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Read this, please, but don't tell anyone what it says or who wrote it. If you must tell, attribute it to a former Government aide writing in a large metropolitan daily.

By BILL MOYERS

Following my address at the University of Maine commencement last June, a student said to me: "Mr. Moyers, you've been in both journalism and Government; that makes everything you say doubly hard to believe." The skepticism which she expressed toward two of our major institutions is widespread, one reason being, I am convinced, the indiscriminate use of backgrounders as the source of "hard" news stories.

The backgrounder permits the press and the Government to sleep together, even to procreate, without getting married or having to accept responsibility for any offspring. It's the public on whose doorstep orphans of deceptive information and misleading allegations are left, while the press and the Government roll their eyes innocently and exclaim: "No mea culpa!"

I know. I used to do a little official seducing myself. The objects of the chase—members of the Washington press corps — were all consenting adults. Having been around much longer than I and being more experienced, they came to each tryst more eagerly than I had expected. As when the noted correspondent of a major network implored me, "If I can't use what you have just told me, can I use what you haven't just told me?" Assuming the classic posture of the incorruptible but ingenuous press secretary — eyebrow arched casually, condescendingly, in the manner of Clark Gable, and a smile like Whistler's Mother—I merely looked him in the eye and he was had. That night his gravelly voice carried to millions of homes across the nation the word we wanted out in the first place but were unwilling to announce explicitly.

Every major newspaper picked up the story the next day, quoting the network reporter quoting "high Administration officials." Never mind that two months later the trial balloon burst. Except for a few crusty veterans in the White House press corps, no one knew who was responsible for the story. And my accomplice? He was back for more. Score one for the Official Version of Reality.

The backgrounder has its defense, most ably put forward, ironically, by the victims themselves, the reporters. Three years ago, in one of those periodic fits of repentance which befalls an ex-press secretary when he has been away from Washington too long, I confessed to misgivings about the practice and suggested some changes. My proposals were modest. Always identify a source by his specific agency, I suggested; this would replace the loose anonymity of "high U. S. officials" with more accountable terms like "a Defense Department spokesman," "a White House source," or "an official of the Interior Department." Embargo the contents of a group background session for at least one hour, I went on, permitting hastily summoned reporters time to cross-check what they have been told. A few other suggestions followed, equally sensible, of course.

You would have thought I had pro-

posed abolishing the First Amendment, so wrathfully did the press corps rise up to proclaim the absolute indispensability of the backgrounder. Perjury, naiveté, and hypocrisy were but the lesser sins of which I stood condemned, perhaps accurately if somewhat excessively. For two weeks one could travel the length of the National Press Club bar by the light of my effigies, no mean distance.

Some of the arguments in support of the backgrounder I appreciate. As Jules Frandsen, veteran head of the Washington bureau of United Press International, wrote: "A lot of skulduggery in Government and in Congress would never come to light if everything had to be attributed." True, but I am not protesting this form of backgrounding. A single reporter digging for a more detailed story can usually check with other sources the information he gets privately from one official, unless he is lazy or on the take. And the good reporters, of which there are many in Washington, learn to throw away self-serving propaganda offered by a disgruntled or ambitious official.

Background sessions which are held to provide reporters with understanding of complicated issues are also useful. Explaining the President's new budget or the ramifications of legislative proposals requires giving reporters access to experts whose names would be meaningless to the public.

But these are not the practices that cause harm and create an unbelieving and untrusting public. It is when the press becomes a transmission belt for official opinions and predictions, indictments and speculation, coming from a host of unidentified spokesmen —when the press permits anonymous officials to announce policy without accountability—that the public throws up its hands in confusion and disgust.

