

On the Matter Of News 'Leaks'



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BARRY GOLDWATER, Patrick Buchanan, and Ken Clawson exploded in sequence last week, like a string of dynamite blasts, on the matter of "leaks" in the national press. The situation demands attention and it merits concern, but it defies easy answer.

The senator from Arizona, the President's top speech writer, and the head of White House communications were outraged — justifiably outraged — at the torrent of leaks flowing chiefly from the House Judiciary Committee.

I have been in the news business all my life, and I cannot recall any situation that approaches the situation that now obtains. Every day brings a fresh leak of some confidential document. It is not only the Judiciary Committee that gushes its subterranean secrets; the Senate's Watergate committee and possibly the FBI also are involved.

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FOR ALL OF Senator Goldwater's long memorandum last week on the law, it seems to me doubtful that criminal conduct can be proved. The questions are not questions of law, but of ethics, of honor, and of professional responsibility.

In the matter of leaks from the House Judiciary Committee, it is plain that someone with access to the committee's confidential files is behaving if not dishonestly, at least dishonorably. A number of memoranda prepared for the committee's use by William P. Dixon, a Democratic staff lawyer, have been deliberately leaked to the press. His leaked memoranda are damaging to the President, and so long as the memoranda are not publicly released, they cannot be examined by other reporters. They are shots from ambush.

In my own view, the conduct of the leakers ought to be roundly condemned. In times past, in such matters as Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers, some plausible appeal could be made to a "higher morality." Ellsberg had to reveal the war documents, he said, because there was no way the people could learn the truth otherwise.

No such rationalization is available to the anonymous source who leaked Dixon's memorandum of June 6 on June 17. Release of this confidential statement could not conceivably serve some "higher morality." It served the cause of the partisan Democrats who are out to get the President.

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WHAT OF THE role of the newspapers? The ethical and professional questions here are far more complex. One starts with the plain truth that Dixon's memoranda are news. Newspapers exist not to suppress news, but to print it. If a newspaper is given confidential material, having demonstrable news value, the newspaper's duty is to print it, unless —. Unless what? Unless other considerations are more important.

One such consideration, obviously, is the national security. This is not involved in the current leaks. Another consideration, far more difficult to appraise, is the image and reputation of the press itself. By serving as a willing ally to the committee's hatchetmen, the conniving newspapers inevitably create the impression that their purpose is not to pursue the news, but to pursue a vendetta instead. It is an ugly image, harming the press as a whole. Speaking for myself, as one professional newsmen, I voice my resentment, and my protest.