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RECENT EROSION OF PUBLIC CONFIDENCE
IN GOVERNMENT

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by

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The confidence of the American public in their government has eroded seriously in recent years due to unwarranted and unjustified secrecy, lying by government officials and the impression that government officials are misleading the public through news manipulation. While such tactics are not new in our country, they run counter to the ideals and values that this democracy was based upon. With present techniques of information gathering, processing and transmission, such attempts at chicanery have less chance of success today than in former years. Each instance discovered heightens public skepticism. The implications for the military are serious. The profession of arms in a democracy depends on the trust and support of the people. As agents of the executive branch, those charged with the defense of the country may find their effectiveness limited by being included in the general disaffection.

RECENT EROSION OF PUBLIC CONFIDENCE
IN GOVERNMENT

A nation with a democratic form of government enjoys, in theory at least, an opportunity for all people to share equally in the privileges, duties and responsibilities of citizenship. While many may be dissatisfied on occasion with specific policies and programs of their government, except under very extreme conditions of economic deprivation, domestic order is assured by the knowledge and confidence of the citizens that the people can always make changes through constitutional means so long as the system is operating in the responsive and representative, legal manner prescribed by their constitution. Primary to the proper operation of a democratic system is the free flow of information, based on which the people can make intelligent decisions in elections and referenda, judge the appropriateness of actions by elected and appointed officials, and feel confident that those serving in legislative assemblies are acting on their behalf in the light of true facts and circumstances.

Historically we in this country have seen, in many instances, an erosion of public confidence in government,

often accompanying military conflicts that were unpopular to large segments of the population. President Polk, and to some degree President Lincoln suffered during their term of office from attacks by prominent persons as well as the news media against either the conduct of or justification for the Mexican War and the Civil War. While these attacks indicated fairly widespread disaffection and lack of public confidence, the very mechanics of information transmission diffused the criticism, made coordination and exchange of intelligence by interested parties difficult and allowed the leaders and decision makers far wider latitude in dealing with or ignoring the objections until time rendered them harmless.

News that in the past took days or weeks to reach the public now is available in hours. The report of Lincoln's election in 1860 was carried to the west coast of this country by pony express. At an earlier time the Battle of New Orleans was fought seven weeks after the Treaty of Ghent had ended the war. Today television makes everyone an eye witness familiar with every detail and every gesture of the officials involved.

Through the network of communication channels, statements can be confirmed or refuted, often in minutes; reproductive devices make all but the most closely

guarded documents public evidence. It is possible to record and preserve not only pictures and words, but the very voice inflection with which the words were spoken. All available information can be assembled and collated using computers to prepare it for careful analysis.

The public response and reaction to international and political events often comes before policy makers have had time to complete their analysis. In this atmosphere, public officials are certain to become more reticent in an effort to preserve their options. Finally, while communication technology has speeded the dissemination of news, its effectiveness in detecting dissimulation has brought the government into much closer scrutiny by the people.

This scrutiny has brought with it an erosion of public confidence in government, as many people are finding evidence of actions incompatible with the values and ideals that, they were taught to believe, constituted the foundation of our democracy. This public attitude is due in large measure to a lack of candor, and often lack of honesty, in the executive branch of our government. It is the purpose of this paper to examine, in the light

of recent events, the nature and causes of the public attitude relative the responsibilities of the executive branch, the congress and the press.

This area of inquiry has particular significance to the military for three reasons:

1.) Although dependent on the legislative branch for funding and that legal authority that defines roles and missions, the military is an agency of and identified in the public mind with the executive branch. Policy and guidance including those areas concerned with information to news media are determined in most cases by civilian appointees of the chief executive.

2.) The nature of the military's mission is such that a large part of its most important business is necessarily not susceptible to public scrutiny for reasons of national security, relying on the faith and confidence of the people in their government agencies to perform according to law and in the best interest of the nation. An erosion of this confidence creates an atmosphere of questioning distrust that diminishes public support and impacts adversely on the effectiveness of those charged with defending the country.

3.) The military enjoys an enviable reputation

for fearless integrity that is embodied in an honor code. The values and ideals whose loss the public deplores are those attributed to the profession of arms. It is important that military leaders demonstrate that they have preserved those values without compromise.

THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

The executive branch of government has always been forced to tread a narrow line between informing the people fully concerning the people's business and withholding information which would be harmful to the country if revealed. As in most areas that require nice judgement, there is room for wide disagreement, especially with members of the working press. But, in addition, governmental information agencies have a natural, political tendency to attempt to manipulate public opinion, utilizing the news media as a vehicle. These tendencies, though admittedly natural, create animosity when discovered - among the very journalists whose good will and understanding they are seeking and through whom they wish to influence the public.

One journalist, Bruce Ladd, attributed governmental credibility problems to three basic factors:

1. The government's unwarranted and unjustified concern with secrecy; its refusal to reveal information which is properly in the public domain.
2. Lying by government officials.
3. The government's adeptness at devising new ways to mislead the public and the press through manipulation of information or news management.¹

To further complicate the task of executive branch information officers there is not universal agreement that all three of these factors are necessarily reprehensible in all cases. President Eisenhower in what has almost become another age said, "Credibility in our informational programs is the first essential, and it cannot be achieved by falsehood and hypocrisy."² As a man of integrity who, at the time of the U2 crisis and the 1956 Suez War, placed truth and justice above personal and political considerations, he did not visualize the more subtle means available and utilized 10 years later.

