

25 The Science of Secrecy

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Of the many institutions of American government that emerged in the course of the 20th century, none has received, in relation to its importance, so little attention as that of secrecy. The New Deal of the 1930s brought on a great increase in government regulation, along with a great range of concern. In 1938, Roscoe Pound—then chairman of the American Bar Association’s Special Committee on Administrative Law and former Dean of the Harvard Law School—denounced what he saw as turning “the administration of justice over to administrative absolutism...a Marxian idea.”¹ Dean Acheson was enlisted by the Roosevelt administration to address the matter. In 1946 the Administrative Procedure Act was enacted with its provisions for discovery, due process, and the like. As early as 1935, the Federal Register had been established to publish all public regulations. President Carter even decreed that his cabinet members actually read all such decrees issued by their departments, although one by one they begged off. The task was too great. Still this regulatory regime answers to most democratic standards.

Not so secrecy. The Report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy (1997) begins:

Secrecy is a form of government regulation. Americans are familiar with the tendency to overregulate in other areas. What is different with secrecy is that the public cannot know the extent or the content of regulation.²

It remains a hidden, enormous, metastasizing mass within government itself. In a recent paper entitled, “On Liberty, the Right to Know, and

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Public Discourse: The Role of Transparency in Public Life,” economist Joseph Stiglitz argues:

There is, in democratic societies, a basic right to know, be to informed about what the government is doing and why. To put it baldly, I will argue that there should be a strong presumption in favor of transparency and openness in government. The scourges of secrecy during the past seventy years are well known - in country after country, it is the secret police that has engaged in the most egregious violations of human rights. I want to talk today about the kind of secrecy that is pervasive today in many democratic societies. Let me be clear: this secrecy is a far cry from that pursued by the totalitarian states that have marred the century that is drawing to a close. Yet this secrecy is corrosive: it is antithetical to democratic values, and it undermines democratic processes. It is based on a mistrust between those governing and those governed; and at the same time, it exacerbates that mistrust.³

Stiglitz’s paper, which was presented at Oxford, followed the 1997 Report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy. (The Commission is a statutory body with members of both parties, both houses of Congress, and representatives of the Executive.) Although less elegantly stated, the unanimous conclusions and recommendations of the Commission were not that different. In 1998, the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs unanimously supported the Government Secrecy Reform Act, a bill based on the Commission’s recommendations. Now we have this colloquium sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a momentous academic initiative.

In all, we may hope that a new subject has appeared—or rather, reappeared. Almost half a century ago in 1956, Edward Shils, recently described as “the most learned man in the social sciences” of his time, published *The Torment of Secrecy*, an impassioned yet rigorous account of the turmoil of the McCarthy era of the 1950s.⁴ As the turmoil was just then subsiding, Shils wrote, “A great society should not allow its partial recovery from a humiliating and unjustifiable lapse from decent conduct to diminish the necessity for the conscientious scrutiny of that lapse.”⁵

Seymour Martin Lipset—fearless as ever—observed that at the height of anti-Communist fervor, loyalty oaths, and the like, a person could get in more trouble on the principal American campuses by supporting

McCarthy rather than opposing him. But that would scarcely have included Shils. In the 1930s, he had made clear his contempt for fellow travelers: “the rush of the Gadarene intellectuals” to embrace Communism. Wartime service in the Office of Strategic Services only strengthened his disdain, adding an element of concern. In *Torment* he writes:

The Communist Party of the United States is and has been malevolent in intent. Its impotence as an effective conspiratorial revolutionary body does not mean that it is entirely harmless. Given the interest of the Soviet Union in penetrating such information on American resources and intentions as are kept secret, and given the subservience of the Communist Party to the Soviet Union, there have been ample grounds for care in dealing with Communists or persons under their influence.

He was, however, a cofounder of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. He continued:

The scientists, who had worked on the bomb and knew its monstrous powers, felt perhaps more than a little guilty over their role in having produced this necessary tool of destruction and they also knew enough about the inner nature of science and scientists to foresee that the American monopoly of the scientific and technological knowledge which went into the making of the bomb could not be indefinitely maintained.

