

PROLOGUE

Workman?
Myths are powerful because they are believed, not because they are true. The world was hypnotized in August, 1974 by the drama of a President being destroyed: Richard Nixon, the right-wing dragon, slain by two scruffy reporters at the Washington Post. That's how it's recalled in the books and the movie that have come out of the event. The historical truth may be that the federal courts and the Congress -- not to mention the ineptness of the President's staff who had installed a voice-actuated audio taping system in the Oval Office -- had more to do with the unmaking of the President than the combined efforts of the nation's press, including the two reporters.

The American press believes it brought down a President. It has conducted itself since as if the techniques of Watergate, when applied to every level of journalism, enrich and enlarge the final product, even when the sources and the motives are unknown. Historians may find a rich vein of irony in the paradox that the newspapers of America, signing on late in the consumers' rebellion, campaigned for truth-in-labelling in food products, while insisting on their own right to disguise the origins of their own contents.

The warm, self-congratulatory afterglow of the Watergate episode, as the two formerly scruffy reporters weighed their book, lecture and film offers, was a golden moment. But the cloud on the horizon, the hubris that preceded the nemesis, was the method

of the dragon slayers. Who were the "sources," which were the "officials," how did an incriminating set of facts "become known?" Even those spare clues in that terminology were missing in the case of The Post's "Deep Throat," the informative apparition who talked to reporter Bob Woodward in a parking garage but only on "deep background," with no attribution at all. (The Post always claimed it insisted on at least one other source for its Watergate information, but that does not change the critical fact that one of the principal driving sources for its investigation was unknown. His motives were also unexplored.)

The cumulative effect of the stories in the press and on radio and television was to create a consensus of indictment. The identity of the source of the information and his credibility became less important than the snowballing revelations that were being put before the public in kind of a journalistic feeding frenzy. In a perverse way, the anonymity of the "source" gave credence and weight to the information; surely the facts must be important and true if the person who was saying it was frightened of losing his job if he were to be identified; surely the source must be trustworthy and important if the hardnosed reporters and editors permitted him to mask his identity and, in effect, themselves took responsibility for the accuracy of the information and giving it the prominence of the front page.

In the case of Nixon, a President left office before his term was over without knowing who the faceless "officials" were who helped do him in. Neither did the American public know; nor did foreign officials, some of whom, such as the Chinese and the

Soviets, still believe that Richard Nixon was driven from office for establishing a system of detente with the Soviets, or opening the door to China, rather than the absurd venality of spying on a psychiatrist, or trying to cover up a burglary that never would have been discovered if the KGB had been in charge.

The use of concealed sources did not begin with Watergate, but the episode gave the technique a new journalistic respectability. There were attentive observers on the sidelines of Watergate. As they watched, they drew some logical conclusions about how the game is played and how they intended to play it in the future. Some of these alert students, for example, were in California working for the man who had almost snatched the 1968 presidential nomination from Nixon, Ronald Reagan. They did not forget those lessons when it was their turn to move into the White House. Other watchers were in foreign embassies, lobbying groups, in Congress, in corporations and the ubiquitous public relations firms around the world.

They drew the obvious conclusion that journalists are intramurally competitive and that one of the things they compete in is tapping better "sources" than their rivals. Not only is it permissible, in the post-Watergate morality, to conceal your official identity when dealing with a reporter. In some ways, it is preferable to the reporter, because it gives him the mystique of being plugged in to the sources of power. The multiplicity of anonymous sources, in the world of big-time journalism, translates directly into editorial esteem, income and competitive success. So, why not use this journalistic tribal custom to conceal the

identity of the president's own men when they are in the business of inflating, rather than deflating, the presidential reputation? A press release is normally thrown away by an self-respecting reporter. In this new way of doing business the information is "leaked" to a favored reporter, who understands very well that he remains in favor only so long as he successfully gets the story on the front page, or the evening news, or in his magazine. Thus a routine State Department report summarizing anti-narcotic operations can be expected to disappear on page 32 of the important papers if it is handed out to everybody at the same time. But suppose somebody at the State Department is thoughtful enough to provide The New York Times with a report of the report one day ahead of the rest of the mob. It has a good chance (as it did) of popping up on the front page of that paper.

Meanwhile, editors at the other papers and the news agencies are gnashing their editorial and corporate teeth, demanding to know of their reporters why they were not favored with such a scoop. It is understood by all concerned that if the leaked information does not get sufficiently prominent play in The Times, some other reporter is going to be chosen next time. Then it will be The Times which will be grinding its corporate molars.

