

The Government Is a Crude Liar

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NEWSPAPERS REPORTING on government are often wrong, and Presidents of the United States are often prepared to say so. On leaving the White House, George Washington canceled his newspaper subscriptions in disgust. Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper."

Modern Presidents have been no exception, with bitter comments on the subject from Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower (who, in his last presidential press conference, delivered the unkindest cut by saying he wasn't sure that the press made much difference, anyway). John Kennedy canceled his subscription to the New York Herald-Tribune. Lyndon Johnson on the subject of newspapers was not always quotable in mixed company. Richard Nixon through much of his career has been passionate in his feeling that he is kicked around by the media.

Vice Presidents of our time have been known to murmur an occasional reservation about the press. Even presidential assistants are ready to sneak in a kidney punch while their bosses swing the haymakers. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., while in the White House seven years ago, said that newspaper and magazine accounts "are sometimes worse than useless when they purport to give the inside history of government decisions."

All of this has some justification. Journalists are often wrong. Sometimes they are malicious, other times lazy. More often they are honestly

in error. When that happens, they have no "Top Secret" label to cover up their human and professional failings. When they make mistakes, they make them in public.

But what government officials almost never talk about when they complain about press inaccuracy is that some of this is the result of the government's own frequent dishonesty in dealing with the press and the public. The conventional assumption is that the government of the United States never lies to its people. But it does, and when this is proved, (1) the government is very ungracious and (2) it usually answers that it had good reasons for lying.

Sometimes there are compelling reasons for the government to lie—as in the days of the Cuba missile crisis when we were on the brink of a nuclear war. But most of the time, the government excuse for secrecy, or secrecy that creates a distorted public picture, is on more spongy ethical and practical ground.

Arthur Sylvester, lately an Assistant Secretary of Defense, once said that the government has a "right to lie," which was refreshing bureaucratic candor but appalling doctrine. As a practical matter, diplomatic negotiations are, like photographic film, best developed in the dark. But they can, through secret error, also go wrong because of the dark.

Some military information must be kept under cover. But a lot of it, maybe most, is already known to our adversaries, leaving only the American people uninformed. Friendly governments should not be unduly embarrassed. But frequently the friendly government is the United States, and the embarrassment is to one of its erring leaders.

And there is that most fishy of all reasons: the other side lies more than we do.

A Massive Lid

WHATEVER THE excuse, secrecy and its use to distort is a perpetual threat to the democratic process. It

means that "Big Brother knows best." Neither history nor contemporary events confirm that Big Brother is ever that wise. Elitist decisionmaking has produced catastrophes that match anything created by popular folly (the United States can be grateful that no electorate interfered with King George III).

The government has a massive apparatus to prevent the whole truth from coming out. In Congress, the most open forum the country has for policy evolution, 40 per cent of all hearings are secret. The Executive Branch of government, especially in diplomacy and defense, has systematic secrecy with tough laws to back up its power to conceal.

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If all of this apparatus followed its natural bureaucratic tendencies, the press of the United States could become like Pravda and Izvestia, reporting only those official things that officialdom wishes to say, reducing the public to a passive audience instructed how to implement what its leaders have already decided.

Ironically, the distortions of secrecy may be greater because officials can selectively cancel it, picking certain fragments to release. The President, the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State preside over an enormous jigsaw puzzle that constitutes their best view of the world. Much of this picture is officially secret. At any moment, an official can reach behind the curtain and select a piece of the jigsaw puzzle and show it to the press or directly to the public. It could be a genuine piece of the puzzle but still give a false impression of reality.

The Vietnam Election

FOR EXAMPLE, in the summer of 1967, the nature of the government of South Vietnam was at issue in the United States. The debate on Vietnam had already poisoned the domestic political atmosphere. Distrust bordering on paranoia characterized almost everything said on the subject, whether hawkish or dovish.

An election was being held in Saigon to demonstrate or create a consensus in South Vietnam. This would, among other things, show that the United States was fighting for the life of a regime that at least had the support of its own people. Washington hoped that this would lay to rest some American and European suspicions that the incumbent regime in Saigon was a narrowly based military clique that could not, on its own, obtain the loyalty of the South Vietnamese.

Some of the press was reporting that the regime in Saigon had no intention of relinquishing power, regardless of how the election came out. On July 28, 1967, The Washington Post reported from Saigon that there were rumors that "South Vietnamese generals . . . are forming a committee that would preserve their power in the remote event that a civilian ticket wins the Sept. 3 election."

On Aug. 2, The New York Times reported flatly, "The generals who rule

South Vietnam are at work on a plan that would perpetuate collective government by the junta despite the election of a President, Vice President and Congress."

Such reports persisted for a few days. Then, curiously, on Aug. 16, a number of supposedly independent news outlets carried contrary accounts. At a high level of government, a secret cable from Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon had been made known to selected columnists.

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, for example, began their column for that day, "The vital importance to the Johnson administration of a reasonably clean election in Vietnam was underscored last weekend in a confidential cable from Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. Deeply worried by the clamor in Congress over alleged irregularities in the campaign for president, Bunker methodically knocked down one charge after another . . . Bunker's cable has deep significance."

That same day, William S. White, attacking doves and other administration critics, wrote in his column that these critics ignored "all the factual information patiently supplied by Americans on the ground in South Vietnam, including Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker . . . Bunker has reported over and over that charges by the civilian candidates [in Saigon] that the present heads of South Vietnam, Gens. Thieu and Ky, are loading the electoral dice have no foundation."

