

A TIMELY REPORT ON ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL

# We the people: do we

by JACK ANDERSON



President Johnson talks with reporters in his office. He tries to keep firm control over news that flows from the White House, a policy that has cost some public confidence.

ington Post, has expressed one in his book, *Freedom or Secrecy*:

"If a government repeatedly resorts to lies in crises where lies seem to serve its interests best, it will one day be unable to employ the truth effectively when truth would serve its interests best. A government that too readily rationalizes its right to lie in a crisis will never lack for either lies or crises."

## BETTER LIARS

Moreover, there is the question whether our way of life can survive if we get down to the Communist level and trade lies. Not only are the Communists better liars, but they have no free press to contradict them. The merit of the American newspaper is the way it digs out truth no matter how deeply hidden. Thus in a democracy the truth keeps bubbling to the surface. Democracy's strength lies in the free flow of information to its citizens.

Of course, security information must be withheld from the public so it won't reach an enemy. In this case a simple "no comment" is better than a lie.

Yet increasingly, American policymakers have engaged in the disturbing practice of concocting "cover stories," as

official lies are delicately called, to keep the Communists guessing. Unhappily, the covers repeatedly have been ripped off these stories.

Four days after a U-2 spy plane disappeared over the Soviet Union in 1960, the State Department blandly announced, "There was no deliberate attempt to violate Soviet airspace, and there has never been." The world soon learned that U-2's had been winging over Russia for several years, and the cover story exploded in the faces of those who had invented it.

The following year, the late UN ambassador, Adlai Stevenson, relying on information from Washington, lied to the United Nations about the Bay of Pigs invasion. Another who helped to spread misinformation about the debacle in Cuba was White House aide Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who in his recent memoirs presents a different set of facts from those he gave to the *New York Times* in 1961. When his book confirmed that the invasion force was much larger than he had estimated it to be then, the *Times* reminded him of his earlier statement. "Did I say that?" blurted Schlesinger. "Well, I was lying. That was a cover story."

During the Cuban missile crisis a year later, government information was tightly controlled and carefully coordinated to give a false picture of events. Five days after aerial photographs had been taken of Soviet missiles in Cuba, for instance, the Pentagon issued the following statement: "A Pentagon spokesman denied tonight that any alert has been ordered or that any emergency measures have been set in motion against Communist-ruled Cuba. Further, the spokesman said the Pentagon has no information indicating the presence of offensive weapons in Cuba." Not a word of the release was true. But press chief Sylvester still insisted three months later, "There has been no distortion, no deception and no manipulation of the news released by the Defense Department during the Cuban crisis."

Last year, when Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew claimed a CIA agent had offered him a \$3.3 million bribe, State Department spokesman Robert McCloskey indignantly declared, "We deny that allegation." Not until Lee threatened to produce tape recordings and a 1961 letter of apology from Secretary of State Dean Rusk did McCloskey backtrack. "Those who were consulted yesterday," he said sheepishly, "were not fully aware of the background of the incident, which occurred four and a half years ago."

In the Dominican Republic uprising last spring, a whole series of conflicting stories were put out. At first Washington announced that U.S. forces had been sent to protect the lives of American citizens. Later it was admitted that the purpose was to prevent a Communist takeover. The government released a list of 58 Reds said to be active on the rebel side. Reporters quickly found that the list included duplications, names of men then in prison and of some who were not even in the country at the time.

Government statements have also shed more smoke than light upon the war in Vietnam. At the same time that President Johnson has appealed to the people to support his Vietnam policies, his administration has not been frank about what's going on.

In August 1964, for example, the White House denied a report that UN Secretary-General U Thant had forwarded a peace feeler from North Vietnam. A year later, the President himself told a press conference, "Candor compels me to tell you that there has not been the slightest indication that the

A few weeks ago President Johnson launched a dramatic "peace offensive" by dispatching our top diplomatic envoys for talks with the leaders of other world powers. As a demonstration of U.S. willingness to spare no effort to stop the fighting in Vietnam, these simultaneous missions were widely hailed for the skill with which they were arranged by the administration. This was a bright chapter in the long history of the Cold War and a hopeful contrast to the fumbling, bumbling and outright lying that has frequently embarrassed us in other dealings with the rest of the world.

