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The Government Struggles to Keep Even Those Secrets That Leak

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"All that remains for me to add is, that you keep the whole matter as secret as possible," the general wrote. "For upon secrecy, success depends in most enterprises of the kind."The general was George Washington, and the enterprise he was talking about was "procuring good intelligence" _ or, in short, spying.

What he had to say about it in 1777 is being repeated in his own words and others in 1986 as official Washington and the journalists who report on it grapple with what President Reagan calls "this business of secrecy."Keeping secrets "does not come easily to us Americans," the president said in a speech Thursday night to tight-lipped veterans of the Office of Strategic Services, the granddaddy of the CIA.

It certainly doesn't, judging from the administration's experience so far in dealing with what it says is an alarming leakage of intelligence information in the news media.

The trial this week in Baltimore federal court of Ronald Pelton, the former National Security Agency communications worker accused of selling secrets to Soviet agents he talked with over a pizza parlor telephone, has focused the issue most sharply.

But, as White House spokesman Edward Djerejian told reporters Friday, "there is a larger question" going beyond Pelton's case.

"Every method we have of obtaining intelligence _ our agents, our relationships with other intelligence services, our photographic, our electronic, our communications capabilities _ have been damaged ... by disclosures of sensitive information," CIA Director William J. Casey told The Associated Press in an interview last week.

The administration is attacking the problem on two fronts and is not finding the going easy on either. As it seeks to stop its own people from making unauthorized disclosures, it encounters disagreement in its ranks over how far to go. And when it cautions news organizations about publishing sensitive intelligence information, it is accused of trying to muzzle the press.

"Meetings have taken place at the working level to look at how the government can have better discipline over unauthorized disclosures," Djerejian said.

"When the senior group that would have to make recommendations on this issue meets, then you get into the area where recommendations to the president will be discussed in an authoritative way."He said he didn't know when this would happen.

Among the issues being discussed are how extensively to administer polygraph, or lie detector, tests to government employees. Casey supports polygraph use, but Secretary of State George P. Shultz has said he would resign if he were asked to take one.

Also at issue is a 1950 law against "publishing any classified information concerning the communications intelligence activities of the United States."Casey cited this law in referring to the Justice Department for possible prosecution an NBC-TV report on the Pelton trial. The law has never been invoked against a news organization and some administration officials are said to believe it should not be.

Djerejian conceded there are disageements within the administration, but said he wouldn't get into "who is advocating what."As the government unfolded its case against Pelton in court, Casey and NSA Director Lt. Gen. William E. Odom issued a warning:

"Those reporting on the trial should be cautioned against speculation and reporting details beyond the information actually released at trial. Such speculation and additional facts are not authorized disclosures and may cause substantial harm to the national security."Lawrence K. Grossman, president of NBC News, responded, "There are some countries where 'speculation' or analysis must be authorized by the government before it can be published or broadcast. That does not happen in a democracy, and our constitution will not allow it to happen in the United States."Sen. Charles Mathias, R-Md., a senior member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said he believed Casey "is genuinely concerned by these leaks, genuinely feels that there will some damage be done, but I think that society at large has to balance whatever that damage may be as against the much greater damage of muzzling the press."The administration retreated a bit on the issue of the verb "speculate," which Webster's New World Dictionary defines as "To think about the various aspects of a given subject; meditate; ponder; especially to conjecture.""If I had it to do over again I might not use that word," said Casey. "I might use 'extrapolation."'"Extrapolate" is defined as "to arrive at conclusions or results by hypothesizing from known facts or observations" or "to speculate as to consequences on the basis of known facts or observations."Djerejian, too, said that "a better word than speculation could have been found."