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Reagan Tries to Plug the Leaks

Ronald Reagan is the latest in a long line of Presidents who have become greatly disturbed by what they have regarded as harmful leaks to the news media by officials of government. And, like several of his predecessors, he has now resolved to do something about it.

The White House has ordained that government officials must obtain advance approval of contacts with news people in which "classified" national security matters might be disclosed. Written reports must be submitted afterward on the content of such discussions. And, when "unauthorized disclosures" are found to have occurred, "all legal methods" will be used to uncover the culprit.

Already a deputy secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff have been "invited" to take lie-detector tests to help determine who leaked the substance of a meeting dealing with the military budget. That invitation was demeaning. And it is all pretty futile.

In human terms, the presidential discomfort is understandable. Like other executives, Presidents like to run a tight ship. They don't appreciate picking up newspapers and reading stories obviously leaked by subordinates who hoped to head off or sabotage decisions with which they disagreed.

At least as far back as the Eisenhower era, Pentagon correspondents sometimes discovered that they were under FBI surveillance. Lyndon B. Johnson was so paranoid on the subject of leaks that he sometimes reversed decisions already made in order to foil the leakers.

During Richard M. Nixon's presidency, staff

members of the National Security Council were bugged, and Henry A. Kissinger—one of the biggest leakers in town—became enraged when other officials made "unauthorized" disclosures that complicated his management of foreign policy.

The Reagan White House says it is concerned only about leaks that impair national security, but it offered no examples.

And the fact is that, within the State and Defense Department bureaucracies, there is no subject under the sun that is not theoretically classified. It is very easy for people in the White House to scream "national security" when in fact nothing more than political embarrassment is involved.

As Reagan's press spokesman, David R. Gergen, said in a recent interview, the leaking of supposedly confidential information is a "time-honored tradition" in Washington. "Unauthorized disclosures" are an integral part of the systems of checks and balances in the U.S. system of government.

Without leaks, Congress and the public would not hear about impending decisions until it was too late to do anything about them. Reagan himself would have been spared great embarrassment if somebody had leaked ahead of time the decision, which the President has now disavowed, to allow tax-exempt status to schools that practice racial discrimination.

In the recent interview, Gergen said, "Ultimately every Administration is judged not on the way it handles the news but on performance—on how well it copes with the country's problems."

We can't improve on that.