

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Press jitters over prosecution threat

"Apoplectic" is the proper word to describe the state of the press corps, overall, in Washington, since the administration threatened to invoke a 1950 law that would toss witting journalists into the slammer for a decade for publishing secrets that compromise national security.

The tension was heightened further when it became known that President Reagan personally called Katharine Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*, and issued a warning against the newspaper reporting sensitive testimony in the trial of Soviet-paid spy Ronald Pelton in Baltimore.

Wailing that the administration is trying to repress the First Amendment, the *Washington Post's* Bob Woodward threatened on "Meet the Press" June 1: "It is a judgment call where to draw the line on what to publish and what not to publish, and the administration is not going to like where we draw the line."

However, this open admission of the *Post's* intent to compromise national security flies in the face of the 1950 law, which, as Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger pointed out on the same show, "after all, was passed not by us, but by the Congress." He said it relates specifically to "cryptologic information," that is, code-breaking information, which is a subject in the Pelton trial.

Many older veterans in Washington comment that with the amount of "leaking" going on here now, the United States could not possibly fight

and win a war. The old "Loose Lips Sink Ships" motto that prevailed in all the nation's past conflicts, as well as in peacetime, seems now long forgotten.

However, despite his tough talk to the contrary, Secretary of State George Shultz, together with Don Regan and James Baker III, have battled against proposals made in Reagan cabinet meetings to institute polygraph tests and create a special strike force to crack down on leaks from the administration.

One journalist remarked on a local commentary show here recently that, in fact, the administration is really worried only about the leaks it doesn't like getting out—and that if it also went after those who leak what it wants leaked, then nationally syndicated columnist Robert Novak would be at the top of the list. Novak, who was also on the show, sat back and kept his mouth shut in response to that one.

Why did the media lie about the SALT breakout?

Most of the nation's major news media told a bald-faced lie to the American population when it characterized the historic decision taken by President Reagan on May 27 as "a move to continue operating within the SALT framework."

The reality, of course, was the exact opposite. Yet, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and major TV networks insisted on peddling the lie.

In truth, abandoning 14 years of the SALT era that produced enormous relative military buildup and strategic advance by the Soviet Union, the administration announced that, as of May 27, it was no longer basing its strategic decision-making on what SALT accords say is permissible, but

only on "the nature and magnitude of the threat posed by the Soviet Union."

The media, which had already begun to believe their own lies, came into the White House briefing room the day after only to hear that Weinberger was now saying the SALT warhead ceilings would be "definitely" broken by early fall.

This reporter took the occasion to ask deputy press secretary Ed Djerejian for confirmation that a new criterion for U.S. strategic decisions had been established by the May 28 announcement. Then I asked him to comment on the media characterization of the announcement as a "commitment to a continued compliance with the SALT framework."

Many in the press corps became audibly nervous at that point. Djerejian chose to cool down the situation with a joke about "selective" coverage methods of "certain" press.

Everybody laughed nervously. Given criminal investigations into five major news sources for violation of U.S. laws on the publication of classified information, the press corps was definitely on the defensive.

The White House correspondent for *USA Today* approached to assure me that she had not been among those who misrepresented the SALT decision, and was appalled at the coverage of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. "Some of us who carried the story straight were grinding our teeth," she said. "We couldn't believe how they played it the way they did."

TASS didn't play it wrong. Larry Speakes hadn't even finished making the announcement May 27, when its chief Washington correspondent, on his last day on the job before going home, dashed to the back of the room to his hotline to Moscow. The nightly TV news was just going on the air over there, and he was reporting the development live on the phone.