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Returning the Papers

To the Editor:

Dean Acheson (Op-Ed July 7) says that the "purloined papers" should have been returned to their owners, "the Government." Like the Chief Justice, he views the papers as physical possessions, in the category of lost shirt-studs or stolen five-dollar bills. Even so, it seems odd to return the evidence of deceit and betrayal of public trust to the authors of the deceit.

Taking a deeper view, can truth, once discovered, be returned to any custodian or any hiding place? Can truth be excluded from the responsibility of the discoverer, tied with twine, and delivered to the State Department, the Pentagon or the White House?

Mr. Acheson's distinction between "the Government" and the people has been useful to dictatorships but it has not always or usually been valid in a democracy.

Many times in recent years Mr. Acheson has disappointed his former admirers, but never more so than in this denigration of individual and public conscience, and in his equating the press with such industries as professional sport, brewing, or the garment trade. Like them, he suggests, the press needs a czar, "a universally respected public figure" to head a commission charged with telling newspapers what is desirable or undesirable for them to print. The figure of Thomas Jefferson is no longer visible even remotely on his once democratic horizon.

HENRY BEETLE HOUGH
Edgartown, Mass., July 7, 1971