

# James Reston

## All Power to The President?

A TROUBLED friend wants to know why the newspapers don't leave the questions of secret documents and national security to the president. Let us suppose that we did.

Presidential power is now greater than at any other time in the history of the republic. Ever since the invention of atomic weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles, it is clear that the nation could be mortally wounded before the Congress could ever be assembled on Capitol Hill.

Accordingly, the balance of decisive power in the foreign field — but not over internal policy — has passed from the Congress, where it lay before the two world wars, to the White House. This may or may not have been what we wanted but it was clearly what we had to do.



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OTHER INVENTIONS tipped the balance of political power toward the president, especially nationwide television. It is at his disposal whenever he likes, with a studio in the White House. He has instant communications with the people and the world, all of which is necessary. The Congress cannot compete with him in the use of these modern instruments in the conduct of public policy.

But these unavoidable facts raise serious questions. Should such power not be subject to review by the representatives of the people? Should the Congress not know what is going on? Should the executive be free to use the power it needs to deal with the threat of nuclear war in undeclared wars like Vietnam? Should the press shut its eyes to any documents, even old historical documents, the executive chooses to mark top secret?

The fuss over the Pentagon Papers is only a symbol of a much larger problem. It is true that these papers raise questions of "national security," but the greatest threat to national security in this time is the division of the people over a war they have had to fight in accordance with decisions of governments that didn't tell them the truth. The nation is seething with distrust, not only of the government but of the press, and the issue of the Pentagon Papers is merely whether we should get at the facts and try to correct our mistakes, or suppress the whole painful story.

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FUNDAMENTALLY, this is not a fight between the government and the press. It is not even a fight over the president's decisive power to defend the nation in an age of nuclear missiles. Congress has submitted to the scientific facts on the ultimate questions of nuclear war.

But now it has been asked, in the name of "security," not even to look at an historical analysis of a war it has financed but not declared, not to question the unelected members of the White House staff, who had access to the papers Congress could not see, and to respect the Administration's right to stamp "secret" on any documents it likes, and to keep them secret years after the event, when officials long out of office are writing their own versions of history out of the "secret documents."

My "troubled friend" has good cause for anxiety. He is right to wonder whether the press knows enough and is responsible enough to publish things the attorney general wants suppressed. He is right to concern himself with the security of the nation.

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BUT WHAT is being exposed here is not primarily some government documents that might cause "irreparable damage" to the defense of the nation, but a system, of secrecy, of presidential presumption, of influential staff advice by men who cannot be questioned, of concealment and manipulation, all no doubt with the best motives, but nevertheless a system which has got out of hand and could really cause "irreparable damage" to the republic.

No doubt the press itself is often poorly informed and clumsy in its efforts to expose the dangers of this system, but the greater the power in the hands of the executive, the greater the need for information and skepticism on the part of the Congress and the press.

My anxious friend might be careful about weakening the instruments of information and review at such a time. No doubt they are blunt instruments, often misused, but in this case of the Pentagon Papers, or so it seems here, the greater danger is the system of executive secrecy, and the greater danger to the security of the nation is the mistrust this system of secrecy and of contrived television propaganda has caused.

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