

FBI's efforts to discover news leaks not surprising

WASHINGTON — The FBI's use of lie detectors to locate news leaks may be upsetting to The New York Times. But for us, it's strictly routine.

Long ago, we became resigned to this sort of intimidation. We've counted as many as 18 FBI agents at one time searching for our sources. They've used not only lie detectors but third-degree methods and grand jury subpoenas.

The latest investigation was touched off, the press reported, by a New York Times account on July 22 of the secret U.S. position at the strategic arms limitation talks.

Actually, Atty. Gen. John Mitchell began investigating news leaks last spring. He ordered the FBI, specifically, to find out who was slipping us Pentagon secrets often intended for the "eyes only" of the top brass.

Military gumshoes grilled suspects behind the doors of room 3E993 at the Pentagon. FBI agents followed up, flashing their credentials and asking terse questions. Lie detectors were used; some suspects were tailed, their neighbors were questioned.

At least one suspect, a mild, bespectacled Pentagon aide named Gene Smith, was badgered, threatened, cursed and, finally, subpoenaed to appear before a federal grand jury in Norfolk, Va.

But unhappily, the vaunted FBI had fingered the wrong man. Smith denied under oath that he had given us so much as the time of day.

U.S. Attorney Brian Gettings admitted to us afterward that a "federal agency" had suggested he go after Smith. "We probably do have the wrong man," the chastened prosecutor acknowledged.

Triple threat

With the publication of the Pentagon papers, Mitchell broadened his investigation of news leaks. Then in July, the gumshoes moved into the State Department after the appearance of three more sensitive stories:

1. The New York Times account by William Beecher giving details of the U.S. bargaining position on arms limitation;
2. Another New York Times report by Tad Szulc about arms shipments to Pakistan; and
3. A column by us quoting from a State Department message that had been hand-carried in a sealed envelope to U.S. AID Administrator John Hannah.

Were these news leaks "prejudicial to the national interest," as State Department spokesman Robert McCloskey claimed? Or do government officials use the security stamp to cover up their mistakes and to manage the news for political purpose?

Let's take the message that was deliv-

ered to Hannah in a sealed envelope. This was a hush-hush report from our Ambassador to Kenya, Robinson McIlvaine, on the highjinks of the AID administration in

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Kenya. It was classified, we believe, solely to spare the involved officials from embarrassment.

Our publication

But admittedly, the Pentagon investigation was triggered by our publication of sensitive information. We reported, for example, that Gen. Creighton Abrams, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, had been asked to draw up top-secret contingency plans last October for a three-day, seven-day or ten-day aerial assault upon North Vietnam. We revealed no military details, except that the contingency plans included the bombing and mining of Haiphong harbor.

Here was evidence that President Nixon was preparing plans to expand the war at the same time that he was promising to curtail it. We thought it was in the public interest to print the story.

Official discrepancy

We also revealed that MACSOG teams, composed of U.S. special forces and South Vietnamese rangers, continued to operate inside Cambodia and Laos at the same time our spokesmen were claiming no American troops were in those countries. We cited secret messages, which referred to the Cambodian raids by the code name "Salem House" and to the Laos raids as "Prairie Fire."

Again, we felt the public was entitled to know about this little discrepancy.

Perhaps the story that caused the most embarrassment (and produced the most intensive investigation) was our disclosure that the U.S. had been intercepting South Vietnamese President Thieu's private communications. These were picked up and decoded by the National Security Agency, then passed on to the White House and other agencies. The intercepted messages were identified by the code name "Gout."

This unpleasant revelation, no doubt, was awkward for the U.S. But we strongly believe that, in a democracy, the people have the right to know what their officials are doing. Since no military security was involved, we published the story.

For the same reason, we reported that Adm. Thomas Moorer, the Joint Chiefs' chairman, received a "Flash" message after the daring Son Tay raid informing him that the North Vietnamese prison compound hadn't been occupied for three months.