

Obama rapped for lack of transparency

By: Craig Smith - May 26, 2013

James C. Goodale was the 37-year-old chief counsel for The New York Times in 1971 when it published a leaked version of a secret government study of U.S. policies in Vietnam that came to be called the Pentagon Papers.

Now 79, he sees similarities in the way the Nixon and Obama administrations have battled with the media.

“We've come full circle, with respect to national security and the First Amendment,” he said. “Nixon was bad on that; Obama is catching up.”

Goodale is among a growing number of open-government advocates and whistle-blowers who say the president hasn't delivered on his campaign promise to make his administration the most transparent in history.

“They treat the public like spies, and journalists as conspiracists,” said Coleen Rowley, a former FBI special agent who co-authored a petition to rescind a transparency award given to the president in 2011 by five open-government groups.

Supporters of the effort to rescind the award said the idea should be revisited in light of recent controversies. The groups who presented the award said that won't happen.

A White House spokesman declined to comment.

Obama advocates greater transparency in a detailed letter on the White House website.

“Government should be transparent,” he wrote. “Transparency promotes accountability and provides information for citizens about what their government is doing.”

But reports that the Justice Department secretly obtained telephone records of reporters and editors at The Associated Press in April and May 2012 infuriated news groups and some members of Congress. Gary Pruitt, AP's president, called the seizure unconstitutional.

The Justice Department targeted Fox News correspondent James Rosen in connection with a story he pursued on North Korea. Rosen declined to be interviewed, a Fox spokesperson said.

Those reports should be considered “frightening,” Goodale said.

“He's crossed the line,” he said of Obama. “How we uncross that line is not clear to me.”

Nixon was said to have been obsessed with secrecy and had a long-running battle with the media. His infamous team of “plumbers” earned that nickname while trying to plug leaks as the Watergate scandal that brought down his presidency escalated.

“Most people think secrecy is protecting them. It's the opposite,” said Rowley, who wrote a May 2002 memo describing some of the bureau's pre-9/11 failures.

When five groups — OMB Watch, the National Security Archive, the Project on Government Oversight, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and OpenTheGovernment.org — presented the transparency award to Obama in secret in the White House in 2011, Rowley and former FBI language specialist Sibel Edmonds drafted a petition asking them to take it back.

Petition signers include Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers; former CIA analyst Raymond McGovern; a former Pentagon analyst, Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski; and former National Security Agency analyst Russ Tice.

The groups that presented the award acknowledge that they've taken some heat but said rescinding it isn't likely to happen.

“There is certainly room for discussion about that award,” said Joe Newman, spokesman for the Project on Government Oversight. “We have not been waving our pom-poms for Obama. ... What happened with AP is alarming.”

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press declined to comment, spokeswoman Debra Gersh Hernandez said.

Obama apparently found it difficult to meet his campaign promises on transparency, said Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington public policy research organization.

“He vastly overpromised transparency, compared to what he delivered,” Harper said. “He promised he would post bills online five days before signing. ... That was his first broken promise.”

The president's actions are disappointing, Boston University journalism professor Chris Daly said.

“As a journalist and a student of the history of journalism, I am deeply disappointed in President Obama for his record of touting transparency while continuing the business of ‘secrecy as usual,’ ” said Daly, who worked at the AP and Washington Post.

“Obama has waged an unprecedented campaign of investigation of unauthorized ‘leaks,’ while following in every other president's footsteps by using tactical leaks of information for his own advantage.”