The Times was favored with a one-day jump on the State Department's routine semi-annual report two years in a row, even though, in both cases, there were ludicrous errors, including the reporter getting the year of the report wrong. In both cases The Times gave the prosaic report spectacular play. Errors in the articles notwithstanding, there was front-page evidence in

America's journal of record that the State Department's Bureau of Narcotics Control is certified as an active member of the President's army which is energetically battling drugs.

In a kind of cumulative campaign of disinformation, the front page stories based on (leaked) self-serving State Department press releases give the impression that something important is being done about stopping the flow of drugs into the United States, while the drugs continue to roll in.

The effect of leaks and backgrounders is amplified because newspapers and other news organizations are prideful and in this competitive world they have a tendency to preen and strut when they have something they consider to be exclusive, inside stuff. Such prominently displayed stories in important newspapers tend to be picked up intact by the wire services and used as the starting point for the planning of the day's television coverage.

It is not a great leap to the next logical step: why not create news or events that never happened but advance the President's goals, and then leak them to a compliant but competitive press? So it happened, in August, 1986, that a National Security Council Directive suggested a "disinformation" campaign to suggest to Col. Moammar Ghadafi through leaks in the American press that he was about to get bombed again. It is after all, more cost-effective to conduct a campaign against Ghadafi in the columns of the Wall Street Journal or on the CBS Evening News than to actually send planes or agents to Libya. As Secretary of State George Shultz told a group of reporters in New York, who were complaining about their being misled by the

administration, "you're predictable." He was referring to their habit of uncovering ship and troop movements and reporting on them but he was also defending the administration's practice of deliberately staging such maneuvers so that they would be reported, giving U.S. adversaries some sleepless nights. There was no trace of false remorse from Shultz, who also insisted that he, personally, did not lie but did not dispute the institutional fibbing. Such candor is rare.

The process of using the intramural press competition to further the specific policy goals of the administration in power is not rare and had been going on long before the Reagan administration. Woodrow Wilson's administration anonymously leaked the famous Zimmerman telegram to the Associated Press in 1917 in order to dramatize the German villainous designs. This relatively simple operation could be likened to the Wright brothers experiments in aviation. The Reagan administration's public relations juggernaut techniques, with whole floors of the Old Executive Office Building given over to public relations factories, would be the equivalent of a Boeing 747. Since each successive administration appears to have absorbed the lessons of the failures and successes of its predecessors, we can only imagine and tremble at the efficiency of the next generation of political creatures now hacking their way through the Darwinian jungle to the White House.

What is most troubling about this apparently inexorable process is that the members of the press, like the Germans and the Japanese in World War II, have not discovered that their code

has been broken and their competitive drives are being used against them. The journalistic rivalry for inside stuff is being used against the democratic process, which requires that the voters have as much relevant information as possible, including the sources of the news and their motives.

If information is silver for officials in Washington, it is gold for reporters since it helps an individual reporter's reputation and income to be able to quote "a senior official" and to predict accurately what the President is going to do tomorrow.

The somewhat removed editor and reader do not realize that it is not all that difficult for a reporter with a large organization to be invited to a White House backgrounder. The system of pretend insider journalism gets the information out and it gives the flavor of being exclusive, sort of a fast-food equivalent of genuine investigative reporting. Everybody wins, except the reader and the voter, whose ability to judge the truth of the facts is severely impaired by a system which routinely disguises its sources.

Controlling the information in Washington (one can apply the same lessons to any other governmental body, foreign or domestic) means the press is also controlled, since it depends on the information it receives. A sampling of a typical front page of any American newspaper (and the same holds true for the editorial page, and the op-ed page, which has become the preserve of the PR hired gun) shows that a vast majority of the news comes directly or indirectly from government policy makers. Last year's

smuggling problem, uncovered by a few reporters with great effort and personal bravery, becomes this year's War on Drugs, with networks and the news magazines saluting and snapping to attention as the governmental press machine runs the flag up the pole. The administration's 1983 insistence on dealing with the urgent Middle East problem turned into an unwillingness to talk about it in 1984 when it became apparent the United States had run out of ideas. So the previous year's Big Story disappeared with hardly a bubble in Washington, although the killing in Lebanon went on in the vacuum created by the American diplomatic failure.

Always paramount in the administration strategy is the need to perpetuate the heroic myth: the President is not only In Charge, he is Right. The carrier of the myth is a compliant press, dependent on government officials to provide the inside stuff.

The method of building a presidential reputation can be refined by turning leaks in daily dribbles. On Monday, the reader finds out that officials are telling The Washington Post that the President is reluctantly considering ways to punish the Canadians for their unfair trade practices and is considering a new tariff on cedar shingles. On Tuesday (following a backgrounder by the Canadian embassy, which has closely followed American techniques), we learn from U.S. sources that a troubled but determined president has made up his mind and is expected to announce a punitive duty on Canadian cedar shingles.