Writing of the more recent past, William Lawrence Rivers observed:

"I do not believe the press of this country ever made it clear to the readers and viewers what the essential issue was in the 'credibility gap' controversy. It was not that President Johnson tried to manage the news; all politicians and all presidents try to

do that. It was that in a systematic way he attempted to close down the channels of information from his office and his administration, so that decisions could be made without public debate and controversy."³

Journalists have discovered that it is not necessary for agencies to "classify" information or for spokesmen to limit their responses to "no comment" in order to make information unavailable. Reporter May Craig was sent around to 15 different offices while trying to determine, in response to a query from her editor, why the Air Force had cancelled a contract for a large hangar in Maine. She never did get a satisfactory answer; no one would accept the responsibility for giving out the information. With so many offices, each could simply pass the buck.⁴

Concerning the same period another view is expressed by Bill Moyers, former press secretary to President Johnson, in a speech reported by Hoyt Gimlin.

"As a journalist I am quick to say 'tell us more'. But as one who has had some experience in crisis management, I can understand why silence is sometimes the wisest policy. What I am speaking of is the necessity for a president to refrain at times from telling all he knows - and to resist commenting on a situation until he can be certain his words will produce the intended results. Some of us will not hesitate to hustle a president's

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priorities if we can; unfortunately we forget far more quickly than a president can afford to forget, that diplomacy and political maneuvers, like film, can curl up and die from exposure."⁵

Faced with such opposite viewpoints from respected sources it is not surprising to find executive agencies under simultaneous attack on the grounds that they are hiding behind a "paper curtain of secrecy" and at the same time for flooding the American public with a torrent of propaganda.⁶

At a minimum in order to foster public confidence there is a need in the executive branch to deal candidly with the press concerning matters that are the public's business. On the other hand, the news media have a similar responsibility which will be examined shortly.

THE CONGRESS

But before leaving the responsibility of the executive it is important to address the subject of its candor in dealing with the Congress and congressional committees. As the president is charged with the task of executing the laws of the country in the name of the people, Congress has the obligation of expressing the will of the people in the form of legislation.

For the system to operate effectively and properly, authorized committees must have the power to obtain accurate testimony and governmental records from appointed officials. "If this power is lacking, the Congress, the press and the public are dependent upon the information or half information that the executive branch chooses to release."⁷ Public confidence in government depends in large measure on the public's perception that the system is working.

That confidence has been seriously undermined on several scores lately; fortunately the most serious, Watergate, did not involve the military. But in other cases our hands are not so clean. In the matter of the Tonkin Gulf resolution, the Defense Department was instrumental in assisting the Johnson Administration to obtain the legal equivalent of a Congressional declaration in the Vietnam War based on evidence of an attack that was something less than conclusive. Years later Secretary McNamara testified, "it was decided at both Washington and field command levels that no credible evidence of an attack existed."⁸

Of an even more serious nature is the bombing of Cambodia since the Paris Agreement on Vietnam. Whatever its role in international politics, this combat became

an explicit point of contention between the legislative and executive branches of the government.⁹ Coming in the midst of the Watergate hearings, the impact of the revelations was dampened by public concern in other areas; however, it represented a flagrant lack of official candor and even outright lying by appointed officials to the elected representatives of the people. In contrast to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, here Congress had not implied its consent in any way. "Nor could the President cite his responsibility for the safety of any American troops."¹⁰

Columnist Tom Wicker outlined the sequence of events as follows:

"Last March and last June, the Pentagon sent deliberate lying reports, concealing the Cambodian bombings, to the Senate Armed Service Committee. The Pentagon spokesman, Jerry Friedheim, knowingly distributed the same lies to the press. 'I knew at the time it was wrong and I'm sorry,' Friedheim said when caught."¹¹

The executive branch's attempt to continue the war in Cambodia in defiance of Congress brought us to the verge of a true constitutional crisis. Attempts to deceive and flout the will of Congress can be made only at grievous political cost to the administration, and more importantly, to the confidence

of the public in orderly, responsible government.

THE PRESS

Let us return to the role of the press in the matter of public confidence in government. It holds a position that has been recognized as special since the "fourth estate" arose among the first stirring of democracy in Europe. But it is necessary to recognize that it is not a monolithic institution. It consists of many people representing many different shades of opinion and points of view, with the same strengths and weakness found in people employed elsewhere. Only in the aggregate is it possible to say that the free press is vital to the preservation of an informed public. Newsmen do err, and have been known to misrepresent, but since they too must compete for the confidence of the public in the information they supply, their influence is generally proportional to their reputation for integrity.

