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WASHINGTON POST
8 June 1986

The Post and Pelton: How The Press Looks At National Security

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By Benjamin C. Bradlee

NATIONAL SECURITY means protection or defense of the country against attack, sedition, espionage, or other forms of hostile interference.

It isn't a complicated concept.

It isn't just hard to be against national security; it's inconceivable.

And yet, why is the director of Central Intelligence trying to get various news organizations indicted for the treasonous disclosure of information classified in the interest of national security? Why does the director of the National Security Agency threaten to prosecute news organizations if they publish information he feels threatens the national security? What does the assistant to the president for national security affairs have in mind when he joins the battle with such relish?

Why is the president of the United States himself so concerned that he calls the chairman of the board of this newspaper and asks that information be withheld in the interests of national security?

What's all the fuss about? Do these men really think the people who run this newspaper would betray their country? What reporter and what editor could betray this trust, and look their owner in the eye?

It sounds so simple, but it isn't.

The Washington Post has been at the center of some stormy national security debates in the last 20 years. One of those debates—the Pentagon Papers—went all the way to the Supreme Court in 1971 before it was resolved, in favor of the press.

The most recent, and the most anguishing, of these debates surrounds the story we published late last month about the Ronald Pelton spy case, after eight months of internal discussion and six months of conversations with the highest government officials.

As usual, outsiders seem both fascinated and mystified by how this newspaper handles this kind of story.

The Pelton case illustrates two important points about how The Post deals with national security issues:

- First, we do consult with the government regularly about sensitive stories and we do withhold stories for national security reasons, far more often than the public might think. The Post has withheld information from more than a dozen stories so far this year for these reasons.
- Second, we don't allow the government—or anyone else—to decide what we should print. That is our job, and doing it responsibly is what a free press is all about.

Trouble starts when people try to sweep a lot of garbage under the rug of national security. Even some very highly placed people.

Like President Richard Nixon in 1969, when he described a New York Times exclusive report on the secret bombing of Cambodia as an egregious example of national security violation.

That's right out of Kafka, when you think about it. The Cambodians certainly knew they were being bombed, and since only the United States was then flying bombing missions in Indochina, they certainly knew who was bombing them. If the Cambodians knew, the Vietcong knew. And if the Vietcong knew, their Soviet allies knew immediately. So what was all *that* about? Well, the American people didn't know and, in fact they had been told we would not bomb Cambodia.

Here, national security was used to cover up a national embarrassment: The president had lied to the American people and to the world. But the New York Times story, by reporter William Beecher, was used by the White House to justify creation of the infamous Plumbers unit, ostensibly to plug the leak that produced this dreadful violation of national security.

This led us to Watergate, of course. Is there anyone now alive and kicking in today's national security debate who remembers Nixon looking the world in its television eye and telling us he couldn't tell the world the truth about Watergate because national security was involved?

The worst lie of all.

All of this is not to say that there is no such thing as a legitimate claim of national security. Of course there is. Ever since World War II, a standard example of what not to publish for reasons of national security has been the sailing times of troopships leaving American harbors for foreign battle. But the world doesn't work that way anymore. Another good rule for when not to publish involves the risk of American lives (though that one has been used in cases where the risk was all but impossible to conceive). In any case, this newspaper does keep information out of print for reasons of national security. I can't give you a list without violating the national-security interest that led me to withhold publication.

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In addition to stories that are withheld for reasons of national security, there are some close calls—stories that are eventually run, after long discussions where opposing views are vigorously defended.

Such a story appeared in The Washington Post on Feb. 18, 1977, under the headline "CIA Paid Millions to Jordan's King Hussein," and under reporter Bob Woodward's byline. Millions of dollars of "walking around money" (as distinct from economic or military aid) had been paid to the king by the CIA under the codeword project name "No Beef."

Jimmy Carter had been president less than a month. He agreed to see Woodward and me, after we sought White House reaction to the story before publication. The president totally disarmed us by admitting the story was true. He said that the payments had been stopped, and then stunned us by saying that he had known nothing about it until The Post had sought White House reaction, despite multiple briefings during the preceding months by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and CIA Director George Bush. The president never asked that the story not be printed, although he made clear he hoped it would not. He told us that the story, if printed, would make the progress he hoped for in the Middle East harder to achieve.

The argument over whether to print or not to print was spirited, to understate it. Some of us felt that the national interest would best be served if the world knew that the CIA had a king on its payroll, and that neither the outgoing CIA director nor the outgoing secretary of state felt that fact was important enough to share with the new president. Others felt that anything that might make resolution of the problems of the Middle East more difficult was not worth the candle of publishing.

There are no absolutes in such discussions. Rightness or wrongness lies in the eye of the beholder. Our decision was to publish. Hussein is still king. Bush is the vice president. Carter is the former president.