The next day, the reporter's prescience and ability to cultivate inside sources is confirmed as the bare details are announced. There are details of the actual announcement, plus

outraged reaction from the Canadian government, together with sounds of satisfaction from American manufacturers. The cumulative effect of the week-long controlled trickle and counter-trickle of information is to give the impression that the president has been a terribly busy, concerned man. Clearly no sparrow falls and not a pound of cedar shakes enters this country without the President knowing about it and weighing its national security implications. That is an essentially "disinformational" way of portraying the way a huge government works, but the Reagan administration became expert at it and its methods will be refined by those other administrations coming along.

We are approaching the bi-presidential system: one man who runs for office largely because of his success at avoiding journalism and appearing directly before the public only on his terms on television. There is another presence who runs the government, a series of technicians who create the holograph of an operating president, who does not exist except in the calculated image created by the President's men and passed on through an intramurally competitive, cooperative press. Mike Deaver may be gone, but Deaverism, like McCarthyism after Joseph McCarthy, remains a fundamental operating technique.

Although there are occasional cries of outrage from the President and his men about how they are cruelly used and plagued by anonymous leaks (not all leaks are planned; many do happen as a result of journalist enterprise), the federal government is by large margin the most incontinent of all. When a foreign visitor arrives at the White House to talk to the President, it is usually

an assistant secretary of state who briefs reporters on the meetings, but only under the strict condition that the briefer not be identified. When the visitor is European and the briefer is Assistant Secretary of State Rozanne Ridgway, even the feminine pronoun is forbidden on second reference, lest the world be given a hint of the briefer's identity. The reason for this travesty on secrecy is that everything must be suppressed that does not directly contribute to the essential myth of presidential omniscience and activism. By using the techniques of authentic investigative journalism -- the "sources" and the unnamed "officials" -- the government benefits from the public respect created by the real investigative reports. All use the same kind of protective concealments of the sources, an example of art imitating nature, just as some good-tasting butterflies extend their life spans by emulating the color of foul-tasting relatives.

The federal government has also mastered the art of selectively releasing secrets in order to enhance the president and his policies. In some cases the information is legitimately classified, but is unveiled to make a point in support of a political direction, even at the cost of drying up the intelligence channel, as President Reagan did when he announced the intercept of coded messages from the Libyan embassy in East Berlin in order to inculcate Libya in the bombing of La Belle Disco in West Berlin. Occasionally, high-ranking policy-makers are produced before groups of reporters at the White House or at the Pentagon to reveal the deployment of new Soviet weapons, and sometimes even to show satellite photography, a disclosure that

would land a lower-ranking government employee in the slammer. The result is not only the debasing of classified information but a resulting climate of skepticism about the system used to guard real secrets. The method combines the disclosure of formerly secret information with the holding back of another vital piece of information: who said this? what was his motive and his authority? what is his track record for credibility and objectivity?

David Brinkley, then of NBC, once foolishly said, whether out of pride or desperation is not clear, "News is what I say it is." That is flat wrong. News in Washington and thus in the United States is what the government determines it to be. The three branches of the federal government determine most of what tomorrow's newspapers will report and what will lead the tonight's television newscast. A television newscast on a federal holiday has an odd, aimless quality. Newspapers, when the White House is out west on vacation, exude a sense of desperation, running interminable features and uninformed speculations about what the executive branch and Congress might or might not do when they get back from the beach. Barring the odd earthquake and flood (even there, the government will take over by the president declaring it a disaster, as if a natural cataclysm cannot achieve recognition without the federal seal of approval) it is the giant bureaucracy of the executive and legislative branches which not only decide what will happen, but also how it will be reported and when. The most important overall result is that the American press has become part of the information engineering system run by the U.S. government the press is supposed to be balancing.

Other branches of state and local governments, foreign embassies, even corporations have begun to pick up the technique, Coca-Cola, for example, "leaking" the momentous news about the birth of New Coke one day early to the Wall Street Journal, which reverently treated the scoop as Really Big News, setting the tone for the rest of the nation's business press, and the national general press, as well.

The watchdog has been muted by the simple device of giving it a few bones. The adversarial relationship between press and government has become a romance, a partnership in which they work hand in glove. The reporters may have different motives, aims or beliefs than the officials they talk to. They may even disagree or argue publicly. But by dutifully using the "source" material put out calculatedly by the government, reporters have become transmission belts for a government which has analyzed the competitive, sometimes mindless, nature of the American press. Government officials, some of them former reporters, have discovered how the press works and now they are making it work for the political leadership. That means it is not working for the people, not the way it supposed to.

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