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# The Gabby American Way

As the decibel level rises in this country concerning our policy toward El Salvador and how we should approach the Polish debt, my mind keeps going back to an earlier, eerie silence, eerie in retrospect anyway. It is the silence that was maintained on the Russian side all the while that the lightning-stroke repression of the Poles was being planned, presumably argued about and finally executed. Within hours, out of nowhere—like the construction of the Berlin wall, the move on Czechoslovakia and too many other affairs—it was done.

Just like that. And the only background noise you heard before or after was, naturally, ours. There we were beforehand, arguing about what the Russians would probably do (an outright Hungary-style invasion?) and what our response should or shouldn't be. Afterward, once again surprised, we took to our telephones to ask each other what that was we thought we had just heard on the news. Confirming the worst, we at once settled into our familiar hand-wringing and acrimony about whose fault it was and what to do. They do the deed, and we hold the hearing.

I sometimes have this fantasy that the Soviet system falls apart and begins to resemble ours because we have dropped a nonlethal but absolutely destructive weapon called the First Amendment bomb on them, followed up by a biological agent called virus of congressmen (there would also be an especially exotic strain called disaffected Cabinet officer).

Only imagine. Pravda and Izvestia would have been competing to expose the policy on Poland. The leakers would have been in full gush. The denials, as is always true, would have been telling much of the story—a story for which the headlines write themselves: KGB PLAN TO "DESTABILIZE" SOLIDARITY CHARGED, POLITBURO SOURCE ASSAILS MARTIAL-LAW OPTION, BREZHNEV SAYS MARTIAL-LAW OPTION NOT RULED OUT, CENTRAL COMMITTEE DEMANDS POLITBURO DOCUMENTS ON WARSAW PLAN, RUMOR PHONE LINES BEING CUT IN GDANSK, RED ARMY REPORTEDLY ANGRY AT SMALL ROLE ENVISAGED IN POLAND. It's wonderful; but it's not that way yet.

Instead, the eerie silence with its great abiding advantage obtains. And against

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this advantage our own disheveled and undisciplined blathering can appear all the more reckless and self-damaging. If there is someone, somewhere, who has not got the idea by now that this government is perplexed, divided and, in any case, not entirely free to do what it wants (once it figures out what that is) in Central America or Central Europe, well, that someone can't be very bright. We advertise our imprecision and disagreement, which also go by such names as checks and balances and pluralism.

It's not just that our institutions and our traditions incline us to this type of free-for-all between, say, government and press and among the different branches of government. It's also that this administration, maybe even more than some of its unruly predecessors, seems given to a lot of public and semipublic infighting—to the joy and glory of those of us who are paid to write about it and those who have been elected to the Congress that governs along with it.

We are all having fun, but I find it unimaginable that this festival of democracy is doing much to help along such serious strategies as the administration is able to contrive; thanks to the side that lost the internal battle, the secret news rarely seems to hold until the last black limousine has pulled away from whatever marble palace it was that the top-level meeting was held in. And not all of the disclosure is sub-rosa or indirect. We now have a whale of a battle going—right up there and out loud—over the Polish debt and what the administration should do in relation to it. The Weinberger-Haig conflict, in general, gets more, not less, vivid every day.

This stark contrast between Soviet secrecy and discretion and compulsive American revelation sooner or later threatens to put every president berserk. And why wouldn't it? The problem is that there is very little that can be done to change the situation and a great deal that shouldn't be attempted, not just be-

cause it won't work, but because it will do positive harm as well. I think the difference between our two systems in this respect does have implications for a number of our activities, the character of our agreements with the Soviets, for example, and the degree of security and verification we need to have on any risk-laden deal: they can break an agreement without Rona Barrett's finding out about it. But the presidential reflex to plug every one of those leaks and classify more things secret is something else again. It is as understandable in origin as it is doomed in practice.

Right now in Washington there is a great effort under way at this plugging and caulking and finding out who's doing the troublesome talking (when the talking isn't being done artlessly for the record, that is). The guys with the short foreheads, as the security men are endearingly known, are going around town questioning this one and that one about the innumerable leaks. The polygraphs are out. And terrible legislative and administrative steps are planned to restrict more information and to punish harshly those who disseminate it. The thing about all this is that it won't work but it might do harm—including to the administration that promotes it and sees it into law.

The harm will come from what grows in the darkness when too much information is put beyond the reach of any but a few—a few who are bound to grow arrogant (as we have seen) and to tromp off on their own ill-conceived secret missions. But beyond that, it's a mugs' game; it can't be done. Of course there is a range of material that needs to be protected. But you cannot really change the sloppy, ebullient, gabby, exasperating nature of the society, especially of the political society, and I don't think, even with the screaming disadvantage this creates in many overseas relationships, that you would want to. You can distort the social and political process with Draconian measures. But you can never stop the leaks or the determined self-expression or the fact that we can't by our very nature do it their way. A president can only learn to make the best of the system as it is. The alternative, in a famous phrase, is to "destroy" the unruly democratic culture "in order to save it."

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