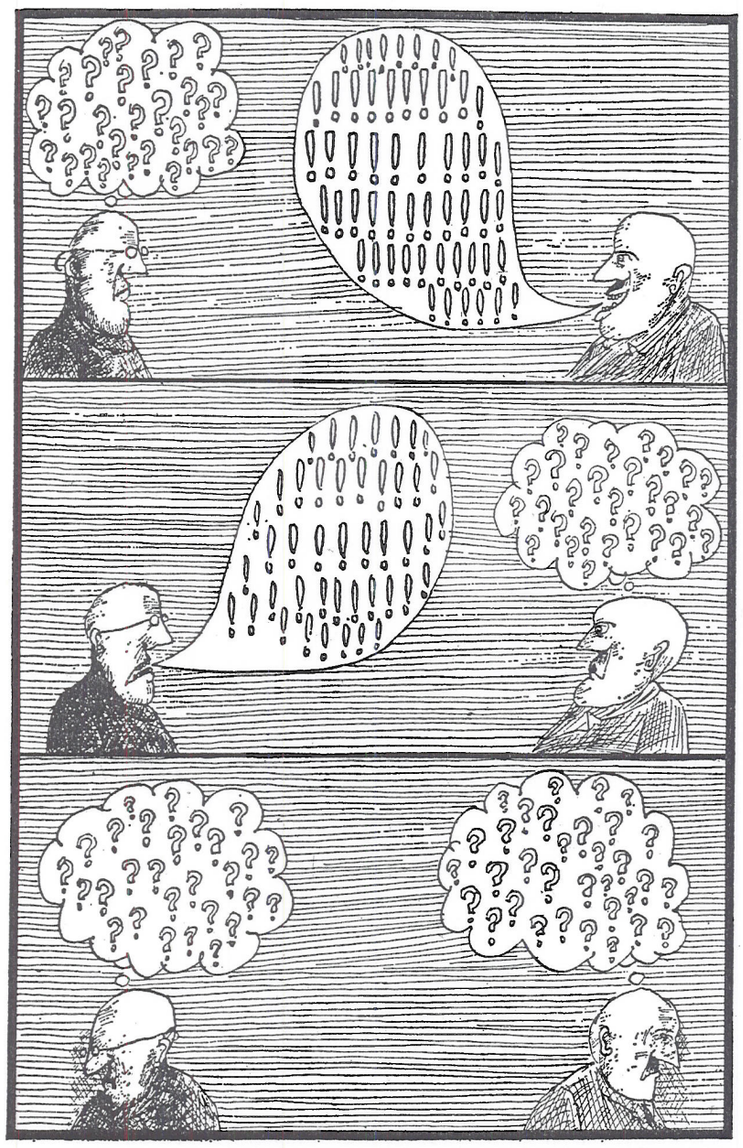
Mr. Kissinger's *sotto voce* threat to the Soviets, which in true Orwellian fashion had to be denied when its source was identified, is only the latest revelation of the ease with which public officials have come to use the backgrounder as a primary instrument of policy, propaganda, and manipulation. "The interests of national security dictate that the lie I am about to tell you not be attributed to me." There are plenty of other examples.

In 1966 an official in Saigon gave a backgrounder in which he led reporters to believe that certain Pentagon studies had forecast a long war in Vietnam—that it would take 750,000 troops in Vietnam to end the war in five years (at the time we had 290,000 men there). The President then told a news conference that Secretary McNamara could find no evidence of any such studies having been made. Later, sources identified only as "U. S. officials" said no such studies had been made, except perhaps as one man's opinion. The source of the original backgrounder turned out to be no less an authority than the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Wallace M. Greene. Whom was the public to believe: the "high official" in Saigon or "U. S. officials" in Washington? There had been such studies, but the Government, by manipulating the press, obscured the fact.

In 1967 Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the U. S. commander in South Vietnam, told a group of reporters in Washington that he was "deeply concerned" that the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville was about to become an important source of arms for Vietcong troops in South Vietnam. Furthermore, he said, the military was considering contingency plans to quarantine the port. Reporters agreed to hold their stories until the general had left town, and then they quoted "some U. S. officials." The Government was obviously trying to put extra pressure on then-Premier Sihanouk to crack down on the arms shipments—a worthy goal, as the Government saw it. But instead of using available diplomatic channels to reach Sihanouk, Washington enlisted the press as its surrogate. By conspiring to quote plural sources when in fact they had talked to only one man, reporters wittingly became a party to the kind of double-dealing and concealment the press so often condemns on the part of the Government.

Such backgrounders occur frequently. Mr. Kissinger just happened recently to get caught. A mild case of righteous indignation broke out over the incident and some editors have now instructed their reporters to walk out if an official refuses to permit attribution. Representatives of the White House and reporters have been trying to put down some ground rules for the future, but a high source in Washington told me off-the-record that when the rules are issued they will not be for attribution.

In the end very little will change. The Government will go on calling backgrounders as long as the Government wants to put its best face forward. Reporters will be there to report dutifully what isn't officially said by a source that can't be held officially accountable at an event that doesn't officially happen for a public that can't officially be told because it can't officially be trusted to know. But don't quote me on that.



Dusan Ludwig

Bill Moyers, press aide to President Johnson and former publisher of Newsday, conducts a regular television program over National Educational Television, Channel 13 in New York.