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American media dodges U.N. surveillance story

Three days after a British newspaper revealed a memo about U.S. spying on U.N. Security Council delegations, I asked Daniel Ellsberg to assess the importance of the story. "This leak," he replied, "is more timely and potentially more important than the Pentagon Papers." The key word is "timely." Publication of the secret Pentagon Papers in 1971, made possible by Ellsberg's heroic decision to leak those documents, came after the Vietnam War had already been underway for many years. But with all-out war on Iraq still in the future, the leak about spying at the United Nations could erode the Bush administration's already slim chances of getting a war resolution through the Security Council.

"As part of its battle to win votes in favor of war against Iraq," the London-based Observer reported on March 2, the U.S. government developed an "aggressive surveillance operation, which involves interception of the home and office telephones and the e-mails of U.N. delegates." The smoking gun was "a memorandum written by a top official at the National Security Agency — the U.S. body which intercepts communications around the world — and circulated to both senior agents in his organization and to a friendly foreign intelligence agency."

The Observer added: "The leaked memorandum makes clear that the target of the heightened surveillance efforts are the delegations from Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Mexico, Guinea and Pakistan at the U.N. headquarters in New York — the so-called 'Middle Six' delegations whose votes are being fought over by the pro-war party, led by the U.S. and Britain, and the party arguing for more time for U.N. inspections, led by France, China and Russia."

The NSA memo, dated Jan. 31, outlines the wide scope of the surveillance activities, seeking any information useful to push a war resolution through the Security Council — "the whole gamut of information that could give U.S. policymakers an edge in obtaining results favorable to U.S. goals or to head off surprises."

Three days after the memo came to light, the Times of London printed an article noting that the Bush administration "finds itself isolated" in its zeal for war on Iraq. "In

the most recent setback," the newspaper reported, "a memorandum by the U.S. National Security Agency, leaked to the Observer, revealed that American spies were ordered to eavesdrop on the conversations of the six undecided countries on the United Nations Security Council."

The London Times article called it an "embarrassing disclosure." And the embarrassment was nearly worldwide. From Russia to France to Chile to Japan to Australia, the story was big mainstream news. But not in the United States.

Several days after the "embarrassing disclosure," not a word about it had appeared in America's supposed paper of record. The New York Times — the single most influential media outlet in the United States — still had not printed anything about the story. How could that be?

"Well, it's not that we haven't been interested," New York Times deputy foreign editor Alison Smale said on the evening of March 5, nearly 96 hours after the Observer broke the story. "We could get no confirmation or comment" on the memo from U.S. officials.

The Times opted not to relay the Observer's account, Smale told me. "We would normally expect to do our own intelligence reporting." She added: "We are still definitely looking into it. It's not that we're not."

Belated coverage would be better than none at all. But readers should be suspicious of the failure of the New York Times to cover this story during the crucial first days after it broke. At some moments in history, when war and peace hang in the balance, journalism delayed is journalism denied.

Overall, the sparse U.S. coverage that did take place seemed eager to downplay the significance of the Observer's revelations. On March 4, the Washington Post ran a back-page 514-word article headlined "Spying Report No Shock to U.N.," while the Los Angeles Times published a longer piece that began by emphasizing that U.S. spy activities at the United Nations are "long-standing."

The U.S. media treatment has contrasted sharply with coverage on other continents. "While some have taken a ho-hum attitude in the U.S., many around the world are furious," says Ed Vulliamy, one of the Observer reporters who wrote the March 2 article. "Still, almost all governments are extremely reluctant to speak up against the espionage. This further illustrates their vulnerability to the U.S. government."

To Daniel Ellsberg, the leaking of the NSA memo was a hopeful sign. "Truth-telling like this can stop a war," he said. Time is short for insiders at intelligence agencies "to tell the truth and save many many lives." But major news outlets must stop dodging the information that emerges. ■