

**Statement for the Record of Walter Isaacson, President and CEO, The Aspen Institute  
Hearing of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence  
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It is an honor to be asked to address the issue of national security, the press, and government leaks.

I speak to you today from the vantage of someone who worked at Time Magazine and CNN, and who has also written some books about American history and foreign policy, and who runs the Aspen Institute which is dedicated to finding common-sense solutions to our nation's challenges.

Speaking first from my historical perspective, I will try to avoid pulling out my Bartlett's and serving up all the well-worn quotes from Jefferson and other Founders about how a free and unfettered press is a foundation of our liberty and of our democracy.

I will simply note two things:

It is this type of freedom that we are fighting for in Iraq and in the battle against terrorists around the world, and we should be loath to tamper with this freedom even in the cause of such battles. This thought prompts me to break my resolve, made just a moment ago, about trying not to quote the Founders in order to cite something my favorite, Benjamin Franklin, said: "Those who would be willing to sacrifice some of their eternal liberties for the sake of temporary security deserve neither liberty nor security."

And my second historical point is this: if you go back in history to find and then analyze cases where leaks caused true danger to our national security, rather than merely embarrassment or political squirming for those in power, it is hard to find many. Far more often – from John Adams putting Ben Franklin's grandson in jail to Richard Nixon's team forming the plumber's unit – the frenzied efforts to prevent leaks has been far, far more damaging to the country than the leaks themselves.

Now speaking from a journalistic perspective: I can count dozens of instances in which my colleagues and I were cautious with information at the request of the government. From the beginning of our history, there has been a delicate balance. Journalists try to get out information while remaining responsible citizens. The government tries to keep many things secret, not only for reasons of national security but to avoid embarrassments and controversies.

It's worked astonishingly well, with remarkably few lapses, for more than two centuries. We don't need a broad new "official secrets act" to smash this delicate balance now. Nor do we need to start a new practice of prosecuting the leak recipients.

Should Bob Novak and Matt Cooper go to jail because they used information given to them by Scooter Libby and Karl Rove about Joe Wilson's wife being a CIA agent? No. Reporting such tips – without knowing whether or not it's classified – is a normal part of the way information flows in Washington.

Journalists should be careful about true security risks: reporting on the methods and sources for intelligence operations, endangering the lives of those involved in ongoing operations, details about weapons systems, those sorts of things. And journalists have always been careful about these things. Even the most famous example – the story on the national security domestic wiretaps – was held for a year by the New York Times after they informed the government that they had

the story. And when it was finally reported, it was very vague and devoid of specifics about methods, tactics, approaches used, and technical details.

Our democracy is beautiful because it is filled with checks and balances. You in Congress, especially on this committee, are part of that process. So are the courts. And, if I may be so bold, so is the press. That's the whole point of the First Amendment.

Nowadays, an extraordinary amount of information is needlessly classified. Every day papers and broadcasts are filled with stories based on some of this classified information. Most of it comes from official sources in background briefings. A law criminalizing the use of such information would mean any administration would be able to prosecute or chill whichever journalists they don't like.

The best way to avoid truly dangerous leaks is to restore some of the trust between officials and journalists. When I was at CNN, there were certain people I trusted, and whom I think trusted me: Dr. Rice, her deputy Steve Hadley, FBI director Muller. When they would call with a specific request based on security reasons, I trusted them enough to take them seriously.

But it worked because they knew the relationship had to work both ways, there was a balance. They could not simply order us to do things and throw us in jail if we did not comply.

That is the type of society that James Franklin helped to create when he started a paper in Boston that poked fun at Cotton Mather's family. It is the type of society that his younger brother Ben fought for when he ran away to Philadelphia to start a cheeky and irreverent newspaper of his own.

And it is the type of society we are fighting for today, in the 21st century – in Iraq, around the world, and here at home.

Thank you.

Walter Isaacson