

A Man to Be Trusted

By TOM WICKER

IN THE NATION

WASHINGTON, June 28—Among the other debates set off by publication of the Pentagon Papers is one on the solemn question whether the Johnson Administration lied to the people, while escalating the Vietnam war, or merely misled them artfully.

This may put honest men in mind of the subtitle to Stephen Potter's classic dissertation on "gamesmanship," or how to win without actually cheating; but it is taken seriously in these precincts where numbers of people will argue heatedly that Government half-truths, cover-ups, obfuscations, sophistries, euphemisms and curve balls are permissible tools of the trade, so long as a "real lie" (meaning outright and provable) is not employed to gull the people.

Even those who adhere to this reasoning, most of whom are Government officials past, present and—they hope—future, would hardly deny, however, that the faith of the American people in their Government has been badly bent, if not broken, in the past decade.

This is evident, whether they were lied to or misled or just held in such contempt that the whole truth was regarded as too fearful for them to accept. Whether it was the Government claiming in 1960 that Francis Gary Powers and the U-2 were collecting weather data; or its original claim to have nothing to do with the Bay of Pigs invaders; or the Pentagon's refusal for 44 days in 1966 to admit that it had lost an H-bomb over Spain; or President Johnson's contention that the marines were sent to the Dominican Republic only to protect American lives; or American planes flying combat support missions in Cambodia despite President Nixon's assurances that they would not do so, not to mention all the dissembling and subterfuge (to choose words that can hardly be disputed) disclosed in the Pentagon Papers—all these episodes and many others surely support Anthony Lake's conclusion (in "Foreign Policy," spring, 1971) that "the Government has been caught out in enough deceptions, even on the most important issues, to raise strong

doubts in the minds of most informed Americans about the value of the official word."

Mr. Nixon has conceded publicly that he may not be believed about his intentions in Vietnam, because the people have so often been conned on that subject. Mr. Lake demonstrates that the "credibility gap" damages the nation's interests abroad; obviously, it

will impede any administration's efforts to lead at home. Almost surely, the loss of belief in the Government has much to do with the fact that an authoritative survey has just found that 47 per cent of the American people believe "a real breakdown in this country" is impending. The widespread conviction that the Government can't be trusted may also explain why, in a Newsweek survey, 47 per cent of those questioned thought national security was more important than freedom of the press (34 per cent) but 48 per cent of the same respondents disapproved of the Government trying to suppress the Pentagon Papers (only 33 per cent approved of that effort).

A Louis Harris survey recently found that by the huge margin of 71 to 15 per cent the public believed that "the real story" from Washington seldom made its way into the news, even though by 67 to 15 per cent the same public thought the Washington press did a good job of "keeping the politicians on their toes."

But it is patently not the press that can mend the credibility gap, because, despite all the Agnewian charges of slanted news, the press did not create that gap. The press may not have been lion-like in penetrating the image-making and word-wrenching to the truth or the absence of it, but any misleading words in the news columns have been largely those of Government spokesmen, not of reporters who made them up or got them garbled.

Nor is it "the Government"—the great torpid mass of political officials and bureaucrats—on whom the primary responsibility lies. A good, resounding resignation in protest of some outrage against public understanding would help a great deal, of course; but in the final analysis the tone of truth, if there is to be one, has to be set from the top.

It has to be set by the President of the United States, and not merely by some vacuous Executive order or ghost-written piety uttered at a news conference, then to be honored in the breach. The faith of the American people in their Government will be re-established only when it is headed by a man who understands that if the people are to trust him, he must trust them; and whose whole character and bearing will both symbolize that faith and impose it on his associates.