

# worldview

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## THE FREE SOCIETY: HOW OPEN, HOW SECURE?

Compared to the ongoing uproar in England, the recent controversy about national security and press freedom in this country was a trifle. Britain's security services, never greatly admired in this country and under frequent attack at home, were sharply questioned after the arrest of William Vassall, who for years had operated out of the Admiralty as a Soviet spy. A Tribunal was soon set up to investigate the many seamy charges and insinuations that were made in the press.

Although Rebecca West has said that "the Vassall Tribunal must rank as one of the greatest forensic disasters of the age" and that the performance of the Bar was "the worst . . . in living memory," journals from the *Spectator* to the *New Statesman* had high praise for the Tribunal. It did very well two things. It served as a reminder, according to the *Spectator*, that one "cannot usefully talk about 'excessive police powers' and go into indignant hysterics every time a successful Russian penetration of our defenses is revealed." Second, it revealed a need for the press in England to examine and reform itself.

To consider the second point first, the Tribunal, simply by presenting its findings, returned a strong indictment against the British press. In its wholly justified efforts to uncover and expose what was in the interests of the public, the press invented and exploited. The two journalists who are now in jail for refusing to "reveal" their sources have received scant public sympathy. The unspoken public judgment seems to be that the public interests were poorly served and that British politics were damaged. Thus, while the Vassall Case ran its course, the onus shifted from the government to the press.

While the Tribunal also pointed out the need for some improvement in the security measures, there was a general feeling that present measures were largely satisfactory. But the Spies for Peace, who distributed pamphlets containing secret information, and a new espionage case involving a Euratom scientist have shattered this comfortable feeling and thrown the whole ques-

tion into open, public debate. And the whole question, bluntly put, is "How much security does a free society want? How open can it afford to be?"

Probably the only emotionally satisfactory answer to the question is the observation of the *Economist* that "cold war is hell for a free community." But when we start the hard work of adjusting to this hell we are led to the more tempered statements of the former head of the CIA, Allen Dulles: "Our free societies, with all their blessings, cannot be made over merely to even the balance sheet of intelligence. But some of the loopholes, some indiscretions, some carelessness in our publicity can possibly be dealt with more effectively than they are today."

An open society and absolute security are a contradiction in terms. As long as our society can fairly be described as open there will be some deficiencies in our security. Except to say that we must balance the demands of both there is no general answer to the dilemma that is posed. The real answer—the answer that actually determines our practice—must always be found in the particulars. We must always have under constant surveillance and scrutiny the practices that are employed. And here there will be a natural, constant and necessary tension between the press and government authorities. There is always, of course, the temptation for any government to classify as secret not only what it wants to conceal from the enemy, but also what it wishes to keep from its critics at home. Apart from this there will be differences in prudential judgments about particular security measures. One of the costs of an open society is the maintenance of these differences, of this tension. When they cease to exist, our society will no longer be free.

The June issue of *worldview* will be devoted primarily to comments on *Pacem in Terris*, the recent encyclical of Pope John XXIII.