Government imposes excessive censorship

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Professor who takes a temporary consulting job with the government and has access to SCI (a common occurrence). For the rest of his life, whenever he wants to publish a book, an article, or a letter to the editor that deals in any way with the subject matter on which he consulted, it must first be submitted to the government for review.

On one level, this directive is rather ironic, considering that it comes from a president who promised to "get government off our backs." On a more serious level, it is dangerous. As the Times magazine article states, "those most knowledgeable about subjects of overriding national concern will be least able to comment without the approval of those they wish to criticize."

The opposition to this plan caused the administration to announce that it was dropping the censorship requirement until they could consider the matter further, after the election. That announcement was apparently just a smokescreen, however, for according to a study by the General Accounting Office released in July, at least 120,000 government employees have signed lifetime censorship oaths. This figure does not include CIA or National Security Agency employees, who have always been required to sign them.

I grant that Reagan takes these steps in the interest of national security. But national security should be in the interest of protecting our freedoms and preserving democratic government. Reagan's actions are an unprecedented and unsurpassed peacetime sacrifice of our democratic liberties in favor of a questionable gain in national security.

As former Deputy Secretary of State George Ball has warned: "Any abridgment of the freedom of speech, and particularly the practice of prepublication censorship, runs counter to the genius of our democratic system ... Our founding fathers strongly affirmed that a democracy can govern wisely only in an atmosphere of informed public discussion."

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