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REPORTERS BALK AT SECRECY PLEDGE

Pentagon, in Unusual Move, Asked Journalists to Sign Agreement on Briefing

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 14 — The Defense Department today took the unusual step of asking reporters to sign a secrecy agreement before attending a briefing about Soviet military capabilities.

The secrecy agreement stipulated that the reporters never disclose "in writing, broadcast or any verbal discourse" the information they would hear. It also required the journalists to report to the Pentagon any effort made by others to obtain the sensitive information.

When the reporters balked at signing the agreement, senior officials in the department settled for their verbal word of honor.

The New York Times declined to send a correspondent to the briefing because of the restrictive conditions. Richard Gross, a correspondent for United Press International, left the session after the discussion about the secrecy agreement.

A 'Conflicting Assignment'

According to one reporter who was there, among those who attended it were representatives from the three commercial television networks, The Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times, The Baltimore Sun, The Associated Press and Newsweek.

George Wilson, Pentagon correspondent for The Washington Post, said he did not know about the restrictive rules but had not attended the session because he had a "conflicting assignment."

Seymour Topping, managing editor of The New York Times, issued this statement: "The Times does not enter into agreements that bar a reporter from sharing information with readers or responsible editors. The extraordinary agreement proposed by the Defense Department does not serve national security but simply tends to confuse the issues and consequently the public."

One reporter who was present, Fred Hoffman of The Associated Press, said that he rarely accepted information off the record but thought in this case that it would be educational.

45-Minute Argument Ensues

In a scene that some participants later said seemed to be drawn from the pages of "Alice in the Wonderland," the reporters and department officials spent the first 45 minutes arguing over the conditions for handling information that could not be told to the public.

The sequence of events that produced today's briefing began several weeks ago, when Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger invited correspondents who regularly cover the Pentagon to come to his office for a background briefing on military matters.

In the meeting, which was attended by about 15 reporters, Mr. Weinberger said that the Soviet Union posed a serious and ominous military threat to the United States, according to several reporters who attended the session. When Mr. Weinberger was pressed to support the contention, he said he would try to arrange an intelligence briefing on the subject for reporters.

However, officials from the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency, according to Pentagon sources, were reluctant to provide reporters with highly classified information, even on the understanding that the material would not be published or broadcast.

Agreement Proves Unacceptable

The problem was resolved, according to intelligence officials, when the Defense Department then offered to make reporters sign a secrecy agreement that would underscore the off-the-record ground rules of the briefing.

But the agreement drafted by Pentagon attorneys and public relations officials proved unacceptable to the reporters when it was announced today.

When the reporters were admitted to a Pentagon briefing room across the hall from Mr. Weinberger's office, officials handed them a one-page form entitled "Department of Defense Secrecy Agreement."

After noting that the reporters would receive "highly sensitive intelligence information which concerns the security of the United States and belongs to the United States Government," the agreement stipulated that the journalists would never disclose the information to anyone, including their editors, in any form. In addition, it called on the reporters to notify the department immediately if anyone attempted to solicit the information from them.

Modifications Also Rejected

When the correspondents refused to sign the agreement, Defense Department officials left the room for 10 minutes, then returned with a proposed modification in some of the language, according to one of the reporters who was present.

The journalists also rejected the modifications, prompting the officials to huddle for another private discussion. After the second break, the officials said they would accept a verbal pledge to abide by the agreement.

Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, then read a roll-call of the reporters present, asking each if he agreed to give his word of honor not to disclose any of the information, several of the correspondents said. All the reporters present responded affirmatively.

"I've been to a lot of off-the-record briefings but never one where they asked reporters to sign a secrecy agreement," said one veteran Pentagon correspondent who attended today's session. Pentagon officials said they could not recall any previous effort to gain the approval of reporters for a secrecy agreement.