

115. Memorandum for the Files by the President's Assistant for Communications (Gergen)¹

Washington, April 14, 1982

SUBJECT

ABC Story on U.S.—British Cooperation

This is a recap of my activities on Tuesday, April 13 regarding ABC's story on the U.S. providing help to the British with regard to the dispute on the Falklands.²

At approximately 5:00 p.m. Tuesday, Jerry O'Leary came into my office looking very concerned and said, "I've got a hot one that we have to do something about."³ He then explained that Carl Bernstein had called him to say they had a story from their sources (which included U.S. government sources plus a British source) that the U.S. was providing ELINT information and AWACS data to the British and had American sailors on the British ships.⁴ These were the only three aspects of the story that were discussed with me. Jerry was very concerned because he thought publication of the story would damage our diplomatic efforts in Argentina and might lead to an attack on the U.S. embassy there. He thought it imperative that the story be denied and that we make every effort to keep it off the air.

I agreed with him on both points and said that if he could definitely confirm that it wasn't true and that he had proper guidance from NSC, he should deny it. He said he was satisfied that he could vouch for its untruthfulness. Since he had taken the first call from Bernstein, I

¹ Source: Reagan Library, David Gergen Files, [Correspondence and Memos 1982] Falklands. No classification marking.

² In his personal diary entry for April 14, Reagan wrote of this episode: "We really have a tough problem and it hasn't been made any easier by the press. In what I think is a most irresponsible act—engineered by Bernstein of the Post, they have charged that we are lending aid to Britain's Navy in the Falklands dispute. This of course has set the Argentinians on fire. The charge is false. We are providing Eng. with a communications channel via satellite but that is part of a regular routine that existed before the dispute. To have cancelled it would have been taken as supporting the Argentine." (Reagan, *Diaries*, p. 123)

³ Attached but not printed is an April 14 memorandum from O'Leary to Gergen, detailing O'Leary's activities relating to the *ABC Nightline* story.

⁴ The following day, April 15, an article citing unnamed "Administration officials" appeared in the *New York Times* asserting the United States was providing the British with a "wide range of intelligence." "Those officials," the article continued, "said that the sharing of intelligence with Britain, including that from aerial surveillance, electronic intercepts, covert agents and diplomats, was based on cooperation dating back to World War II. 'It's become routine,' said an informed official." ("U.S. Providing British a Wide Range of Intelligence," *New York Times*, April 15, p. A11)

suggested that he call Bernstein back with the denial and in the meantime, I would talk with the managerial side of the house to see if we could dissuade them from using it. I tried to call the deputy bureau chief here in Washington (Bob Zellnick) since the bureau chief is with our traveling team in Europe; Zellnick was on his way to Europe, so I asked for the next person in charge and was given to John Armstrong (whom I have never met before). I explained to Armstrong the seriousness of the story, said that I was informed that it was wrong and that we would view its publication—in view of our denial—as detrimental to our national interests. As a double pre-caution, I then called Bernstein briefly to re-inforce O’Leary’s denial: I told him that I didn’t know all the facts but that I had it on good authority the story was untrue and our denial was a good one.

About an hour later, I was informed—I think by Mort Allin—that ABC was planning to run the story, that the matter was serious, and we needed to huddle on it. At that point, I recommended we meet with Judge Clark, John Poindexter, etc., to see if we couldn’t come up with a stronger denial from the White House that might knock it off the air. Specifically, I thought that a denial straight from Clark might keep it from running.

As Judge Clark was unavailable, Mort, Jerry and I gathered in Poindexter’s office where we had a rather lengthy exchange before we saw Clark. While in Clark’s office, there was a tentative decision that the Judge would make a statement in time for the 7:00 p.m. news, and I called ABC to alert them that something might be coming from us—so they would be sure to be ready. It was at that point they told us (Poindexter and I were on the line) what the actual contents of the story were. It turned out that the story they were running had nothing to do with any of the three points we had denied but were four additional points that I had never heard about before in any of our conversations.⁵

After we all stewed for a while, it was agreed after 7:00 p.m. by the group that we would not issue any additional statement but would instead have a no comment on the story they had run. We were also greatly perturbed that the story quoted a Pentagon spokesman to the effect that the story was correct and said other administration officials were confirming it. This, of course, made the White House denial sound very hollow and undercut us badly. (To me it was the second time in the day we had been undercut by the agencies: first, when someone

⁵ The April 13 ABC *World News Tonight* story at 7 p.m. reported that the United States was providing the United Kingdom with a communications link to its submarines, intelligence on Argentine military activity, weather forecasting, and supplies on Ascension Island.

leaked out all the information to ABC and then when those outside the building confirmed it.)

With the show over, I was in a position where I owed ABC a call on two counts: (1) to tell them that we in fact were not going to have a statement but were not commenting the story; and (2) to tell them that we would not place a spokesman on Nightline (Nightline had been calling others during the day about this and still did not have a firm answer from the White House).

At approximately 7:30 p.m., I called ABC and spoke with Bernstein and Susan Mercandetti of the Nightline staff to make both of the above points. Bernstein informed me at that point that they had been getting very mixed signals from the administration during the day and they suspected that our denials in the afternoon were lies since others in the administration were confirming their story. I explained to him that our denials earlier in the day were with regard to the ELINT, AWACS and American soldiers; I also explained that I really didn't know much about the points that he did report but that our official posture was one of "no comment" (as we had agreed with NSC).

Other than some later conversations with Mort and Jerry, that was the end of my contact with the matter until about 10:30 p.m. when I had a call from our White House duty officer (Pete Roussel) who said that UPI had it from ABC that the White House had confirmed their earlier story. Pete and I were both indignant because that had not been the thrust of our conversation, and I agreed to call them yet once again. I then spoke in a joint call with Bernstein and Ted Koppel of Nightline to say: I want to make only this point. Earlier in the day we denied a story that we understood you were going to run; you then did not run it. Instead you ran something else; our posture on that story, I want to emphasize, is one of no comment, and I want to be sure you understand that. They said that they did but that they had had calls after their evening news from administration sources who confirmed their story (and they had even had one apology). I said I had no way of knowing what others in the administration might have told them, but I wanted to be sure they understood our position was one of no comment. That ended the conversation and my involvement in the matter except for a subsequent conversation with Roussel to close the loop so that he could continue to no comment the substance of the story.

I cannot vouch for what others may have told ABC, but I do know these two things:

—We would never have been in this mess unless someone/ones had not first spilled a lot of sensitive information to the network. This is not information that anyone in the White House (outside NSC) had; it came, I presume, from an outside agency.

—Secondly, our whole effort to deny a story from the White House (or to no comment it) will never be credible when those outside the

White House (e.g., a “Pentagon spokesman”) tell reporters that the story is true.

Our problem is those who are causing damage, not those who are trying to contain it.