

Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

Facts and Un-facts

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IN THE EXCITEMENT over the State of the Union Message, something of great significance has passed all but unnoticed. Rather glaring new light has been shed, in fact, on President Johnson's strange notion of the right way to deal with the public.



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To begin with, a part of the curious espionage system to which members of the White House staff are subjected has been rudely brought into the open. All staff members' telephone calls are noted. All places they visit outside the White House are reported by the Government chauffeurs. And these lists of contacts are nightly studied, for symptoms of dangerous associations, by the President's new alter ego, Marvin Watson.

THE UNFORTUNATE White House Press Secretary, Bill D. Moyers, who more and more resembles a modern Saint Sebastian, was required to explain that Watson's nightly list perusals were solely motivated by a desire to achieve operating economies. This was said with a straight face, and the nearest that could be managed in the way of a show of indignation.

Yet it is of course an open secret that the telephone and limousine checks are only parts of a much wider system of surveillance that now covers most of the City of Washington. It is informal, but it works very efficiently.

IN BRIEF, a great many sleazy persons are now aware that the quickest way to make Brownie points at the White House is to pass the word that X has been seen talking to Y. Thus it is now an odds-on bet that any X-Y meeting, in a restaurant or other public place, will soon be added to the White

House's dangerous associations-list.

In addition, a fairly complete news control system has long been in force at the Pentagon. It was installed even before President Johnson's time by Secretary McNamara, who cannot quite get it through his head that he has thereby deprived the country of almost all protection against a Louis A. Johnson of the future.

Last week, finally, the State Department briefly tried to install a total news control system, and only retreated to installation of a partial system when sharp protest developed. And almost simultaneously the long suffering Moyers, a good man trapped in a harsh predicament, gave the explanation of these puzzling phenomena in a television interview.

"It's very important for a President to maintain his options up until the moment of decision," said Moyers. "And for someone to speculate, days or weeks in advance, that he is going to do thus and thus, is to deny to the President that latitude he needs in order to make, in the light of the existing circumstances, the best possible decision."

Taken literally, this extraordinary statement appears to mean that the President cannot do whatever his duty requires him to do, if someone or other has already suggested in print that this is indeed what his duty will require. At any rate, this statement tells us why the President's attempts at news control are so much more aggressive, comprehensive, and one must add, repugnant to American tradition, than any such attempts by other Presidents.

THE KEY to the statement is that curious word, "options." In order to understand the strange meaning the President gives to this word, it is useful to recall the period, almost exactly a year ago, before President

Johnson faced up to the realities of the Vietnamese situation.

At that time, in the highest circles of the Government, there was desperate and justified fear of an early Vietcong victory in South Vietnam. The same concern was felt by the U.S. Embassy and U.S. military staff in Saigon. From Saigon, the President was being repeatedly warned that nothing could save the situation except determined U.S. action, such as he later took after the attack on the Pleiku barracks.

In November and December, the fear in the Government and in Saigon, and all the compelling reasons for this fear, were reported with some emphasis by a few persons, including this correspondent. The reports were strictly factual, if anything understating the true situation. But the President was deeply infuriated by this public ventilation of a crisis of the utmost public importance.

And it was later authoritatively explained that he was only angry because his "options" were being restricted.

What he means by his "options," therefore, is the freedom to decide whether facts are indeed facts, or whether it will be more convenient to classify them as un-facts. The facts themselves cannot of course be wished away, nor can their impact be diminished on the American national situation. But if they are just not mentioned, then they remain un-facts, as people who are unmentionable in the Soviet Union thereby become unpersons.

Most Presidents have of course tried, in one way or another, to manipulate the front and editorial pages of the press. But no previous President has claimed the right to keep from the country the basic facts of the national situation, unless he sees fit to divulge them. This is the novelty, and a most alarming novelty it is!