They hoped for some mode of international control. But before anything could be achieved, the Soviet Union detonated its own bomb and the Cold War was on. Soon came some evidence and many charges that they had stolen the secret. Again, Shils:

The American visage began to cloud over. Secrets were to become our chief reliance just when it was becoming more and more evident that the Soviet Union had long maintained an active apparatus for espionage in the United States. For a country that had never previously thought of itself as an object of systematic espionage by foreign powers, it was unsettling.

The atomic bomb was a bridge over which the fantasies ordinarily confined to restricted sections of the population—hole-and-corner nativist radicalism, religious fundamentalism, and revolutionary populism—entered the larger society which was facing an unprecedented

threat to its continuance. The fantasies of apocalyptic visionaries now claimed the respectability of being a reasonable interpretation of the real situation.

Shils called for a “functional secrecy” that would protect the society from “genuine external danger.” What he feared was secrecy that was not functional, but symbolic.

Part of the war of fantasy which the pure and good conduct incessantly with corruption and evil until the Last Judgment. The secrecy demanded by ideological extremism in the United States and in Soviet Russia, in Soviet China and in the Soviet satellites is not connected with national security except by the occasion which crises provide for fanatics to focus their excited fantasies.⁶

What Shils did not know—something none of us knew until John M. Deutch, in his role as Director of Central Intelligence and a member of the Secrecy Commission, made the archive public—was that the United States had by then intercepted and decrypted the text of Soviet cables going back to World War II (the VENONA project). The first such cable was broken on December 20, 1946 by Meredith Gardener in Arlington Hall, a requisitioned girls’ school not far from the Pentagon. It contained a list of the principal scientists at Los Alamos. Looking over Gardener’s shoulder was William W. Weisband, an Army corporal, cipher clerk, and spy. By the time Shils published in 1956, the United States military and law enforcement agencies knew all about the Soviet attack—or all that they needed to know—and had pretty much rolled up the entire operation.

The Soviets knew this, as did the United States Army and the FBI. Further, they knew that the Soviets knew and that we knew they knew. Only the American people did not know—including, it would appear, the American President, this on the direct orders of Omar Nelson Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recorded in an FBI memorandum dated October 18, 1949. If the President was to know, the General would inform him—which, evidently, he did not.

Had Shils known this, he likely would have instantly recognized the rise of bureaucracy as propounded by Max Weber in Germany in 1922.

The pure interest of the bureaucracy in power, however, is efficacious far beyond those areas where *purely functional* interests make for secrecy. The concept of the “official secret” is the specific invention of bureaucracy, and nothing is so fanatically defended by the bureaucracy as this attitude, which cannot be substantially jus-

tified beyond these specifically qualified areas. In facing a parliament, the bureaucracy, out of a sure power instinct, fights every attempt of the parliament to gain knowledge by means of its own experts or from interest groups. The so-called right of parliamentary investigation is one of the means by which parliament seeks such knowledge. Bureaucracy naturally welcomes a poorly informed and hence a powerless parliament—at least in so far as ignorance somehow agrees with the bureaucracy’s interests (*italics added: see Shils’ term “functional secrecy”*).⁷

Note that of the 6,610,154 secrets created in 1997, a small proportion (some 1.4 percent) were created under statute—that is to say, the Atomic Energy Act.⁸ The remainder are pure creatures of bureaucracy via Executive Orders.

The proposition that President Truman was never told of the VENONA decryptions has been challenged.⁹ As it ought, for the thought is discouraging. Yet for whatever small increment of confidence that might attach, let me say that I suspected Truman had not been briefed, and was sure if we dug deep enough we would find evidence—as we did, hence the proposition. This was Army property, and the Army commander would not part with it save in exchange for something of equal value, which evidently never materialized.

Stiglitz has now added an economist’s perspective: there are gains to be got.

