

Let's Declassify

By RICHARD HUDSON

More than half a century ago Woodrow Wilson called for "open covenants openly arrived at." It was a good idea then, although the other statesmen of the time didn't think so. They made a lot of secret deals, and a generation later the world had its biggest war yet.

Now, I think, Wilson's idea is not merely good but indispensable if mankind is to avoid catastrophe. The Pentagon Papers provide fresh and dramatic evidence that Government officials operating behind closed doors do not possess some mysterious high wisdom denied to the rest of us. Indeed, one could make a good case that the outside public exhibits more good sense.

Suppose the Johnson Administration had been a goldfish-bowl operation, leveling with the Congress and the people. If the truth had been released about the events in the Gulf of Tonkin in August, 1964, would there have been a Tonkin Resolution? Most unlikely. Without the Administration's massive snow job, I believe it is probable that the American people and the Congress would never have permitted a U.S. ground war on the mainland of Asia.

The system of secrecy backfires even within governments and at the highest levels. The case of Adlai Stevenson at the time of the Bay of Pigs crisis, when he declared (and believed) that the U.S. had nothing to do with it, is well known. For no gain whatever, the U.S. suffered a serious loss of credibility. Also well known is the fact that The New York Times knew about the planned invasion beforehand but refrained from printing much of the story at the request of President Kennedy. If The Times had published the story surely a storm would have arisen—but a disastrous foreign-policy blunder probably would have been prevented.

I think it has not been published before that in the Cuban missile crisis the shoe of secrecy was on the other foot. I have learned from a Russian source in a position to know that on October 23, 1962, in the heat of the Security Council debate, when Stevenson angrily turned to Soviet Ambassador Valerin Zorin and said that he would wait "until hell freezes over" for Zorin's answer as to whether there were Soviet missiles in Cuba, Zorin stalled and balked for the simple reason that he didn't have the foggiest idea of the true answer. It is also clear from Robert Kennedy's book, "Thirteen Days," that Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin in Washington did not know on that same date, the day after President Kennedy's television address letting the world in on the crisis, whether there were Soviet missiles in Cuba.

It would be interesting to know whether Gromyko was in on Khrushchev's secret when he saw Kennedy

on October 17—the day after Kennedy had seen photographs of the Soviet missiles—and assured Kennedy "that the Soviet Union would never become involved in the furnishing of offensive weapons to Cuba" (Robert Kennedy's words). I have never been able to ascertain the answer to this question but circumstantial evidence leads me to believe that Gromyko had not been told.

What if President Kennedy had not kept his secret and had confronted Gromyko with the photographs? Might not the public confrontation have been avoided? What if Khrushchev had told Dobrynin of his intentions? Surely Dobrynin would have told Khrushchev in strong terms that putting Soviet missiles into Cuba would take the world to the brink.

The most bizarre example of secrecy today is that at the talks on the limitation of strategic arms—SALT. Supposedly secrets are to be kept from potential enemies, but here the potential enemies sit down together to talk about important matters that are kept from their own people. U.S. officials say that they have to be secretive about the talks because the Russians want it that way, but I suspect that the American officials have not pressed for openness. I think that the talks might very well progress better if they were open to the public.

Of course, there are valid arguments at times for secrecy: military matters have to be kept quiet so long as the present archaic international security system continues to exist; codes must be protected; information in personnel files that might damage reputations should not be released; often diplomats can avoid making propaganda speeches by holding private negotiations.

What is needed is the establishment of a rule that unless there is overriding reason for secrecy, Government business should be done in the open. I would suggest that all executive department documents be automatically declassified after one year unless a newly established commission rule that a valid reason existed for a document to remain classified. The commission should be a quasijudicial institution not under the authority of the executive department. It would review documents at the time they are first classified and would not permit classification unless a strong case were presented. In short, the less material classified, the better, and for material that is classified, the sooner it is declassified, the better.

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