Deft 'Declassification'

GOVERNMENT officials regularly criticize the press for using classified information, but it is often secret information deliberately handed the press by high-level government people. The press is inclined to believe such information partly because of the impressive "secret" stamp. The Bunker cable, for example, was classified "EXDIS," meaning exclusive, or very limited, distribution, even among cleared policymakers.

Among the point-by-point rebuttals by Bunker referred to by Evans and Novak was the one that the South Vietnamese armed forces "had formed a council that would 'run the government' no matter who is elected." Citing this, Bunker said, "The formation of any such council and such intent of the armed forces have been categorically denied by Thieu and Ky, al-

though, of course, the constitution provides for a military council to advise the government on military matters."

This was a genuine piece of the jigsaw puzzle. That is, the cable really existed. But its history is interesting.

The journalists who were given the contents of that cable were not shown an earlier cable to Bunker asking him to comment on a number of matters. "Please comment" is diplomatic cablese for, "What shall we tell people about this?" And that Bunker's reply was preceded by, "This . . . may be useful in answering criticisms in the U.S."

Furthermore, the journalists could not know that 10 days earlier, on Aug. 3, there had been another secret cable from Saigon on the same subject. It was distributed to officials on Aug. 13, the same day as Bunker's cable denying it and three days before the appearance of the newspaper columns on the subject. These columns, as noted above were based on Bunker's Aug. 13 cable saying that there was no reason to believe that there was a secret military committee prepared to seize power in Saigon.

Definitely Top Secret

THE AUG. 3 cable that was not divulged to the journalists said:

"Senior Vietnamese generals have had the Ministry of National Security draft a charter or organization plan for a Supreme Military Committee which is to serve as the vehicle through which the generals will continue to exercise ultimate power in South Vietnam, even after election of a President. The existence of the committee is being treated as 'top secret' for the present and will not be admitted till after the 3 September elections, if at all.

"Ky has been designated committee chairman and Minister of National Security, Maj. Gen. Linh Quang Vien, secretary general. At present, other members are Thieu, Minister of Defense Cao Van Vien and the four corps commanders. Meeting of 17 July attended by all . . . actual government powers will be vested in an extralegal S.M.C. . . . Definitely not provided for in the constitution, hence top secret . . . should not be confused with Advisory Armed Forces Council . . ."

Two days later, confidential analysis of the evidence also circulated in Washington commented further:

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"Despite Premier Ky's public and private denials, several intelligence reports indicate that the South Vietnamese military leadership is proceeding with secret plans to form an extrakonstitutional 'inner sanctum' of generals that would exercise the real power in any elected government . . .

"These plans and the point to which they have apparently progressed have some ominous implications. For one, additional support is provided for the view, already prevalent among many informed Vietnamese, that the military have no intention of really sharing power with the civilians, regardless of the election outcome. At the same time, the prospect is raised that the army intends to operate largely through its own political control apparatus rather than through the constitutional structure."

'Completely Untrue'

PRESUMABLY, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker saw the cable based on the evidence acquired Aug. 3. In any event, on Aug. 12 he cabled the State Department:

"I asked him [Ky] 11 August about the report of an armed forces committee to run the government which had such adverse editorial comment. Ky said this report was completely untrue and added that it was merely a series of meetings that the usual group of top generals held to discuss reorganization of the armed forces and pacification matters prior to discussion with Westmoreland, Komer and me . . ."

The cable referred to Gen. William Westmoreland, then commander of ground forces in South Vietnam, and Robert Komer, chief of the pacification program.

Bunker's Aug. 12 cable said of his conversation with Gen. Ky:

"He said there was absolutely no intention to set up any inner military group to run the government after the elections and this report could be flatly denied . . . I reverted to my earlier advice to him as an 'elder' regarding handling of the press. Ky said yes, he remembered, and perhaps the best thing for him to do was first to keep his mouth shut. I agreed with him . . ."

Was the press knowingly and cynically tricked into the false reports that no secret military committee existed? Did the official who disclosed the contents of Ambassador Bunker's Aug. 13



Associated Press

Ellsworth Bunker at Andrews Air Force base returning from Saigon to see President Johnson in April, 1968. His 'leaked' cable about the Vietnam election proved to be a kind of rebuttal to an earlier one.

cable know the contents of earlier cables? It is hard to be certain.

The government is large. It has many different channels. There is some game-playing among intelligence, military and diplomatic officials at lower levels that affects what is passed on to higher levels. There are inevitable mistakes in communications.

Silence at the Source

BUT ON AUG. 16, prominent syndicated columns reflecting the Aug. 13 Bunker cable were printed in Washington. The White House, military and diplomatic community read those columns. If they did not see them at breakfast, the columns' contents showed up on the press summaries distributed daily throughout top levels of government.

One reason newspapers distributed

in Washington receive so much criticism from government is that these papers constitute the only common intelligence system for all of government, often telling one part of government what a different part had intended to keep to itself. So when the newspaper columns of Aug. 16 appeared, all the relevant people in government knew it. So far as the press and the public were concerned, the relevant government officials remained silent. If the Aug. 13 cable was wrong, the public remained misinformed. At that point if not before, the press and the public, almost without any defense against it, had been hoodwinked.

"Truth crushed to earth shall rise again," William Cullen Bryant wrote. But government truth, like every other kind, needs all the help it can get.