Secrecy provides some insulation against being accused of making a mistake. If a policy fails to produce desired results, government officials can always claim that matters would have been even worse but for the government policy. While we all recognize human fallibility, government officials seem particularly loath to own up to it, and for good reason: the public judges mistakes harshly. But there is a vicious circle: given that so little information is disclosed, the public must rely on results in judging government officials. The officials receive credit for good results, whether they deserve the credit or not; and they are condemned for bad results. ...

If outsiders have less information, voters may feel less confident that they will be able to take over management effectively. Indeed, the lack of information of outsiders does increase the costs of transition, and make it more expensive (for society) to change management teams. The fact that the alternative management teams

have less information means that there is a higher probability of any proposals that they put forward will be ill-suited to the situation. By increasing the mean cost of transition and increasing the subjective variance, secrecy puts incumbents at a distinct advantage over rivals.¹⁰

Thus the military might well have asked what the public would think if it were known that all those spies got into and out of Los Alamos—a Corps of Engineers project, after all.

Stiglitz offers another economist's insight:

While it may be in the interests of the government as a whole to maintain secrecy, it may not be in the interests of particular individuals. Indeed, that is what gives rise to the whole problem of leaks. As in the case of other forms of collusive behavior, there are incentives for individuals to deviate. If a secret is shared among a number of individuals, any one of the individuals can reap the scarcity rents for himself by disclosing the information to the press.¹¹

Is it not likely that something similar is going on right now regarding Chinese doings at Los Alamos? Such information that we evidently have is classified. Yet it continues to leak, to the presumed advantage of various parties. Once again, a foreign government probably knows, the American government sort of knows, and the American public only knows what is given without attribution to the press. This is not what an economist would call transparency.

A similar situation occurred in 1976 when President Ford approved a "competitive analysis" of Soviet strategic strength and intentions.¹² As related by Christopher Andrew, a "B Team" of conservative critics of the CIA's supposed "arms control bias" was asked to make an independent analysis of the Agency's view, which would in turn be critiqued by an in-house "A Team." The B Team concluded that the Nation was in grave peril given the Soviet "drive for dominance." The classified B Team report was delivered December 2, 1976. "Within a few weeks the main conclusions of the report had been leaked to the press."¹³ Ronald Reagan, for one, was convinced, and upon his becoming President four years later the B Team was well rewarded both in policy terms and appointments.

I had been a member of President Ford's cabinet, having returned from a posting in India more than ever convinced of the power of ethnicity in

world affairs. Colonial empires did not last. On my way home from visiting China I wrote a “Letter from Peking” for *The New Yorker*, which concluded that that regime would be around for a bit, as would the Soviet Union “until ethnicity breaks it up.”¹⁴ By 1979, in *Newsweek* I proposed that the break-up would come in the 1980s. But the B Team had access to classified information and hence far greater authority, although, one could argue, the analysis was incomplete.

This brings us to a final thesis in what I dare to call the science of secrecy. In *The Torment of Secrecy*, Shils wrote that the “American visage began to cloud over” when we learned of Soviet espionage. “For a country that had never previously thought of itself as an object of systematic espionage by foreign powers, it was upsetting.”¹⁵ Shils, a second-generation American, was seemingly little aware of the near panic over German espionage that accompanied World War I. The Espionage Act of 1917. Theodore Roosevelt going on about the “Hun within our own gates.” Eugene V. Debs going to prison. The German language and culture, beaten down—even to the lowest of dogs (in 1919 at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, Dachshunds were entered as Badger Hounds).

Espionage is almost invariably associated with diaspora politics. It can lead to panic, as with Germans in the First World War or Japanese in the Second. On the other hand, the atomic spies were in the main first- or second-generation Central Europeans. Little was made of this. Chinese will now be watched a bit more closely, as might Indian nationals. But American society has pretty much lost its nativist dread—not enough natives, or so I would hypothesize.