For the fact is that the U.S. has repeatedly been caught in half-truths and awkward lies that have often done our country more harm than the truth itself would have. Confidence in our government has been severely shaken, and this "crisis in credibility" has reduced America's effectiveness in world affairs.

Some people contend that the President, for the protection of the nation, sometimes must withhold the whole truth about foreign affairs. But domestic officials have also played loose with the truth to cover up blunders, hide corruption and make bad policies look good. Though most government statements are straightforward enough, reporters have learned to beware of tricky wording. Many an embarrassing fact has been papered over with verbal camouflage. Officials who have hesitated to spread falsehood have accomplished the same result simply by sweeping the truth under a secrecy label.

The public can be excused for wondering occasionally whom and what to believe. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's optimistic reports on the war in Vietnam, for example, have been regularly contradicted by events on the battlefield. The Defense Department's credibility has sunk so low, charges aviation writer Robert Hotz, "that most Pentagon reporters really don't believe a story until it has been officially denied."

Pentagon spokesman Arthur Sylvester contends that "information is a weapon, a very important weapon, to be used or withheld." Though he denies any intent to "phony up" the news, he defends the government's inherent right "to lie to save itself when it's going up into a nuclear war." However, Sylvester has also fibbed about non-nuclear matters.

This practice of expedient lying raises some serious questions in a democracy. J. Russell Wiggins, editor of the Wash-

# have a right to know?

other side is interested in negotiation."

The President's candor, it turned out, was less than complete. Three months later, there was official acknowledgement that the United States had rejected three bids for negotiation from North Vietnam, including one relayed by U Thant in August 1964.

In fact, this very policy rebounded against the U.S. a few months later. A St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* reporter, Richard Dudman, discovered that a vague message, which could be interpreted as a peace bid, had been transmitted from Hanoi to Washington via Italian Foreign Minister Amintore Fanfani. When the story broke, the government felt compelled to release full information on the exchange—even though it was known that Hanoi would probably then withdraw from the overtures. The step was necessary, UN Ambassador Goldberg said, because of the necessity of "maintaining our credibility with our own people. . . . There has been great concern as to whether we in the administration really are pursuing a path to peace."

## BAD PUBLICITY?

Still, official obfuscation appears to be the policy in Vietnam. A 1962 State Department cable, which is still classified, directed U.S. commanders in Vietnam not to take reporters on missions that might result in bad publicity. "Ambassador has over-all authority for handling of newsmen, insofar as U.S. is concerned," the cable read, in terse telegraphese. "He will make decisions as to when newsmen permitted to go on any missions with U.S. personnel. . . . correspondents should not be taken on

missions whose nature such that undesirable dispatches would be highly probable."

The cable also ordered suppression of the fact that Americans were directing combat missions against the Viet Cong. "We recognize it natural that American newsmen will concentrate on activities of Americans," the cable noted. "It not—repeat not—in our interest, however, to have stories indicating that Americans are leading and directing combat missions against Viet Cong. . . . sensational press stories about children or civilians who become unfortunate victims of military operations are clearly inimical to national interest."

Though this cable has been superseded by others containing noble language about the public's right to non-security information, the original guidelines are still followed. Not long ago, for instance, Lt. Col. George Brown, an official briefing officer, gave an imaginative account of an ambush northwest of Saigon. Guerrillas had struck at the second half of a First Infantry Division truck column, he said. He told dramatically how the troops had dismounted to fight off the attack.

Survivors later complained about the way newspapers "get things fouled up." The trucks had been sent, they said, to pick up foot soldiers who had been attacked while they were milling around preparing to board. "The report was totally misleading," said an officer, "even though it did make us look better than we deserved."

Helicopters were destroyed near Danang, according to another briefing officer, by mortar shells fired from off

the base. After newspapers had headlined the story, reporters discovered that the helicopters were blown up by demolition charges planted under the noses of the Marine guards.

Casualty figures are subtly misrepresented to make American losses appear less than they really are. Thus casualties in any action are measured against the total force in the area at the time. Every man in a company might be killed and no other units involved, but the casualties would still be described as "light" on the theory that one company is only a small part of the full complement in the battle zone.

