

'Backgrounder': A Conspiracy in Restraint of Truth

By Benjamin C. Bradlee

IT'S PERFECTLY POSSIBLE that the first background briefing was held by Adam to give his version of the embarrassing murder of Abel by Cain.

But in the memory of living authorities like Kenneth G. Crawford and Edward T. Folliard, the first background more likely

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was held on March 5, 1933—the day the United States went off the gold standard.

Steve Early was FDR's press secretary, and early that day he broke up the White House press room card game to tell the "regulars"—less than a dozen of them in those days—the momentous news. Like the well-trained generalists that they were, the reporters rushed to their typewriters and started banging out leads:

"In a move that shook the economic capitals of the world, the United States today went off the gold standard."

And there, they froze, unable to write another word. If any of them knew the country was in fact on the gold standard, none of them knew how to get off it, or what being on it or off it meant to equally ignorant editors and readers.

One by one the reporters sidled up to Early to confess the depths of their ignorance, and in one of the least illuminated critical moments of history Early called in an anonymous expert from the Treasury Department to give the boys the word "for background only."

Suddenly as authoritative as Keynes himself, the reporters returned confidently to their typewriters and finished the stories that were headlined all over the world on March 6, 1933.

Of course, the reporters had no way of knowing whether their stories were true. They knew only what an anonymous government official had spoonfed them as the truth. And of course, under the ground rules of this first backgrounder and the thousands that have followed, they were not permitted to identify their source. In mutual complicity, the press and the government had conspired to deny the public the whole truth.

It's all been down hill from there.

It's not enough to say that many of us have enjoyed the slide from time to time. To our discredit, we have, but after 25 years in journalism I have yet to meet a serious reporter who does not feel discomfort, if not guilt, over his role in this conspiracy.

MY OWN personal experience with backgrounders began in the early '50s—on the other side of the fence, when I was the press attache in the United States Embassy in Paris. One of my duties was the janitorial chore of setting up background briefings for "high American officials" and the press.

My first doubts about the morality and honesty of what I was doing came with the telephone calls that inevitably preceded any

international conference. "Who'll be doing the background briefing", reporters would ask, a week before the events. "What time is Chip's briefing tonight", they would ask (about Ambassador Charles E. Bohlen). It was perfectly obvious that the journalists—and foreign offices—of any country, friend or foe, knew who was briefing, when he was briefing, and by reading the stories that ensued, what he was saying. For a fledgling diplomat, that was fine: the U.S. was getting its story across in the way it desired. As an ex-journalist, soon to re-enter the field, I had the guilts: how come newspapermen were helping governments give the reader the short end of the stick?

Back in journalism, I began to learn some of the answers:

Background briefings are seductive. It's pretty heady wine for a journalist to turn to his friends (much less his editors) and say, casually: "Dulles, (Dean, Bill) told me last night that (Ike, Jack, Lyndon, Dick) is really sore at old Gromyko (Diefenbaker, Golda)."

The trappings of a well-staged background briefing—an honest-to-God "high government official", the exclusion of TV cameras and tape recorders, the red plush of the White House (Air Force One, Palais Rose) setting—plus the information that is dished out convince the reporter that he has his story, and blind him to the fact that he has *their* story. (One of the greatest myths in the current controversy lies in the claim that the press is not the docile recipient of the party line, but the relentless prosecutor at background briefings, pulling information out of a reluctant briefer fact by fact. Former Presidential Press

Secretary Bill D. Moyers once said "Yeah. They pull it out of me until there's nothing more I want to tell them." Whether birth is by Caesarian section or natural delivery, the child of backgrounds briefings is government propagand.

