

We Have to Make Them Listen

By RICHARD J. DONAHUE

It is said that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." We could probably expand that to include nearly absolute power corrupting nearly absolutely.

When the executive branch is permitted to wrap its actions and intentions in absolute secrecy and is itself the ultimate arbiter of what the public and their representatives shall be permitted to know (as either news or history); when the Congress is so overly concerned with form, professional courtesy, protocol, and respect for the person of the President rather than his office, that they make no concerted efforts to restore the balance of power they so willingly surrendered; when an overworked and archaic judicial system is overly deferential toward the well-to-do and insensitive to the needs of the poor; when the people are not only ill-informed but often hopelessly uninformed; then you have the ingredients of a vast and unprecedented crisis in the democratic way of life.

From the dawn of history men have been ruled by leaders and their cliques of soldiers or ministers. These "governments" felt no responsibility to keep people informed or to act fairly and candidly. The people were ruled by their rulers and they had to obey and ask no questions. The government was a demigod which owed the people nothing, but which demanded from those subjects obedience and loyalty—or else. This concept is still very much alive today in countries around the world.

When any branch of the Govern-

ment consistently and systematically lies to us, it has committed the highest form of treason; it has truly subverted the nation and overthrown it from within. And Administrations which seek to conceal the errors and lies of previous Administrations are guilty of the same crime against our free society. The crime, therefore, lies in the deceptions and the devious maneuverings of the executive branch, not in the efforts of a newspaper to inform the people of the documentable extent of that deception.

It is the people's job to keep themselves informed on public issues, but this cannot be done if the Government does not fulfill its part of the bargain: keeping the public informed.

Ways must be found to make the Government more responsive to public opinion and to raise the quality of those opinions. Ways must be found

to make the Administration more accountable to the people and their representatives. Here are two possibilities:

●Mandatory appearances for questioning before the entire Senate and a rotating fourth of the House every two months for the President, Secretary of State, Defense, the Attorney General and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Less often, but regularly for other Cabinet members. These question periods would occupy an entire day, and if necessary, the evening, in order that as many members as possible could ask questions.

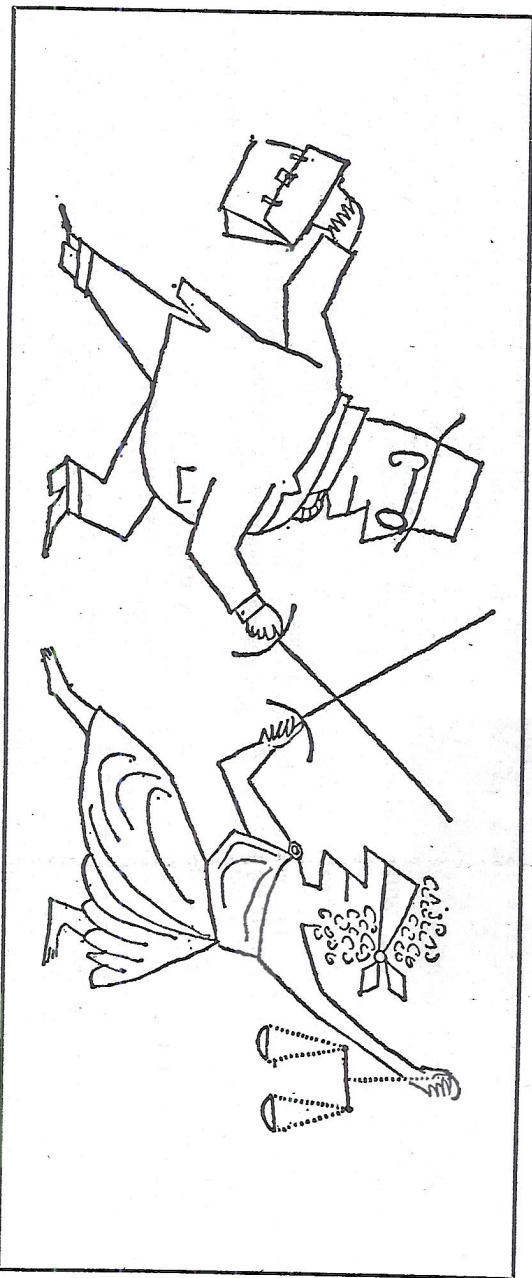
Should any respondent refuse to answer a question because he feels he may jeopardize national security, the Congress would designate a committee of four or five to retire to a closed room off the floor with the respondent and the questioner to listen to the

reasons for the refusal and the reasons for the question. The committee's determination as to whether or not security would be jeopardized would be binding. A continued refusal to reply would be considered as contempt of Congress, with all the consequences that implies.

●Weekly mailings from the Government Printing Office to all registered voters, containing brief summaries of all public bills voted on that week, with a record of how the voter's Senators and Congressmen voted.

The adoption of these two practices might lead to a better informed Congress and public, and reduce the occasions in which the executive could engage the country in situations and wars by fiat and/or deception.

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