Balanced against the news media's responsibility to inform is an equal obligation to safeguard the interests of the country. Here again is an area in which judgements can differ widely between those charged with

protecting information and those whose mission it is to inform. President Kennedy recognized that curtailment of freedom was abhorrent, but in calling attention to the need for official secrecy, he is quoted as follows:

"For the facts of the matter are that this nation's foes have openly boasted of acquiring through our newspapers information they would otherwise hire agents to acquire through theft, bribery or espionage; that details of this nation's covert preparations to counter the enemy's covert operations have been available to every newspaper reader, friend and foe alike; that the size, the strength, the location, and the nature of our forces and weapons, and our plans and strategy for their use, have all been pinpointed in the press and other news media to a degree sufficient to satisfy any foreign power, and that, in at least one case, the publication of details concerning a secret mechanism in our possession required its alteration at the expense of considerable time and money".¹²

He concluded by calling on the news media to ask of every story not only "Is it news?" but also "Is it in the national interest?"

But on the same subject, Hoyt Gimlin reports a journalist's view from the opposite bench.

"The New York Times had prior knowledge that an invasion of Cuba was imminent but declined to publish it because of national security considerations. In June 1966, more than five years later, Clifton Daniel, managing editor of the paper, asserted in a speech to the

World Press Institute in Minneapolis that the Bay of Pigs operations 'might well have been cancelled and the country would have been saved enormous embarrassment if the New York Times and other newspapers had been more diligent in the performance of their duty.'"13

Obviously such wide differences of opinion by respected people indicates that there is need for understanding and discussion by reasonable men holding both views. This can be done if the press will adopt the attitude that while they have an obligation to inquire and investigate, there are certain things that are justifiably withheld. This attitude can be engendered by an executive branch that is available for discussion and withholds only those things that are truly justified by national security.

The best vehicle to facilitate understanding and discussion is, of course, the private interview. However, time demands and the number of media representatives making inquiry limits this means. Next best is the press conference. Unfortunately, our officials recently have tended to hold press conferences when they have something of importance to say, but are unavailable when journalists have questions to ask.

A very revealing attitude toward the press conference

is contained in a remark by former Vice President Agnew concerning the suggestion that President Nixon report to the nation on the Watergate affair at an open news conference.

"I think a free - wheeling press conference would be a mistake. I don't think the President can be put in a position where there is an inquisition with people screaming and yelling the way they've been known to do. Out of that volatile atmosphere comes an impression that's misleading sometimes."¹⁴

Most people who have seen televised presidential news conferences would be more likely to agree with James E. Pollard who contends that the President is in control, lays down the rules and makes the conditions under which the conference is held. "If he is cooperative, and not too thin skinned, they can be helpful and profitable to the executive, to the press and radio, and most importantly, to the public."¹⁵

What can be done to restore public confidence in government must be done by those in responsible executive positions to rectify their dealings with Congress and the press. There is no way in this age of communications technology to ignore these relationships and expect the public at large to be satisfied.

Retaining our traditional ideal of integrity, leaders must be candid and honest when reporting to the people's elected representatives. When responding to the press, all legitimate inquiry must be satisfied, withholding such information, and only that information, which the national security requires be withheld. The caveat cited by Bill Moyers and President Kennedy would be recognized under these rules.

On the other hand, the fact that the government uses the news media as a conduit for public information just confirms the roles of the press. Statements by honest men, honestly reported, may shape public opinion, but that is how democracy works.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Richard Cohen". The signature is written in dark ink and is centered on the page.

FOOTNOTES

1. Bruce Ladd, Crisis in Credibility, p.7.
2. Dwight D. Eisenhower, The White House Years: Waging Peace 1956-1961, p.551.
3. William Lawrence Rivers, The Adversaries, Politics and the Press, p.33.
4. Richard George Gray, Freedom of Access to Government Information, p.35.
5. Hoyt Gimlin, "Credibility Gaps and the Presidency," Editorial Research Reports, Vol. 1, No. 5, 1968 p.99.
6. Francis E. Rourke, Secrecy and Publicity, p.61.
7. Clark Mollenhof, Washington Cover-Up, p.12.
8. Chester L. Cooper, The Lost Crusade, pp.240-241.
9. "The Congress Moves," New York Times, 26 June 1973, p.42.
10. Anthony Lewis, "Moment of Truth," New York Times, 28 June 1973, p.47.
11. Tom Wicker, "The Big Lie Requires Big Liars," Post Intelligencer (Seattle), 26 July 1973, p.A8.
12. Richard George Gray, Freedom of Access to Government Information, p.256.
13. Hoyt Gimlin, "Credibility Gap and the Presidency," Editorial Research Reports, Vol 5, No. 5, 1968, p.99.
14. "'Nixon Needs Proper News Forum to Report' - Agnew," Post Intelligencer (Seattle), 25 June 1973, p.A4.
15. James E. Pollard, The Presidents and the Press, p.25.

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3. Cooper, Chester L. The Lost Crusade. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co, 1970.
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16. Pollard, James E. The Presidents and the Press. Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1964.
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18. Rivers, William Lawrence. The Washington Correspondents and Government Secrecy. Ann Arbor, University Microfilms, 1960.
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21. Sunell, Robert J., LTC and Vilos, John R., LTC. Bias in Broadcast News. Thesis. Carlisle Barracks: US Army War College, 1 February 1973.
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