Again to the matter of routinization. If the Department of Energy was insufficiently alert to the goings on at Los Alamos in the 1980s, there is a possible explanation. It was trying to determine whether Glenn Seaborg was seeking to give classified secrets to the Library of Congress. Dr. Seaborg kept a journal during his years (1961–1971) as Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). A lifelong practice. On leaving the AEC he had his journal checked out by their Division of Classification, which approved it and sent it on to his office in Berkeley. In 1983, he lent a copy to an historian in the Department of Energy, a successor agency. In 1985, he was informed that the journal contained classified material and would have to be reviewed. Threatened with arrest—literally—he turned it over. Agents by the dozen went through the 35.4-linear-foot document. Back it came, black and blue as you

might say. Thus one previously classified and now declassified entry for “Tuesday, October 31, 1961”:

I took Dianne, Steve, Eric, and Dave on a Trick or Treat jaunt around the neighborhood on this Halloween evening.

This is not so absurd as it may appear. The entry for that day begins recounting a conversation with Jerome Wiesner about an “FAS” letter about reopening the Oppenheimer case. “Jerry Wiesner said he had talked with legal people about this problem and he also had talked to McGeorge Bundy and their combined feeling is that in the present climate the President would be embarrassed if the case were opened.”¹⁶ He went on to recount discussions of atmospheric testing. (The Test Ban Treaty was in the offing.) “We think the only thing to do is to announce publicly that we are preparing. Jerry said he wasn’t sure we should do that... .” President Kennedy had given approval, “despite objections from State and Defense,” to issuing a fact sheet on the “Effects of 5, 10, 20, 30, 50 and 100 MT weapons... .” He had called the Secretary of Defense and the Acting Secretary of State to explain “why AEC feels that the public should have this information.” A quarter of a century later the Department reacted to all this, classifying the entire page—including the Halloween passage—evidently not noting that the subject had changed. We call this routinization.¹⁷

Seaborg wrote all about this in “Secrecy Runs Amok,” an article that appeared in *Science* in 1994. “With the beginning of the Reagan administration, the government had begun to take a new, more severe and rigid position with regard to secrecy.”¹⁸

In 1997, he came to see me. I drafted legislation that would return the journal unredacted. The Clinton administration’s Department of Energy said this could not be allowed. “The Department...has treaty and statutory responsibilities under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, as amended, to protect national security and proliferation equities.”¹⁹ Whereupon the measure failed. I am trying again, but with modest hope, at best.

I return to the thesis that organizations behave in this manner—Cabinet departments; not, perhaps, relatively young commissions. Thus, Seaborg was willing to help get Oppenheimer free of animus that developed when “the American visage clouded over.” No Cabinet secretary would risk that. (Nor, yet, did the Kennedy White House).

Science has fought back, insisting on a balance. From the beginning of the atomic age physicists have insisted there were no secrets in nature—nor, for long, in technology. As such, there is inherent tension over government control of scientific communications. As Harold Relyea of the Library of Congress has summarized in *Silencing Secrecy*:

To the extent that national security restrictions were selective and limited, they were not regarded as a danger to achievement and progress in science and technology... . Controversy arose over whether or not actual conditions warranted or justified increased national security controls, as well as over the breadth of the new restrictions, and their seemingly adverse impact on achievement and progress in science and technology in the United States.²⁰

The definitive statement was made by a task force convened by the Defense Science Board in 1970. The task force was headed by Frederick Seitz of the Rockefeller University, and among its members were notables such as Edward Teller and our own Jack P. Ruina.²¹ The group deemed it unlikely that any classified material would remain secret for as long as five years, and more likely, one year owing to “independent discovery” or clandestine disclosure. “More might be gained than lost if our nation were to adopt—unilaterally if necessary—a policy of complete openness.”²² This is the very opposite of the “born classified” rules of the bureaucratizing atomic laboratories. They proposed a “rigid schedule” of declassification, with a general period of one to five years with exemptions for specific categories.²³

The task force was formed during the Nixon administration, with the estimable Melvin R. Laird as Secretary of Defense. The very next year the same administration attempted to prevent the publication of *The Pentagon Papers*, as they came to be known—a history of United States involvement in Vietnam prepared by the RAND Corporation for the Defense Department. Secrecy took a terrible toll on the Presidency. I had been a member of the Nixon cabinet, but was now departed. What I write is conjecture, and should be considered with a measure of caution as no one has yet advanced the proposition. But let us have at it.

