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The Danger of Telling Russia Too Much

The Navy's announcement of two new experimental fighter planes, which can take off and land vertically, is very interesting. So, too, are photographs of the futuristic-looking craft which the Navy also released. But who is the more interested: the American public or Russian military intelligence?

It is true that the Navy announcement was carefully worded and that the photographs were not supposed to give away any secrets. However, intelligence agents are trained to fit many minute pieces of evidence together in order to solve intricate puzzles and are able to use the most innocent-appearing material. A phrase in an official announcement, the sweep of a plane wing, or even comparative size indicated by figures in the foreground of a photograph may provide just the information needed to explain other material that spies have uncovered.

In fact, espionage is not quite the cloak and dagger profession it was a century or so ago. The modern spy, or intelligence agent, may depend upon informers, but he is also quick to pick up scraps of information which leak out through carelessness. Scientific and technical publications, government announcements—almost everything provides grist for the mill.

Allen W. Dulles, director of the United States Central Intelligence Agency, is quite convinced that we are too free with our secrets. In a copyrighted interview in the magazine, U. S. News & World Report Dulles says, "Sometimes I think we go too far in what our government gives out officially and in what is published in the scientific and technical field. We tell the Russians too much. Under our system it is hard to control it. . . . I would give a good deal if I could know as much about the Soviet Union as the Soviet Union can learn about us by merely reading the press."

Russia enjoys the advantage of the police state in guarding her secrets. The Soviet government is not obligated to tell its people anything, and it doesn't. But in the U. S. much of what is done in the way of legislation for national defense is open to the public, and publicity-minded military officers—with an eye toward future appropriations—sometimes seem too anxious to release information about new developments. And then there is the problem of the headline-conscious congressman who may talk too much and out of turn.

Consider the vertical-flying planes. Two national magazines were allowed to take photographs and prepare articles although at the time the Navy would not concede that the planes existed. Then a San Diego newspaper photographer, using a telescopic lens, made and printed a picture of the craft. And later came the official Navy release.

Perhaps the Russians didn't learn anything they did not already know. Perhaps the U. S. has a commanding lead in the field of vertical-flying planes. If so, the release might do no harm. But if the U. S. and Russia are in a nip and tuck race to produce the first such plane, then the release might easily tell the Kremlin which nation held the advantage.

As Dulles remarks, the American system works against absolute military secrecy (if such a thing exists anywhere). But admitting that that is so, we also must be careful not to tell Russia too much. In Congress, the military, the press and everyone else concerned should keep this in mind. Carelessness can be almost as harmful as treason.