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Opinion

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Secrecy, Lies And Credibility

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The initial refusal of President Bush to let his national-security adviser appear under oath before the 9/11 Commission might have been in keeping with a principle followed by other presidents -- the principle being, according to Bush, that calling his advisers to testify under oath is a congressional encroachment on the executive branch's turf. (Never mind that this commission is not a congressional body, but one he created and whose members he handpicked.) But standing on that principle has proved to be politically damaging, in part because this administration -- the most secretive since Richard Nixon's -- already suffers from a deepening credibility problem. It all brings to mind something I've wondered about for some time: Are secrecy and credibility natural enemies?

When you stop to think about it, you keep secrets from people when you don't want them to know the truth. Secrets, even when legitimate and necessary, as in genuine national-security cases, are what you might call passive lies.

Take the recent flap over Richard Foster, the Medicare official whose boss threatened to fire him if he revealed to Congress that the prescription-drug bill would be a lot more expensive than the administration claimed. The White House tried to pass it all off as the excessive and unauthorized action of Foster's supervisor (who shortly after the threatened firing left the government).

Maybe. But the point is that the administration had the newer, higher numbers, and Congress had been misled. This was a clear case of secrecy being used to protect a lie. I can't help but wonder how many other faulty estimates by this administration have actually been misinformation explained as error.

The Foster story followed by only a few weeks the case of the U.S. Park police chief who got the ax for telling a congressional staffer -- and The Washington

Post -- that budget cuts planned for her department would impair its ability to perform its duties. Chief Teresa Chambers since has accepted forced retirement from government service.

Isolated incidents? Not really. Looking back at the past three years reveals a pattern of secrecy and of dishonesty in the service of secrecy. Some New Yorkers felt they had been lied to following the horrific collapse of the World Trade Center towers. Proposed warnings by the Environmental Protection Agency -- that the air quality near ground zero might pose health hazards -- were watered down or deleted by the White House and replaced with the reassuring message that the air was safe to breathe.

The EPA's own inspector general said later that the agency did not have sufficient data to claim the air was safe. However, the reassurance was in keeping with the president's defiant back-to-work/business-as-usual theme to demonstrate the nation's strength and resilience. It also was an early example of a Bush administration reflex described by one physicist as "never let science get in the way of policy."

In April of 2002, the EPA had prepared a nationwide warning about a brand of asbestos called Zonolite, which contained a form of the substance far more lethally dangerous than ordinary asbestos. However, reportedly at the last minute, the White House stopped the warning. Why? The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, which broke the story, noted that the Bush administration at the time was pushing legislation limiting the asbestos manufacturer's liability. Whatever the reason, such silence by an agency charged with protecting our health is a silent lie in my book.

One sometimes gets the impression that this administration believes that how it runs the government is its business and no one else's. It is certainly not the business of Congress. And if it's not the business of the people's representatives, it's certainly no business of yours or mine.

But this is a dangerous condition for any representative democracy to find itself in. The tight control of information, as well as the dissemination of misleading information and outright falsehoods, conjures up a disturbing image of a very different kind of society. Democracies are not well-run nor long-preserved with secrecy and lies.

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