

By ARCHIBALD MacLEISH

CONWAY, Mass.—I suppose I should take an ironical satisfaction in the attempt of the Attorney General to silence The Times, The Times having so recently silenced me. But I don't and can't. When a drama critic, or what passes for one, concocts a review to kill a play nothing is at issue but the worth of the play and the competence of the critic.

But when the Attorney General brings a suit to kill a newspaper story everything is at stake: not only worth and competence but the future of the Republic itself. For the Republic is a self-governing society, and no society can govern itself if the apparatus of government, the bureaucracy temporarily in power, can cut it off from the source of all government, the facts.

Mr. Lincoln put the proposition in iron words a century and more ago. What we have in this country, Mr. Lincoln said—what must not be allowed to vanish from the earth—is government of the people, by the people and for the people. Which means that the government we do not have is government against the people. But what act of government could be more obviously an act against the people than the Attorney General's? It is not The Times which will suffer if publication of this material is enjoined: The Times has other stories to fill its columns. The sufferers will be the people in their grave and difficult task of governing themselves.

And they will suffer not at the periphery of their responsibility but at the center of it, for the question with which the challenged articles deal is the question of peace or war, meaning in the most literal sense the question of life and death—the life and death not only of armies but of nations also—including very possibly our own.

What we as a self-governing people need to know at this particular moment of our bewildering time—what we need to know more than anything else in the dark around us—is whether our Asian war is a war we should have fought and must now go on fighting, or whether the whole thing was, from its origins in the minds of men now dead, a calamitous mistake, a ruinous disaster. And it is precisely to this need that the material, if we may judge by the installments already printed, is addressed.

We have here, in their own words, the changing and developing opinions of some of the best informed and most respected men of the generation. Nothing could better instruct a self-governing people caught in an ambiguous and mystifying war than precisely these troubled voices.

But these voices, the Attorney General protests, are Top Secrets voices, not available to the public ear, meaning not available to the people. They have been tagged and stamped Top Secret, and only the duly certified may listen to them. But who is to certify the listeners to a colloquy as grim as this? Mr. Hoover? And who is to stamp a thought Top Secret in a self-governing state? Who is to say for the people, "This shall be secret from us and this shall be Top Secret?"

The people accept Top Secret in "Superspy" and "Mission Impossible" but in real life they laugh at it, and with reason. There is hardly a man in the top levels of Government who hasn't lost his respect for the rubric—usually on the day when his incoming box contained a Top Secret document, the gist of which he had read in The Washington Post the week before.

The fact is that except in actual war, when troop movements and weapon developments and strategic planning must necessarily be confidential, there

are no Government secrets. There are merely things said and done which officers of government would find it convenient to keep in a locked drawer. There is merely, that is to say, official convenience, the opposite of official embarrassment.

But in a society in which the people are responsible for governing themselves, official convenience cannot take precedence over the public need to know. And the public need to know is a strength, not a weakness. Back at the beginning of the Hitler war there were faint-hearted Americans who said a free society could never defeat a police state because the police state would keep its secrets. As it turned out the open societies drove the keepers of the secret out of Normandy and over the Rhine and discovered at Buchenwald what the secret really was.

What worries me about all this is not the classified documents. It is the classified minds. The Attorney General obviously thinks at one level only, the level of what he would call security. Having claimed the right to defend the security of the nation against the people by listening in on their telephone conversations and by building up secret police files for use against them he now, quite logically, insists on his duty to suppress facts they need to know.

It is all of a piece, but not of a piece Mr. Lincoln would have admired. To the Attorney General the Government comes first and the people after. To Mr. Lincoln the people are the Government. Even the "silent majority" may come to grasp that difference.

*Archibald MacLeish, poet and playwright, served as Librarian of Congress and Assistant Secretary of State under President Roosevelt. His latest play, "Scratch," recently closed on Broadway, will be published in August.*