

NEW JERSEY OPINION

I was press secretary for 2 N.J. governors: Trump will fail in crusade against leaks

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[Spicer cracks down on White House leaks](#)

BY [STAR-LEDGER GUEST COLUMNIST](#)

By Carl Golden

The mission undertaken by presidential press secretary Sean Spicer to identify and punish anyone who leaks information to reporters -- unless authorized -- will end the way all previous similar efforts have: Failure.

It is an utter waste of time and resources to attempt to discover who among the hundreds of potential leakers passed information to reporters under a pledge of anonymity.

Such a quest, moreover, produces a frustration which usually results in a lamp or a telephone or anything else within reach bouncing off the nearest office wall. The physical outrage is often accompanied by a high decibel tirade which tests the limits of creative profanity.

Despite the history of failure, successive administrations have embarked on campaigns to ferret out those who divulge information without consent.



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They've used cajolery, appeals to loyalty, threats to continued employment, public ridicule, and a "you'll never work in this town again" promise.

Telephone taps and computer searches have been used to no avail. While there's no record of personal surveillance and private detectives, there's no evidence to dispute it, either.

According to recent published reports, Spicer was so enraged over premature disclosure of information that [he convened a surprise staff meeting to check cell phones](#) -- personal and government issued -- for evidence of leaking.



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His action no doubt reflected the obsession of his boss with what he's called illegal leaks and his solemn pledge to eradicate them.

Good luck with that, Mr. President.

I spent 11 years as head of the press office for two governors -- Tom Kean for eight years and Christie Whitman for three -- and dealt with leaks and their fallout almost daily. It was an understood and accepted part of the job.

The outrage is certainly understandable. No president or governor wants to look up from his breakfast bacon and eggs to read a front page story about a new administration initiative or a cabinet nomination, information thought to be closely held by inner circle staff.

While the immediate reaction is to identify the source and dismiss him or her, the realistic course is to accept the futility of tracking down the leaker, devise and implement a strategy to respond quickly to the published report, and move forcefully to dominate the news cycle with the official version of events.

Individuals leak information for a variety of reasons. Some are ego-driven, anxious to impress reporters with their insider status. For some, self-aggrandizement is an end in itself. Others engage in it to oppose a policy by ginning up public or official outcry. Still others believe it's a way to advance themselves personally and professionally by offering information damaging to rivals.

And, there are those who do it just for the hell of it, for the inner satisfaction derived from getting away with something no matter the consequences.

Leakers feel secure they won't be caught and their denials can't be credibly challenged. Their security is assured by the knowledge their identity will be protected by reporters who won't reveal a source and will go to jail if necessary to protect it.



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The media plays this game with great skill, tirelessly cultivating sources, learning bits and pieces of information which when stitched together complete a reliable story which the competition hasn't uncovered.

Leaks and efforts to plug them have bedeviled administrations probably since the dawn of the republic.

While most presidents rage privately about them, President Trump has expressed his displeasure very publicly and used the issue as a club to bludgeon the media with regularity.

The president -- way deep down -- more than likely knows there's little he can do to halt leaks. The media knows it as well.

Without question, the most notorious leaker in modern history was Deep Throat who passed along information that brought down a president.

He remained undiscovered for more than 30 years and his identity was only revealed when he offered a death bed confession.

That's the degree of difficulty involved in finding leakers. The president and his press secretary ought to face up to that reality.

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