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Leaks: Whys and Wherefores

DALLAS—President Reagan has decided to get tough with leakers. And with visions of wiretaps, plumbers and Watergate dancing in their heads, the press has reacted with predictable dismay. Charges and countercharges about national security, the public's right to know, and the First Amendment have again filled the air in Washington. In the midst of all this, there are a few reasonable things to be said on both sides.

All administrations pass along to selected reporters information designed to reflect favorably on the administration. White House staffers do it, Cabinet officers do it, assistants to the deputy assistant secretary for you-name-it do it, and even presidents do it. Presidents do not consider these exercises to be leaks. When presidents talk about leaks, and sooner or later most of them begin talking about them in their sleep, they mean telling a reporter something that creates problems or embarrassment for them or their administrations.

President Reagan illustrated his point and mine earlier last month by waving a copy of *The Washington Post* at his staff and protesting that leaks about the defense budget (which had made the administration look bad by showing that the budget was too small to do all the things the president had said it would do) had run at the top of the front page, forcing leaks about the president's meeting with West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (which made the administration and the president look good) to the bottom of the page.

The reasons people leak embarrassing information are almost as numerous as the people who do the leaking. Some seek to promote their own point of view in an argument within the administration. Some hope for favorable treatment from the press in return. Washington reporters and columnists in particular have been known to promote as well as protect their sources. Then there is the desire to establish one's own importance in a town where information is power and one is expected to know about important things if one expects to be treated as important.

Occasionally, leakers are motivated by a sincere and unselfish desire to serve their country, expose evil and inform the public. Occasionally,

All administrations get upset about leaks and end up trying, with something less than resounding success, to limit, if not eliminate, them.

President Reagan seems to have become a little more distraught a little earlier than most, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have some legitimate reasons to be concerned. Leaks can adversely affect a rational decision-making process by limiting options.

A president even has a right to be concerned about the political consequences of leaks. If he wants to call the unsuccessful contenders for an appointment before they read about his choice of someone else in the newspaper, he's not being unreasonable in expecting his staff to keep their mouths shut until he has a chance to do that.

Leaks can sometimes damage national security. I remember a case in which the unauthorized disclosure and subsequent publication of a seemingly innocuous piece of information threatened to deny the U.S. government access to extremely valuable intelligence. However, when a president tries to claim that national security is his only concern when it comes to leaks, as President Reagan did with his "all we're doing is implementing the law" comment, he is not telling the truth.

If there are legitimate reasons for an administration to be concerned about leaks and to seek to limit them, there are equally good reasons not to get too carried away.

One of the more obvious and effective ways to cut down on leaks is to cut down the number of people with access to sensitive information. But the damage done by leaks must be carefully balanced against the damage done by excluding people who can contribute to the decision-making process.

Another approach is to surround a president with a group of advisers so homogeneous in their political philosophy that the possibility of dispute—and, thus, the motivation for self-serving leaks—is minimized. That can be particularly disastrous.

Perhaps the most immediately appealing and least effective way to deal with leaks is to try to devise a system that will control contacts with the press and find and punish leakers. Finding leakers is no easy task for an administration that is inclined to respect the Constitution. The attempt itself is usually harmless, unless important officials get so caught up in chasing leakers that they neglect matters of larger import to the nation.

In the end, about all that can be said with certainty about this continuing conflict between government and the media is that it will continue. If they and the media manage to keep some perspective on the problem—if the administration doesn't get too paranoid to govern and if the media can restrain their inclination to view even reasonable attempts to control leaks as a mortal danger to the First Amendment—then the rest of us can afford to watch all the pushing and pulling with mild amusement while we worry about more important things.

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