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Free Press, Free People

By OGDEN R. REID

Our democracy does not work well in secret. The Pentagon Papers illuminate the arrogance of those in high places and the serious erosion, if not breakdown, of our constitutional system of checks and balances.

At least two Administrations, if not three, believed that they were not accountable to the Congress and the American people for watershed decisions taken about Indochina.

The present Administration has gone even further and launched the most serious attack on the press in our history: subpoenaing reporters' notes, threatening reprisals against television and radio stations under the power to license, and, for the first time nationally, invoking prior restraint against the right to publish.

This precensorship was claimed to be justified because of an "immediate grave threat to national security." Critical national security touching our very survival is not in fact at issue here—nor is cryptographic intelligence.

While the Kennedy and particularly the Johnson Administrations' failure to inform Congress is a shocking example of unilateral executive decision-making, the attempted effort by the Nixon Administration to prevent what is essentially past history reaching Congress or being published is hardly more reassuring.

After six days of hearings before the Government Information Subcommittee of the House of Representatives, certain remedies are clearly called for if the Congress is to reassert its constitutional role.

First, the Congress must enact a new statute governing classified documents. This law must sharply limit that which should be labeled secret and it must provide for automatic de-

classification and Congressional oversight. If a matter should remain secret after a stated period, there should be an affirmative, positive finding as to why continued secrecy is necessary.

The Congress should explicitly reserve the right to make public material improperly classified by the executive contrary to statute when its classification is not a matter of national security and is simply a device to avoid governmental embarrassment. Equally, no Executive order on classification should be issued that subverts the intent of the Congress. Above all, there must be a vast reduction in the corps of 8,000 Defense Department officers who now have authority to originate top secret and secret designations.

Second, the Freedom of Information Act should be tightened in two respects. The types of information now permitted to be withheld must be sharply limited, and time permitted for Government response to a court suit must be reduced from the present 60 days.

Third, the Congress must come to grips with executive privilege. Here we are dealing with a collision between the executive and the Congress that has been going on since George Washington assumed office. It should be subject to accommodation, but that will never happen if the Congress does not assert the powers and responsibilities given to it by the Constitution.

Fourth, legislation may well be required to protect the Fourth Estate. The press often serves as a coordinate branch of our democracy, especially when a breakdown occurs between the other three. Specifically, we need a national Newsmen's Privilege Act—now law in six states—protecting the confidentiality of sources, absent a threat to human life, espionage, or

foreign aggression. Legislation should be enacted to prohibit the issuance by the courts of injunctions against publication, thereby removing prior restraint from the reach of the executive.

Congressional legislation and assertion of appropriate initiatives can help redress the current situation. If need be, the power of the purse can be more resolutely used vis-à-vis an unresponsive executive. But more fundamentally, what we need is government with faith in the American people and in their right to participate in the great decisions. If we do not see this now, after the Bay of Pigs, the Dominican Republic intervention and the whole tragic history of Indochina, then as a nation we do not really understand democracy.

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