident to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for public affairs."

Such a pledge would have prohibited reporters even from telling their editors what was said at the session.

All of the reporters balked at signing the document. After negotiations, the Pentagon officials agreed to give the briefing under what most of the reporters said were rules that permitted them to make some use of the information.

The Defense Department officials who supervised the session did not respond yesterday to telephone calls seeking their explanation of the session or their view on the rules of disclosure.