At the start of World War I, in the face of proclaimed American neutrality, Germany set upon a campaign of espionage aimed at curtailing the American supply of armaments for the Allies. These activities were relatively minor—though they did manage an enormous explosion of the munitions facility on Black Tom Island in 1916—but the perception

of conspiracies and foreign intrigues attended the anxieties of state. Normally moderate, reasonable men and women would grow hysterical confronting unnamed, unseen, and frequently nonexistent dangers. War brought revolution, which brought more war, and then more revolution. Reflexively, the state prepared to guard itself “against all enemies whether domestic or foreign.”

Thus, on June 3, 1916 (ten months before the United States would enter the war), the Wilson administration submitted 17 separate bills to Congress to protect the country, as President Wilson warned, from “citizens of the United States...who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life.”²⁴ One bill called for prior restraint of the press, a lawyerly term for censorship. On April 2, 1917, President Wilson asked a joint session of Congress for a declaration of war against Germany. On the same day, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Edwin Yates Webb (D-NC) introduced an omnibus bill along the lines of the 17 administration bills. Senator Charles A. Culberson (D-TX) introduced a similar bill in the Senate. Although at first receptive to the censorship measure, on second thought Henry Cabot Lodge, Majority Leader of the Senate, decided it would not do and so stated on the Senate floor. (See *Congressional Record*, May 14, 1917.)²⁵ President Wilson sent a letter to Webb (the House having passed the measure by a vote of 191 ayes, 185 nays, 1 “present,” and 54 not voting)²⁶ pleading his position. Thus:

Authority to exercise censorship over the press to the extent that that censorship is embodied in the recent action of the House of Representatives is absolutely necessary to the public safety...I want to say again that it seems to me imperative that powers of this sort should be granted.²⁷

Nevertheless, the conferees rejected the provision and the measure was thus not included in the omnibus Espionage Act of 1917. A half century later this incident had seemingly vanished from the government’s memory. Secrecy was so pervasive that it was simply assumed that government could prevent the publication of the glum compilation. The President’s lawyers argued the “inherent power” of the Presidency, with no seeming awareness that a previous President had deemed a law to be necessary and that the Congress had openly and emphatically decided to make no such law. A divided Supreme Court upheld *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*’s right to publish, but mostly on general principles of freedom of the press.

Justice Stewart went on to write memorably that “moral, political, and practical considerations would dictate that a very first principle... would be an insistence upon avoiding secrecy for its own sake. For when everything is classified, then nothing is classified, and the system becomes one to be disregarded by the cynical or the careless, to be manipulated by those intent on self-protection of self-promotion.”²⁸

It should be noted, however, that Justices Marshall and Douglas (Justice Black concurring), and Justice White (Justice Stewart concurring) all took note of the rejection by the Senate of President Wilson’s legislation calling for prior restraint. It was all there in the law library. But the memory had disappeared from the Executive. After the decision, the “Plumbers” were formed to prevent further leaks. The downward spiral commenced, and in time Nixon, faced with impeachment, became the first President in our history to resign.

Iran-Contra was next, a dozen years later. An administration obsessed with the threat of a Communist coming to power in a Central American country set out to support a counterinsurgency. In time the CIA laid mines in Pacific Coast harbors. The Senate Select Committee, of which I was then vice chairman, was not told, despite a statutory provision requiring that the Committee be kept “fully and currently informed of all intelligence activities.”²⁹

Faced with these facts, the Director of the CIA lied, I resigned. A handsome apology did follow, but the Administration now secretly turned to Iran, trading weapons for money to support the Contras. It all came out. The President escaped—it is not at all clear how much he knew—but the Presidency had once more been put in harm’s way. In his account of the crisis, Theodore Draper writes: “If ever the constitutional democracy of the United States is overthrown, we now have a better idea of how this is likely to be done.”³⁰

