

Hooked On Knowing It All

By Russell Baker
New York Times

Washington

THEY WERE people with a lust to know everything. They had a vision of total information. They believed in Intelligence with a faith which bordered on religion.

Intelligence. One still senses a vocal genuflection when the word passes over their lips. God may be love, but knowledge is power. They were like their predecessors in exulting in the very special, inside, eyes only, super-secret, pried-out - with - latest - electronic - miracle-device, ultra - classified information which was theirs alone, as they believed.

Faith in Intelligence was very presidential, like "Ruffles and Flourishes," the Secret Servicemen with the heaters under their jackets, the airplanes, clicking heels, vacation White Houses. Johnson had had the faith. Kennedy. Maybe Eisenhower.

"Only the President can have all the facts." Who said that? Johnson possibly. Certainly his apologists, sycophants, public relations flunkys, who may even had believed it. Whether they ever said it or not, the Nixon men surely had it engraved on the back walls of their minds, for they pursued Intelligence with the intensity and pure devotion of true believers.

★ ★ ★

THEIRS WAS a faith in Total Intelligence. In their dream of ultimate fulfillment, absolutely everything was knowable. But could the FBI be trusted to bring about the ultimate fulfillment? Not half likely. Not with old Hoover there. Hoover sat on information, kept it for himself, wouldn't share.

Total Intelligence was impossible under such conditions. Accordingly, retired gumshoes from CIA and the New York police force were brought in. The miracle workers of electronics were summoned to sow secret ears through the country.

Johnson's pride in exclusive knowing centered upon the delusion that he had all the facts about Vietnam. The new crowd wanted more than that. They wanted all the facts about everything. When somebody obtained some facts the new crowd had wanted to keep for themselves, they wanted the facts about who let the inside facts out of the bag, and why, and what he was telling his psychiatrist, and whether he ever read comic books, went to the movies, could help his kids with the new math.

★ ★ ★

ONE IMAGINES Washington in that new electric age of faith, its air filled with tiny little amplified conversations bleeping through the night, out of bugged telephones and wired martini olives, into the incessantly rotating spools of the tape recording machines. One fancies thousands of nodding monitors, ear-phones clamped to skulls, nodding over a thousand miles of slowly moving tape.

Was not the President himself submitting to total bugging and total wire-tapping? Were his closest advisers not having their own closest advisers bugged to add to the fund of Total Intelligence? Were the President's agents not toiling to add to the sum of Total Intelligence information about whether his political opponents like girls and whether they preferred scotch or bourbon?

The astounding thing, of course, was that the harder the White House labored to know absolutely everything, the less it knew about the relatively few things that it was its business to know about.

★ ★ ★

PRODIGES OF Intelligence gathering were being performed, the tapes were turning night and day, yet it took months and months and months for the President to learn something he could have found out by buying a newspaper; to wit, that he had a problem down at the Watergate.

Intelligence may have become Presidents' gin. A little of it taken discreetly can ease life along more gently. If one becomes hooked on it, however, it becomes hard to find out what day it is.