Information officers also put out a weekly "kill ratio" contrasting Viet Cong and U.S.-Vietnamese casualties. But the Vietnamese casualties from distant battlefields habitually come in too late to be included. One recent report showing a ratio of 8-4 Viet Cong killed for every American or Vietnamese was widely promoted by the U.S. Information Service. Yet the figures did not include the Vietnamese casualty count from one major battle. When reporters brought this up, a spokesman scolded them for acting "like certified public accountants."

## VIVID IMAGINATION

At least one spokesman added high drama to a casualty report by claiming after an attack on a Special Forces camp at Plei Me that 90 enemy bodies had been counted, many of them draped grotesquely on the barbed wire around the camp. A reporter managed to reach the camp to photograph the grisly scene. But the besieged defenders denied ever seeing any bodies on the barbed wire. In

fact, the 90 casualties had been estimated by desk officers back in Saigon.

It is ironic that all of this misinformation is being doled out under a President who is more accessible to reporters than any of his predecessors were. He shovels information to them, though it is more often what he wants to say than what they want to hear. He even appropriates news announcements that normally are put out by government agencies. During one recent four-day weekend at the LBJ Ranch, for instance, President Johnson issued 42 separate announcements, including one on the survival of the whooping crane. He avoids critical questions, however, as if they were hypodermic needles.

All presidents have sought to present the best possible face to the public, but none ever achieved President Johnson's stranglehold on the flow of information. He keeps the curtain closed on what his administration is doing until all the facts are in and the final decisions are reached. Only then is he inclined to inform the public. Seldom does he let them in on the decision process, and the doubters and dissenters usually are silenced. His directives to subordinates are often accompanied with stern admonitions about secrecy. His anger over unauthorized news leaks has terrorized the few sources who used to talk freely.

Under President Johnson's leadership, many government departments have issued announcements that tend to mold the facts as the administration would like them to appear. For example, when the Ranger-6 spacecraft failed in its mission to photograph the moon, the public was told failure was due to a minor malfunction. But a report classified "secret" said an investigation disclosed "weaknesses . . . so extensive that in combination they suggest that the present hardware . . . is unlikely to perform successfully. . . ."

The question of how much truth the President and other government spokesmen should give out—and how much the people are entitled to—is a thorny one, with no easy answers. Most people seem to agree that the government, for the protection of its citizens, need not always tell every last detail about every situation. On the other hand, it should not lie or mislead lest it lose the trust of the very persons it is seeking to protect.

In a democracy, this argument goes, when the government cannot tell the whole truth it should stand by its privilege to shut up.

## Truth in government: Here are some thoughtful opinions

**GERALD FORD** (R., Mich.), House Republican leader: The American people should be given all the facts on domestic problems and issues to allow them to make sound decisions and to form responsible opinions. It is the responsibility of the President, all federal agencies and the Congress to provide these facts.

In dealing with foreign policy and the armed services, however, some facts may be withheld to protect national security and to prevent giving aid and comfort to the enemy.

For example, international spying inevitably involves deceit, misrepresentation and intrigue, and public officials may not jeopardize the national security by publicizing the true facts. This in no way reflects upon their personal integrity nor upon the broader aspects of public moral-

ity. But when a given situation becomes public knowledge, we recommend a frank and honest disclosure.

**VERMONT ROYSTER**, president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and editor of the *Wall Street Journal*: I would defend the right of a President to sometimes keep silent about plans being made or carried out where a running account would serve no purpose and might do injury.

However, when a President of the United States, or his spokesman, does speak, I think both ethics and the cause of good government require that he speak the truth to them as he sees it.

If President Johnson in 1964 believed that the so-called "peace feeler" from Hanoi was phony, he would have been per-

fectly honest in denying at the time any indication of a sincere desire by Hanoi to negotiate. He could have misjudged the situation but still have felt he was speaking the truth.

**DR. EDWIN DAHLBERG**, former president of the National Council of Churches: It's hard for someone sitting in the grandstand to say how the players on the field should perform, but I think there should at least be more frankness, such as stating simply that there are certain facts that cannot be fully disclosed.

Speaking personally, I don't believe that there have been deliberate falsehoods on the part of high government spokesmen. However, in diplomatic and military affairs there are many good reasons for not revealing certain information to the public.