Background briefings are convenient for the press. It is a cardinal if regrettable rule of journalism that a story dropped in the lap of a reporter is "better" than a story that must be dug from a dozen different mines. It is easier to write, easier to edit, easier to read and



McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara and George Ball, as they prepared to brief the press on President Johnson's Johns Hopkins address on April 7, 1965. Although a considerable portion of that briefing was on a "background" and not for attribution basis, this AP photo bore a caption reading: "Three of President Johnson's top aides . . . as they wait to brief newsmen on aspects of the President's speech . . ."

often easier to understand, even if it may be incomplete, misleading or even false. Normally querulous editors are easily mollified by the knowledge (which they often dine out on) that the high government official quoted in the story is in fact the President of the United States. The lazy reporter can file his background and be out on the golf course after lunch. The confused reporter can convince himself he has the truth by the tail at long last. And even the conscientious reporter knows that if he doesn't file the story fast, he will get scooped.

Background briefings are useful to the government. All governments are understandably and instinctively interested in giving out information of a quality and in a manner that reflects maximum credit on themselves. That, as the saying goes, is show biz. Only two barriers exist to prevent the government from so limiting the news about government.

First is the danger that other information may come into the public domain . . . information that does not reflect maximum credit on the government information that clouds the whole question of credit, or information that actually reflects discredit.

Second is the little problem of accountability. A government official—high, low or jack-in-the-game—will generally say one thing if he is sure that his identity will be publicly unknown, and

quite another thing if the public can call him on it if he is wrong, or misleading. If you will, "senior Defense officials" will say one thing about Lamson 719, the South Vietnamese incursion into Laos with heavy U.S. logistic support, that Lt. Gen. John W. Vogt, Director, Joint Staff, JCS, would not say. Yet they were one and the same man.

THE BACKGROUND briefing is the one mechanism by which the government can surmount both barriers. By its control of the briefing, it can withhold whatever information it wants to withhold, and by forbidding identification of the briefer, it prevents accountability.

This may be a legitimate aim of government, but it is a perversion of journalism. Government is a noble career. So is journalism. They are not the same.

Consider some unforgettable abuses:

- A Secretary of Agriculture (Orville Freeman) gives a briefing for background only. Why background only? His stenotypist is sick. And only one reporter walks out.

- Israeli Ambassador Izhak Rabin speaks to more than 100 members of the Overseas Writers "for background only," and blasts the Arabs from soup to cigars. There are 20-30 waiters present and a sprinkling of Wash-

ington diplomats. No journalist objects. Its cozy.

- President Kennedy calls the White House regulars to his Palm Beach winter White House for a little background chat about what a hell of a legislative record his administration had chalked up in its first year. Next day, the stories list these accomplishments—without attribution. (These year-end reviews are something of a tradition in Washington. For the first time in the memory of White House correspondents, this year the Nixon administration gave its year-ender on the record.)

During his eight years in office, Secretary of State Dean Rusk regularly met with State Department correspondents at the end

of the working day every Friday for a scotch on the rocks or two and a little "background-only" conversation. Every Saturday morning, alert readers like you and me and the embassies of the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China and Castro's Cuba could read the results: "The administration is worried that . . ."; "The government is known to feel . . ."; "High officials in the State Department think . . ."

- Background briefings by the White House officials are normally and regularly made available to any reporter accredited to the White House, specifically including the three correspondents of Tass, the Soviet news agency, now accredited to the White House.

- My own all-time "favorite" example of the abuses of background briefings involved a performance in the White House theater on the eve of President Johnson's speech at Johns Hopkins University, announcing for the first time that the U.S. was ready to engage in unconditional discussions with North Vietnam. On stage—literally—were McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara and George Ball. In front of them, perhaps 150 reporters, plus the ever-present TV crews, cameras silent. For 45 minutes they went through their dog and pony act . . . three "high government officials" secure in their anonymity and not accountable for their works, but hell-bent on spreading the new gospel. When it was all over, the reporters were herded out the door, but a straggler watched dumbfounded as the same three high government officials went on camera for the television audience to say virtually everything they had just told the reporters on "deep background." And no journalist objected.

In the name of common sense, who is kidding whom? When is the thoughtful professional in government and in the press, each properly concerned with his own credibility gap, going to stop it?