Under President Reagan, there was only one major point of tension about national security between the White House and this newspaper during the first term. It is hard to say whether this period of comparative detente was the result of the presence in the White House of James Baker as chief of staff and David Gergen as director of communications, both now laboring in different vineyards, or the absence of Washington Post interest in national security matters. The latter seems unlikely.

The one incident occurred in the waning days—December 1984—of the first term and involved Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. The story stemmed from an extraordinary briefing at the Pentagon by Air Force Brig. Gen. Richard F. Abel about the next Discovery space shuttle mission carrying an intelligence satellite. "Speculation" by news organizations on military aspects of the mission would result in a Defense Department investigation, Abel said.

Reporter Walter Pincus was asked casually by one of his editors, "What the hell is in that satellite, anyway?" He said he would "make a few calls" to find out. Two days and three telephone calls later, a story appeared under his and Mary Thornton's bylines, describing in general terms its signals-intelligence mission.

On that same morning, Weinberger was en route to a CNN early morning talk show interview, where he intended to push the Defense Department budget, which was already under a certain amount of attack from the Congress. He was interrupted by CBS reporter Reid Collins and asked if The Post's story "gave aid and comfort to the enemy" (an odd question, it seemed then and now). Weinberger replied that the story did just that, and the fat was in the fire.

The Post issued a statement saying that there was nothing in the Pincus-Thornton story that had not appeared in bits and pieces somewhere else. But the damage was done. More than 4,000 letters to the editor were received. Some of the letters contained threats of bodily harm, even death.

The story would die there, a minor, if scarring skirmish in the battle over national security, were it not for a lecture given at Emory University a few days later by General Abel. The general was asked if The Post had violated national security by publishing. He replied that The Post's story contained little or no information not on the public record. No Post reporter was present at the lecture, but a student called the paper to report both the question and the answer. We smelled a hoax, and asked to listen to a tape. We listened. He said it. We still wanted confirmation from General Abel, and finally got it at 9 p.m., when he returned to his home from Atlanta.

Some time in September 1985, reporter Woodward came into my office, shut the door, and in almost a whisper laid out an amazing top-secret American intelligence capability that emerged in bits and pieces eight months later in the trial of Ronald Pelton. Woodward described in great detail how the communication intercept had worked, where the communications were intercepted, every detail except Pelton's name.

Woodward didn't have Pelton's name because no American knew for sure at that point that a man named Pelton had sold this intelligence gold mine to the Russians five years earlier. That didn't start to surface until well after Vitaly Yurchenko defected last year and fingered Pelton. Yurchenko

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had been Pelton's first KGB contact, the man who had arranged for Pelton to spill the beans. Pelton was arrested last Nov. 24.

But without knowledge of Pelton, back last September, The Washington Post had no knowledge that every detail of our story was already known to the Russians. We thought we had the highest national security secret any of us had ever heard. There was never a thought given to publishing any of this information.

At one of our weekly breakfasts, I told publisher Donald E. Graham about the story, and about my concern that while the administration was beating the press upside the head for run-of-the-mill leaks, truly important national-security information was floating around town. I wondered out loud to him about trying to get an appointment with President Reagan to inform him of our information and our concern. We scrapped the idea on the grounds that it would inevitably appear to be self-serving and grandstanding.

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About that time I did run into the national security adviser, Vice Adm. John Poindexter, at a dinner party, and asked him for an appointment to discuss the same subject. We did meet, and he suggested I talk to Lt. Gen. William Odom, the head of the National Security Agency. General Odom and I first met at his downtown Washington office in the shadow of the Executive Office Building on Dec. 5, 1985. Post managing editor Leonard Downie and two members of Odom's staff also were present. We told the NSA chief the detailed information we had, information we said that the Russians now had as a result of Pelton's treason. We said we felt extremely uncomfortable with this information, but we had it, the Russians had it, and we asked why it should be kept from the American people.

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General Odom shook his head in dismay. He said the information was still extremely sensitive. We didn't know exactly what the Russians knew, he said. It was hoped, he said, that Pelton would plead guilty, avoiding any public discussion of the evidence against him. He looked us in the eye and told us that any story about this case would gravely threaten the national security of the United States.

We were to hear that claim many, many times in the next five months, as we tried to frame a story that would tell the American people what the Russians already knew, and only what the Russians already knew.

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We were determined not to violate the legitimate security of the nation, but we were equally determined not to be browbeaten by the administration, which has from time to time appeared to relish press-bashing, into not publishing something that our enemies already knew.

The weapons of any administration in this kind of a battle are formidable: presidents, admirals, generals, CIA directors telling you that publication would endanger the nation and the lives of some of its fighters, and ultimately threatening to prosecute you for violating the law.

These are red lights that a newspaper goes through only with a deliberate lack of speed.

The weapons of the press in this kind of battle are generally the reporters themselves and their facts, the First Amendment and common sense.

These are the green lights that make democracy the greatest form of government yet devised.

