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When do we publish a secret?

How the press balances national security with its mission to report the news.

By Dean Baquet and Bill Keller
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SINCE SEPT. 11, 2001, newspaper editors have faced excruciating choices in covering the government's efforts to protect the country from terrorist agents. Each of us has, on a number of occasions, withheld information because we were convinced that publishing it could put lives at risk. On other occasions, each of us has decided to publish classified information over strong objections from our government.

Last week, our newspapers disclosed a secret Bush administration program to monitor international banking transactions. We did so after appeals from senior administration officials to hold the story. Our reports — like earlier press disclosures of secret measures to combat terrorism — revived an emotional national debate, featuring angry calls of "treason" and proposals that journalists be jailed, along with much genuine concern and confusion about the role of the press in times like these.

We are rivals. Our newspapers compete on a hundred fronts every day. We apply the principles of journalism individually as editors of independent newspapers. We agree, however, on some basics about the immense responsibility the press has been given by the inventors of the country.

Make no mistake, journalists have a large and personal stake in the country's security. We live and work in cities that have been tragically marked as terrorist targets. Reporters and photographers from both of our papers braved the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center to convey the horror to the world. We have correspondents today alongside troops on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. Others risk their lives in a quest to understand the terrorist threat; Daniel Pearl of the Wall Street Journal was murdered on such a mission. We, and the people who work for us, are not neutral in the struggle against terrorism.

But the virulent hatred espoused by terrorists, judging by their literature, is directed not just against our people and our buildings. It is also aimed at our values, at our freedoms and at our faith in the self-government of an informed electorate. If freedom of the press makes some Americans uneasy, it is anathema to the ideologists of

terror.

Thirty-five years ago Friday, in the Supreme Court ruling that stopped the government from suppressing the secret Vietnam War history called the Pentagon Papers, Justice Hugo Black wrote: "The government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of the government and inform the people."

As that sliver of judicial history reminds us, the conflict between the government's passion for secrecy and the press' drive to reveal is not of recent origin. This did not begin with the Bush administration, although the polarization of the electorate and the daunting challenge of terrorism have made the tension between press and government as clamorous as at any time since Justice Black wrote.

Our job, especially in times like these, is to bring our readers information that will enable them to judge how well their elected leaders are fighting on their behalf, and at what price.

In recent years our papers have brought you a great deal of information the White House never intended for you to know — classified secrets about the questionable intelligence that led the country to war in Iraq, about the abuse of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan, about the transfer of suspects to countries that are not squeamish about using torture, about eavesdropping without warrants.

As Robert G. Kaiser, associate editor of the Washington Post, asked recently in that newspaper: "You may have been shocked by these revelations, or not at all disturbed by them, but would you have preferred not to know them at all? If a war is being waged in America's name, shouldn't Americans understand how it is being waged?"

Government officials, understandably, want it both ways. They want us to protect their secrets, and they want us to trumpet their successes. A few days ago, Treasury Secretary John Snow said he was scandalized by our decision to report on the bank-monitoring program. But in September 2003, the same Secretary Snow invited a group of reporters — from our papers, the Wall Street Journal and others — to travel with him and his aides on a military aircraft for a six-day tour to show off the department's efforts to track terrorist financing. The secretary's team discussed many sensitive details of their monitoring efforts, hoping they would appear in print and demonstrate the administration's relentlessness against the terrorist threat.

How do we, as editors, reconcile the obligation to inform with the instinct to protect?

Sometimes the judgments are easy. Our reporters in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, take great care not to divulge operational intelligence in their news reports, knowing that in this wired age, it could be seen and used by insurgents.

Often the judgments are painfully hard. In those cases, we cool our competitive jets and begin an intensive deliberative process.

The process begins with reporting. Sensitive stories do not fall into our hands. They may begin with a tip from a source who has a grievance or a guilty conscience, but those tips are just the beginning of long, painstaking work. Reporters operate without security clearances, without subpoena powers, without spy technology. They work, rather, with sources who may be scared, who may know only part of the story, who may have their own agendas that need to be discovered and taken into account. We double-check and triple-check. We seek out sources from different points of view. We challenge

our sources when contradictory information emerges.

Then, we listen. No article on a classified program gets published until the responsible officials have been given a fair opportunity to comment. And if they want to argue that publication represents a danger to national security, we put things on hold and give them a respectful hearing. Often, we agree to participate in off-the-record conversations with officials so they can make their case without fear of spilling more secrets onto our front pages.

Finally, we weigh the merits of publishing against the risks of publishing. There is no magic formula, no neat metric for either the public's interest or the dangers of publishing sensitive information. We make our best judgment.

WHEN WE come down in favor of publishing, of course everyone hears about it. Few people are aware when we decide to hold an article. But each of us, in the last few years, has had the experience of withholding or delaying stories when the administration convinced us that the risk of publication outweighed the benefits. Probably the most discussed instance was the New York Times' decision to hold its article on telephone eavesdropping for more than a year, until editors felt that further reporting had whittled away the administration's case for secrecy.

But there are others. The New York Times has held articles that, if published, might have jeopardized efforts to protect vulnerable stockpiles of nuclear material, and articles about highly sensitive counter-terrorism initiatives that are still in operation. In April, the Los Angeles Times withheld information about American espionage and surveillance activities in Afghanistan, discovered on computer drives purchased by reporters in an Afghan bazaar.

It is not always a matter of publishing an article or killing it.

Sometimes we deal with the security concerns by editing out gratuitous detail that lends little to public understanding but might be useful to the targets of surveillance. The Washington Post, at the administration's request, agreed not to name the specific countries hosting secret Central Intelligence Agency prisons, deeming that information not essential for American readers. The New York Times, in its article on National Security Agency eavesdropping, left out some technical details.

Even the banking articles, which the president and vice president have condemned, did not dwell on the operational or technical aspects of the program but on its sweep, the questions about its legal basis and the issues of oversight.

We understand that honorable people may disagree with any of these choices — to publish or not to publish. But making those decisions is the responsibility that falls to editors, a corollary to the great gift of our independence. It is not a responsibility we take lightly. And it is not one we can surrender to the government.