

How the Media Became the Pentagon's Plumbers

Last month *New York Times* international correspondent David Philipps offered a mea culpa.

“I just deleted a tweet that lacked nuance,” the two-time Pulitzer Prize winner [wrote](#).

Philipps, who in 2022 received the top award in journalism for his reporting on previously undisclosed US military strikes that killed thousands of civilians in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, was walking back an observation made following the arrest of 21-year-old Jack Teixeira, the Massachusetts Air National Guardsman accused of leaking state secrets. Philipps noted the *Times* had worked “feverishly” to assist the Pentagon in identifying Teixeira.

“Ironically, if the same guy leaked to the NYT, we’d be working feverishly to conceal it,” Philipps [wrote](#) in the deleted tweet.

In an odd twist, the *Times* had gone from publishing state secrets to helping the government conceal them.

The Pentagon Papers, Then and Now

Publishing state secrets is an old game, one the *New York Times* knows well.

In 1971 the *Grey Lady* published classified materials – [the Pentagon Papers](#) – showing that the government was lying about the Vietnam War. Papers leaked to the *Times* by antiwar military analyst Daniel Ellsberg revealed that America’s foothold in the war-torn country was much worse than the public had been told.

While the Nixon administration – which secretly created a team of “plumbers” to plug the leaks – argued the documents were a threat to national security, the reality was they were primarily an embarrassment to the government. As R. W. Apple Jr. [wrote](#) in the *New York Times* a quarter century later, the Papers “demonstrated, among other things, that the Johnson Administration had systematically lied, not only to the public but also to Congress, about a subject of transcendent national interest...”

Tapes from the Oval Office of a June 14, 1971 [conversation between Nixon and aide H.R. Haldeman](#) confirm the assessment that government credibility was what was truly at stake. “To the ordinary guy, all this is a bunch of gobbledygook. But out of the gobbledygook comes a very clear thing,” Haldeman told Nixon. “You can’t trust the government; you can’t believe what they say... .”

One can argue that the *Times* was right to publish the Pentagon Papers, which exposed the government’s lies about Vietnam. Or one can argue it was wrong, since it undermined the war effort.

What’s clear is that the *Times* was fighting to expose the government’s secrets, not protect them.

‘Ukrainian Forces in Dire Straits’?

There are similarities between the Pentagon Papers and the Teixeira leaks. While it’s debatable whether the leaks put national security (or Ukrainian security) at risk, it’s clear they are an embarrassment for government officials.

The documents “suggest that the Ukrainian forces are in more dire straits than their government has acknowledged publicly,” the *New York Times* [admits](#). The Associated Press, meanwhile, noted that “at least one of the documents shows estimates of Russian troops deaths in the Ukraine war that are

significantly lower than numbers publicly stated by US officials. Under a section titled 'Total Assessed Losses,' one document lists 16,000-17,500 Russian casualties and up to 71,000 Ukrainian casualties."

This is a very different picture than what Americans have been told by military officials. For example, Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [publicly stated](#) Russia had suffered "significantly well over" 100,000 casualties in Ukraine.

Gate-Keepers and Gate Crashers

Why the government would wish these documents to remain secret is obvious. But why would *The New York Times* and the Washington Post, which also assisted the Pentagon in its hunt for Teixeira?

It's not because the papers are squeamish about publishing illegally obtained documents. The *Times* does this [all the time](#). So does *The Washington Post*, which [received](#) a Pulitzer Prize in 2014 for its reporting on the National Security Agency's illegal mass surveillance program, like the *Times* did [in 1972](#) for the Pentagon Papers reporting.

So why are these same papers now hunting leakers?

Again, it's not because these leaks are a threat to national security. As journalist Glenn Greenwald points out, both the *Times* and the *Post* have been running stories like crazy on Teixeira's leaks.

The real answer comes down to incentives and gatekeeping. The government and media get to decide what leaks are appropriate, what gets published, and what gets prosecuted. It's a symbiotic relationship that serves them both.

The US government, the *Times* notes, classifies tens of millions of documents every year. These documents tell

stories. And a small, select group of people – journalists, editors, publishers, and government officials – get to decide which stories get told, and which stay concealed. Former CIA officials like Frank Snepp [have publicly discussed](#) how The Agency™ plants stories with journalists to shape public opinion. In return for planting stories, journalists are often given access to documents, tips, and exclusives.

These are the gatekeepers. Jack Teixeira and Julian Assange are gate *crashers*. They threaten to destroy this delicate balance. By dumping state secrets on Wikileaks or Discord that are not approved – even if sensitive information is redacted to protect national security – people like Teixeira and Assange disrupt the whole system of “controlled leaking.”

This is why the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* “worked feverishly” to identify Teixeira, and it’s why they treat Assange as a pariah. It’s not so much that these leaks are a threat to national security; what they truly threaten is this monopoly on state secrets, which has the power to conceal not just embarrassments but [atrocities](#).

There’s [an age-old saying](#): *uis custodiet ipsos custodes* (“who guards the guardians”)? It’s a question central to constitutional democracies and government more broadly, and it gets at the rub of state power: how do we hold those in power accountable when they have all the power?

We often think of the Fourth Estate as one of the great bulwarks against government tyranny and protector of freedom. “Our liberty,” Thomas Jefferson famously observed, “depends on the freedom of the press... .”

This is what makes the media’s new role as a defender of state secrets so troubling.

While there are commendable journalists like Philipps dedicated to truth and government accountability, the role of media appears to be shifting to what economist Murray Rothbard

described as [Court Intellectuals](#): servants of the state “who win their place as junior partners in the power, prestige, and loot extracted by the State apparatus from the deluded public.”

By assisting in the apprehension of Teixeira, the Fourth Estate shows it's not very interested in government transparency or accountability. The media are happy to play the role of plumbers, so long as they maintain their perch.

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