



Unprintables?

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Much of the recurrent press outcry over "news management" is the refuge of indolent journalists whose antennae failed them at the Press Club bar. But there is an area in which the controversy is real; it may grow steadily more vexing in this era of undeclared wars, secret intrigues, rival interventions and propaganda offensives.

The question newspapermen in free societies increasingly confront is where the line can or should be drawn between adherence to truth and the acceptance of the vows of silence lest disclosure and dissent give "aid and comfort" to the enemy.

The issue is dramatically unfolded in two of the innumerable glimpses of private history contained in Arthur Schlesinger's exciting, poignant memoir of the Kennedy era. They involve episodes of voluntary censorship in the tense days preceding the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion.

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Early in that fateful month of April, 1961, Schlesinger reveals, Gilbert Harrison, publisher of the New Republic, sent him the galleys of a pseudonymous article called "Our Men in Miami." It was a "careful, accurate and devastating account" of CIA's recruitment of Cuban refugees for the assault on Castro's citadel.

Schlesinger, of course, was then a White House aide (who had privately voiced his opposition to the projected attack in a memorandum to President Kennedy).

As he read the piece, Schlesinger reflected that "its publication in a national magazine would cause trouble." But he adds: "... Could the government properly ask an editor to suppress the truth? Defeated by the moral issue, I handed the article to the President, who instantly read it and expressed the hope that it could be stopped. Harrison accepted the suggestion and without question—a patriotic act which left me oddly uncomfortable."

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This was hardly the end of the matter. In the same interval Tad Szulc, the able Latin-American expert of The Times, sent a dispatch from Miami similarly describing the recruitment campaign and asserting that a landing in Cuba was imminent. Times managing editor Turner Catledge telephoned James Reston, then the paper's Washington bureau chief, for counsel. Reston argued that the story should be suppressed; if published, it would either "alert Castro" and impose the burden of responsibility on the newspaper for casualties on the beach—or it might result in abandonment of the expedition, in which case The Times might well be accused of sabotaging national policy. Reston's view prevailed.

"This was another patriotic act," Schlesinger comments wryly, "but in retrospect I have wondered whether, if the press had behaved irresponsibly, it would not have spared the country a disaster."

These episodes are reviewed here not in terms of reproach to Harrison or Reston, but as illustrative of the dilemmas any one of us might face at any moment in this precarious age.

There is abundant evidence in Schlesinger's volume of President Kennedy's skepticism about the optimistic projections given him by CIA, by military sources and by some of the exiles. But he lacked the self-confidence, in that early phase of his Presidency, to respect his own misgivings. If the story had broken and a full-fledged national debate erupted, he would almost surely have been spared the darkest hours of his thousand days in the White House.

In the absence of the experiment, however, no one would have been able to say with certitude that Cuba would not have been liberated if Harrison and Reston had responded differently.

At what point does conscience require a journalist to take the calculated risk of public infamy?

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I find no moral perplexity about publicly decriing the fiction circulated by some briefing officers in Viet Nam, (exposed to other day by Charles Mohr in The Times) who seemingly operate on the principle that only good news is news. I have I any hesitancy in defending Eric Sevareid's disclosure of Adlai Stevenson's last-hours recitation of concern about some phases of our Viet Nam and Dominican operations, especially since, to a smaller degree, I contributed to a similar description.

But let us visualize the truly difficult case. Suppose—and let it be clear that this is offered wholly in the realm of grim, speculative fantasy—a journalist learned that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had convinced President Johnson to unleash nuclear weapons in Viet Nam. Suppose that journalist was convinced (as I would be) that such a step would be an ultimate madness, and knew that rational men within the government were desperately resisting the move.

Should such a story be voluntarily suppressed? Does a newspaperman's obligation to country dictate a silence that would mean a green light for the calamitous explosion?

I have projected the most extreme circumstances; only in those terms can the nature of many intermediary dilemmas be imagined. It is easy for societies of journalists to proclaim "the people's right to know" and to deplore small idiocies of bureaucratic suppression. But do we mean the right is waived when the deadliest decisions are at hand? One prays no such moment will ever arrive in this age; however, a certain spiritual preparedness for any eventuality may be elementary wisdom.