

EDITORIAL

Freedom of the Press . . . an abused privilege?

Scripps-Howard News Service, mid-January, reported it had documents that reveal a large quantity, more than 1,700 pounds, of highly enriched uranium is missing at a nuclear weapons factory at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. According to experts in atomic weapons, that much uranium could produce more than 85 atomic bombs.

Three days later newspapers reported that the FBI is investigating how Scripps-Howard News Service obtained "classified information of a national security nature."

Of concern to every loyal American is the possibility that unauthorized individuals may get their hands on classified information that could jeopardize national security, but of far greater concern to loyal Americans, particularly in view of the ever-growing evidence that terrorism is an escalating element in today's society, is the fact that enriched uranium has disappeared.

In this instance we come face to face with a dilemma. Which should prevail? Freedom of the press and the public's right to know? Or suppression of information that might possibly prove embarrassing to a government agency or of some value to a foreign power?

In releasing the story, has Scripps-Howard revealed any information that might be useful to a foreign government or agent thereof, or to any terrorists? It would appear more likely that foreign governments or their agents, if involved, would already know these facts. It would seem that the ones who did not know them, prior to publication of the information, were Americans. Do we have a right to the knowledge?

Since we could be in jeopardy should it be proven that enough material to build 85 atomic bombs actually has disappeared, we do have a right to know. Our government, whether or not it would prefer to classify the information, has obligations to tell us about a loss that poses such a threat to all of us.

After investigation, of course, it may turn out that the material has been "lost" only on paper, or that 1,700 pounds of the stuff is "stuck in the pipes" of processing machines, or (as one DOE official contended) it was "accidentally thrown away with trash such as scrap metal and wiping rags." Seventeen hundred pounds? Even over a thirty-five year period, that's a lot of trashed uranium. Expensive, too.

The question, one equally as important in its way as the

whereabouts of the missing uranium, is whether the press has any right or any obligation to publish this information. It could be asked: What use is the knowledge to the public? What does it matter? Why should Americans be concerned; they can't do anything about it, so what good does it do them to know?

And it could be answered: Americans have a right to know their government (not a private, for-profit corporation working under a government contract) is engaged in the production of nuclear weapons and that its record-keeping methods may need careful scrutiny. Americans have a right to know, if for no other reason than that they foot the bill.

Before this story broke, how many Americans knew a nuclear weapons plant at Oak Ridge, and another at Erwin, Tennessee, existed? How many Americans were aware of a similar plant at Apollo, Pennsylvania, (where, in 1965, a missing 11.7 pounds of uranium was never found)? How many realized that Rocky Flats, Colorado is another site of a weapons components plant? There may be other such plants in other parts of our country. Don't Americans have a right to know they exist?

It would seem our government would prefer to keep us as poorly informed as possible concerning nuclear weapon production under the guise of national security. This, in spite of the widespread acceptance by most knowledgeable citizens of the world that superpowers use spy-satellites to pinpoint locations of all such plants wherever they are on our globe. It is ourselves, not our potential enemies, who know little about what's going on in our country, how our dollars are used, and what lies behind the smokescreen of "classification."

Freedom of the press . . . is the privilege abused? Instances exist where it may be, but this nation's history has proven time and again that freedom of the press serves us well, and most particularly well during times when those in powerful government positions complain most loudly of media abuse of privilege.

Administrations with sincere national security concerns have dealt successfully with the media in the past by supplying the press with all the facts and requesting cooperation. Administrations which have made adversaries of representatives of the press have raised hackles as well as suspicions there may be something to hide.

Conceivably, the FBI could better use its time and energy in tracking down 1,700 pounds of missing uranium instead of trying to find out how Scripps-Howard obtained the documentation for its story. And conceivably, if the press were allowed to investigate the loss of the uranium, questions of where it disappeared might readily be answered.