From the first session with General Odom on December 5 to a final session with CIA Director Casey in the bar of the University Club on Friday afternoon May 2, the issue was joined. There were at least three meetings between Odom and one or more editors of The Post. At least four meetings with Casey. One with Poindexter. One with FBI Director William Webster. (One afternoon Webster and Casey asked to see me urgently, and walked through the city room into my office surrounded by bodyguards, while more than 150 reporters and editors watched in astonishment. The subject was national security, but the area was Central America, not the Soviet Union.)

At each of these meetings, different versions of the Pelton story were discussed with the government officials. In some cases different versions of a written story were shown to them, something this newspaper rarely does in advance of publication. Each time, the officials invoked national security. Each time, the editors felt that national security was not involved, but were not 1,000 percent convinced that the Soviets knew every single detail of The Post's story, and publication was delayed.

(On one occasion on Feb. 20, 1986, aboard Air Force One, a copy of the latest version of The Post's story was passed around between Poindexter, Weinberger, Secretary of State Shultz and White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, according to reliable sources. These high officials talked about how important it was to keep this version of the story out of the paper, and they felt it would not be published.)

In February, at an editors' conference in Florida, Washington Post editors held a seminar on national security and the press. Former CIA director Richard Helms was present to give us the perspective of an old intelligence hand. Later in a discussion with only four editors, Helms was told the story and asked what were the chances that the Russians did not know the whole story. He felt the chances were slim. He felt specifically that Gorbachev himself might not

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know, but he would certainly know if the Post published the story and his reaction as the new leader was hard to predict, and potentially volatile. Helms gave no advice.

In April, former NSA director Admiral Bobby Inman met with an editor of The Post to discuss the story in great detail. He, too, felt it was unlikely the Russians were unaware of anything in the Post's story, but on balance argued against publishing.

On May 1, 1986, over breakfast, General Odom was shown the penultimate version of the story. For the first time, he mentioned that he and others were looking to the possibility of using 18 United states Code 798 to prosecute anyone who published the Pelton story. This law provides for a maximum punishment of 10 years in jail and a $10,000 fine for anyone who "publishes . . . any classified information . . . concerning . . . the use . . . of any device . . . for communication intelligence purposes . . . ."

This newspaper's lawyers reported that while the government would surely argue that the story was a technical violation of that statute, the fact that the Russians knew the specific classified information made the government's argument more tenuous.

On Friday, May 2, CIA director Casey called me from his car telephone. He said he had heard we were going to run the story on the next Sunday and he wanted to talk. He suggested the bar of the University Club. Downie and I met him there at 4 p.m. He was shown the story, read it slowly, tossed it aside and said, "There's no way you can run that story without endangering the national security." He then said he didn't mean to threaten anyone, but he would have to consider recommending prosecution of the newspaper if we published the story. "We've already got five absolutely cold violations" of 18 USC 798 against The Washington Post and four other news organizations, Casey said.

Nine days later President Reagan, just back from the Japan summit, called Katharine Graham, chairman of the board of The Washington Post Company, to impress upon her his views that publication of The Post's story would endanger national security.

That was the last red light. The Post withheld the story one more time, and started working immediately on a version of the story that removed all the "wiring diagram" details of the intelligence system, all the details that might be prohibited by the statute.

As a courtesy to the president, in light of his call to Mrs. Graham, White House press secretary Larry Speakes was informed on Tuesday night, May 27, that The Post was going to run its story without the wiring diagram details the next day, unread by any government official.

And it appeared next morning under the bylines of Bob Woodward and Patrick Tyler.

Casey responded that day by saying that the CIA was studying the story to see whether it should be referred to the Justice Department for prosecution. And there the matter lay, until a few days later in the middle of the Pelton trial, Casey and Odom issued a joint statement warning the press against speculating about the Pelton evidence, and implicitly threatening prosecution if they did.

Warnings against speculation are the fabric of a Pravda editor's life. They are anathemas in a free society, and they were greeted as such by the American press on this occasion.

Pelton was convicted last Thursday, after seven days of testimony in a Baltimore courtroom, where the government laid out more information in a public forum about its most secret intelligence gathering capabilities than at any time since World War II. (Some of the testimony produced information that was not in the original Post article.)

The role of a newspaper in a free society is what is at issue here. Governments prefer a press that makes their job easier, a press that allows them to proceed with minimum public accountability, a press that accepts their version of events with minimum questioning, a press that can be led to the greenest pastures of history by persuasion and manipulation.

In moments of stress between government and the press—and these moments have come and gone since Thomas Jefferson—the government looks for ways to control the press, to eliminate or to minimize the press as an obstacle in the implementation of policy, or the solution of problems.

In these moments, especially, the press must continue its mission of publishing information that it—and it alone—determines to be in the public interest, in a useful, timely and responsible manner—serving society, not government.

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