

They've Got a Secret

For the first time since the heyday of the late Senator Joseph McCarthy, State Department personnel are being grilled by F.B.I. agents, reportedly equipped with lie-detectors. The procedure—particularly inappropriate, it would seem, for people trustworthy enough to have been hired for sensitive work in the first place—is prompted by a suspected leaking to the press of “stories harmful to the national interest.”

Out of the controversy that raged over the Pentagon Papers, some hoped might come a subsidence in the Nixon Administration's addiction to secrecy. That is not yet apparent. Possibly the State Department has legitimate reason for its current concern, but its course of action has to be weighed against two other recent episodes that point to continued and needless reliance by the Administration on concealment as a governmental way of life.

The first of these is the release, after a year's litigation, of a report on the SST which the Government kept locked up throughout the battle over that extravagant monstrosity. Six months before President Nixon announced his intention to invest Federal funds in construction of SST prototypes, he had before him this document—prepared at his request by a committee of scientists headed by Richard L. Garwin—which urged “withdrawal of government support.”

The reasons included unpredictably excessive costs, the plane's dubious capabilities, “substantial doubt” that the competing European supersonic planes would prove commercially viable, and the chance of detrimental effects on the environment.

The Office of Science and Technology, in belatedly releasing the Garwin report, makes the obvious point that it was only one of a number of studies that went into the President's decision. However, those studies that recommended the project were made available; this negative one was marked “privileged” and denied even to members of Congress. Senator Proxmire of Wisconsin is not far off the mark when he calls the report's release now a “credibility blockbuster,” which would have “stopped the SST dead in its tracks” if it had been released while the fight was on.

Similarly now comes word of a “top secret” letter to a Presidential committee from William D. Ruckelshaus, Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency—which Mr. Ruckelshaus himself says should not be secret at all. Rumors are that his letter, together with one from Russell Train, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, recommend cancellation of the proposed underground nuclear test scheduled for next month on Amchitka Island in the Aleutians.

Perhaps the rumor is true, perhaps not. In either case the American people have a right to know what their two top officials in the field of environmental protection have to say about the risks of an underground blast 250 times as great as the one that leveled Hiroshima. Will it require a lawsuit a year from now to show that the Government knew all the time that it was tempting earthquake, tidal wave and radioactive poisoning of the atmosphere?

The question, as before, is not whether the Government need fear “stories harmful to the national interest,” but whether the national interest can stand much more of this excessive concealment of information.