My closing note is on the legislation proposed by the Secrecy Commission. A bipartisan bill requiring that an official who makes the decision to classify information shall identify himself or herself and provide written justification for the action; a presumed ten-year limit on classified material with an extension procedure; and a more systematic declassification system was unanimously passed out of the Governmental Affairs Committee in 1998. The Administration, however, could not accept the prospect of judicial review of classification decisions. A new

bill has been introduced in the new Congress—nothing exciting here, but we may have entered a period the old Marxists would have described as “demystification,” or the revelation of underlying interests. Shils might not have disagreed. Presidents take note.

Endnotes

1. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Secrecy: The American Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 157 from Roscoe Pound, quoted in *Annual Report of the American Bar Association* 63 (1938): 340.
2. Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy, *Secrecy: Report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), p. xxi.
3. Joseph Stiglitz, 1999 Oxford University Amnesty International Lecture, Oxford University, January 27, 1999 (transcript available at www.worldbank.org).
4. Donald Dewey, “Edward Shils: A Last Harvest,” *Society* 36 (March/April 1999), no. 3:75.
5. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, introduction to Edward A. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies* (1956; reprint, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), p. xii.
6. *Ibid.*, p. xviii.
7. Max Weber, “Bureaucracy,” in *Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 233–34; *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Economy and Society)*, 1922. Donald Dewey describes Shils’ introduction to Weber and the German tradition in sociology as “close to a religious experience.” Donald Dewey, “Edward Shils: A Last Harvest,” *Society* 36 (March/April 1999), no. 3:74.
8. The Department of Energy reports that it classified 900,000 pages of material in FY 1997 pursuant to the Atomic Energy Act. The Information Security Oversight Office reports 6,520,154 classification actions in FY 1997 pursuant to Executive Order 12958. In comparing these figures, an average of 10 pages per document is assumed, resulting in an estimated 90,000 classification decision by the DOE: 1.4 percent of the combined DOE/ISOO classification decisions reported in 1997. (Sources: Information Security Oversight Office, *1997 Report to the President* (Washington, D.C.: Information Security Oversight Office, 1996), p. 25; A. Bryan Siebert, Director, Office of Declassification, Department of Energy to Steven Garfinkel, Director, Information Security Oversight Office, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, December 3, 1998.)
9. Richard Perle, “In the Dark,” *Commentary* 106 (December 1998), no. 6:78.
10. Joseph Stiglitz, 1999 Oxford University Amnesty International Lecture, Oxford University, January 27, 1999 (transcript available at www.worldbank.org).
11. *Ibid.*

12. Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), p. 423.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 424
14. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Letter from Peking," January 26, 1975, accepted for publication in the *New Yorker* but withdrawn after Moynihan's nomination to the United Nations.
15. Moynihan, *The Torment of Secrecy*, p. xvi.
16. Glenn T. Seaborg, journal entry, October 31, 1961.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Glenn T. Seaborg, "Secrecy Runs Amok," *Science* 264 (3 June 1994): 1410.
19. Kenneth E. Baker, Acting Director, Office of Nonproliferation and National Security, Department of Energy to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Washington, October 29, 1997.
20. Harold C. Relyea, *Silencing Science: National Security Controls and Scientific Communication* (New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1994), p. 6.
21. Defense Science Board, *Final Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Secrecy* (July 1, 1970).
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Woodrow Wilson, "Annual Message from the State of the Union," December 7, 1915, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, edited by Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 35:306-7.
25. *Congressional Record* 55, pt. 3:2262 (May 14, 1917).
26. *Ibid.*, pt. 2:1819 (May 4, 1917).
27. *Ibid.*, pt. 3:3144 (May 31, 1917).
28. *New York Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713 (1971).
29. *Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1981*, U.S. Code, vol. 94, sec. 413 (1980).
30. Theodore Draper, "Getting Irangate Straight," *New York Review of Books*, 8 October 1987, p. 47.