John P. Roche Post 7.6.72

The Difference In News 'Leaks'

THERE SEEMS to be a line of former high government officials forming to testify in behalf of Daniel Ellsberg. Their contention: that leaking secret materials to the press is a run-of-the-mill affair in Washington—even in New Delhi. Former Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith says that he continually passed out classified information. (Those familiar with the amount of classified material on tap in New Delhi are puzzled as to what precisely Galbraith could have been leaking, except his own outgoing "Top Secret" bulletins.)

Former Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Robert Manning has filed an affidavit in Boston affirming that day in, day out, he passed out classified information on a background, or "off the record," basis to the press. Of course, he did—that was what he was getting paid for. I also spent a good deal of time briefing journalists with material drawn from usually overclassified sources.

But Manning's activities, like mine, are fundamentally irrelevant to the issue in the Ellsberg case. Manning and I (and many other similarly situated) did not go into the declassification business on our own. That is, we did not go through the daily summary from the Central Intelligence Agency, or the cables in from Saigon, and decide which items to pass on. These were decisions made by our bosses, not by us. Ellsberg, in contrast, went into business for himself.

LET ME take a typical example drawn from my own experience. In the April 1, 1967 issue of the Saturday Review, Norman Cousins had an editorial criticizing the government for not snapping up a North Vietnamese peace offer involving a "total cease-fire" in exchange for a cessation of bombing. Allegedly the offer had been conveyed through a neutral government (India), but ignored. Cousins claimed to have a document to prove it.

I had been following the various North Vietnamese "peace" gambits with interest and I knew that Cousins had been misled. This particular caper had been code-named (if memory serves) "Operation Narcissus" and had turned out to be a non-bloomer. Indeed, there was reason to believe that it was a Communist "disinformation" ploy lauched at the United Nations.

OBVIOUSLY all the material relating to "Narcissus" (as well as to "Marigold," "Operation Pennsylvania," and the other negotiation efforts) was classified "Top Secret," but I was convinced that if Cousins, a man of good will, could see the original file, he would change his mind about our alleged reluctance to negotiate. So I called the President and asked his permission to show the raw material to Cousins.

Johnson readily agreed, and Cousins came down and was handed the dossier. (For cryptographic reasons I asked him to take no notes.) He read the whole file: the cables from Dean Rusk to Ambassador Chester Bowles, and Bowles' replies indicated that there was no water in that well. Since Bowles is a close friend of Cousins, I thought this might have considerable impact. Cousins thanked me, but alas! never retracted his accusation.

In one sense this was a "leak," but I operated on the assumption that—to paraphrase "Carousel" — Lyndon B. Johnson, the President of the United States, was "the highest declassifier of all." If he told me to pass something on, I did so. If I suggested passing something on and he said "no" (as he often did), I shut up. This, I submit, is an entirely different sort of business from an individual, on his own initiative, depositing a truckload of classified documents on the doorstep of a newspaper.

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