

Leaky Logic

By **George C. Wilson**

■ It's no secret to anybody who has covered the military for any length of time that our leaders, including presidents, reveal military secrets to help themselves politically. This do-what-I-say-not-what-I-do philosophy is practiced by both political parties.

At his very first presidential news conference on Feb. 29, 1964, Lyndon Johnson revealed to the world that the United States, in deepest secrecy, had developed and flight tested the A-11 spy plane, which could go 2,000 miles an hour and climb to 70,000 feet.

At the time, I was a reporter at *Aviation Week and Space Technology Magazine*. Robert Hotz, the magazine's editor, knew about the A-11 but had withheld publishing anything about the plane at the government's fervent request. White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger told me that Johnson broke the story of the A-11 because the administration had learned that *Aviation Week* was about to publish it. This was not true.

Other government officials told me Johnson felt the political need to make headlines at his first presidential news conference and wanted to combat charges by Republican presidential challenger Barry Goldwater that Johnson was soft on defense.

Five months later, on July 24, 1964, when the Johnson-Goldwater campaign was heating up, Johnson revealed another big military secret: the United States had developed an even more capable spy plane than the A-11. It was designated the SR-71. *New York Times* humorist Russell Baker noted on Sept. 20, 1964: "President Johnson has developed an odd habit. Whenever he comes under political attack, he hits back with news bulletins from the wonderful world of hardware."

In 1967, when I was a military correspondent at *The Washington Post*, I learned this top secret: the United States had perfected a technology called MIRV — multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle — which enabled one intercontinental ballistic missile to drop H-bombs on several Soviet cities hundreds of miles apart during a single flight. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara asked the *Post* not to run the story and told me his research director, Harold Brown, would explain why. Brown said the Soviets almost certainly knew we had perfected the technique of packing several H-bombs into the nose of one missile and sending them against a single target, shotgun style. But they probably didn't know, he said, that we had advanced the MIRV technology to the multi-city capability.

If the *Post* still felt compelled to run a story on MIRV, Brown said it would be in the national interest to leave out the latest technical advances. My editors decided that MIRV had such huge implications for arms control, missile defense

and offense that the public and Congress should know about the technology.

My story ran on Jan. 29, 1967. It was short on secret technical details and long on policy implications. Shortly after publication, McNamara revealed many more of its technical details in an interview with *Life* magazine.

In 1971, I was the only reporter cleared to attend the secret federal court sessions on whether the *Post* should be allowed to resume publication of the top-secret Pentagon Papers. My role was not that of a reporter, but to advise *Post* lawyers on the validity of government claims that the Pentagon Papers contained deep, dark secrets that would harm the country if revealed.

The *Post* team showed the judges time after time that what government prosecutors were claiming as deep secrets had actually been in the public domain. The thinly prepared government prosecutors fell back on one crucial disclosure in the Papers to make its case that publishing them would endanger American lives.

This key contention was the text of an intercept from a North Vietnamese military communications station. No less an expert than Adm. Noel Gayler, director of the hush-hush National Security Agency, had sent a sealed envelope to Appeals Court Judge David Bazelon contending that publishing the intercept would tip off the enemy to our eavesdropping on this valuable source and lead to its shut-down.

What Gayler didn't know, or didn't bother to tell the judge, was that the very same intercept had been cleared by the Pentagon for publication in a public hearing book issued by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Luckily, I had that hearing book with me during the secret hearing in Bazelon's chambers and showed it to him, leaving government lawyers speechless.

The point here is that secrecy is in the eye of the beholder. It is easy for government officials to forget about their own behavior in handling secrets and sink into demagoguery when others reveal uncomfortable truths about issues the general public knows little about.

Presidents often try to shoot down the messengers, as President Bush is now trying to do with the *New York Times*. But with the Republican-controlled Congress willingly becoming a wholly owned subsidiary of the Bush administration rather than fulfilling its constitutional oversight obligations — to the point of refusing to hold hearings on Bush's questionable if not illegal practice of eavesdropping on thousands

of telephone calls without obtaining warrants — the *Times* and other publications have by default become the check on executive power that the Founding Fathers had in mind.

We should be grateful for this thin, red line of defense.

■ "Forward Observer," an insider's look at defense and military topics, appears every other Monday in **CongressDailyAM**. Special Correspondent George C. Wilson can be reached at gwilson@nationaljournal.com.