Peter Bourne's Mistake: A Prescription for Trouble

Peter G. Bourne, a psychiatrist in the White House and one of the few persons ever to hold the title of special assistant to the President for health, was to many a symbol of mental health politically come of age. As a close personal friend of President and Mrs. Carter, as well as political adviser, Bourne was in a position to tailor his responsibilities to his own interests, among them: drug abuse, community mental health programs, international health (*Science*, 5 August 1977). He favored decriminalization of marijuana, which he has called safer than tobacco, while at the same time taking a hard line against barbiturates whose availability he thought should be strictly limited because too many people die from an overdose of sleeping pills. He designed the President's Commission on Mental Health to give high-level visibility to the need for research and service of the emotionally ill.

And then Bourne blew it all. Displaying what can at best be charitably called a lapse of judgment, Bourne wrote a prescription for Quaalude, a widely abused nonbarbiturate sedative that is classified as a controlled substance under the law, to one Sarah Brown—a fictitious person. (Quaalude is wrongly thought to be an aphrodisiac.) Through a sequence of events that seem to have involved bad timing more than anything else, Bourne was caught and, in the aftermath of the scandal he created, had to resign. He then proceeded to offer an explanation for his behavior that, had it been calculated to do so, could not have set the cause of psychiatry back more. He wrote the prescription to a fictitious person—he described it as a "pseudonym"—to conceal the fact that his real patient, his White House assistant, had been treated by a psychiatrist.

In a formal statement issued on 19 July after the Washington *Post* broke the story, Bourne declared that he wanted to protect his patient's confidentiality "both with regard to her taking medication and to the creation of a record anywhere that she had been seen by a psychiatrist." The next day, after submitting his resignation, Bourne elaborated on this point in an interview with the *New York Times*. "She was terrified of the thought that some day, on some security clearance check, she would be asked if she had ever undergone treatment for emotional problems," Bourne said. "And that, of course, is part of our totally hypocritical system. We say we should be open about emotional illness and have it treated without stigma, but we tend always to punish and stigmatize those who are open about it," he concluded with no apparent acknowledgement that his own behavior, whether he intended it or not, reinforced that system. It is no small irony that had Bourne been "open" enough to simply write his assistant a prescription in her own name, none of this would have happened. But Bourne, whose friends say he is something of a pushover when it comes to responding to those in need, apparently thought it best to accommodate the fears of an overwrought aide.

It seems that Bourne's assistant, Ellen Metsky, was having what he described as "emotional problems" that made it hard for her to sleep. It also seems that the demands of her White House job made it hard for her to find time to go to the drug store. So, Metsky gave the "Sarah Brown" prescription to a friend named Toby Long and Long, a resident of the Georgetown section of Washington, took it to a pharmacy in Woodbridge, Virginia, where she works. There, the pharmacist, alert for people from Washington trying to fill illicit prescriptions out of town, became suspicious. Long was arrested on the spot that day—11 July—and Virginia police began an inquiry into the matter that was kept under wraps by the White House until the *Post* story a week later.

According to the federal code, as well as Virginia law, a prescription for a controlled substance must contain the name and address of the patient, as well as the name, address, and narcotics registration number of the physician. Although Bourne insists he did nothing illegal, writing such a prescription to a fictitious person is a felony. It is not yet clear whether law enforcement officials will prosecute.

The entire episode has called into

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question Bourne's medical and political judgment, given his position but, more to the point, poses a serious question aboout the "hypocritical system" that drove him to such lengths in the first place in the name of confidentiality. Nothing in Bourne's response suggests that he sees any duty as presidential health adviser to change the fact that psychiatric treatment might imperil one's chances of getting security clearance or to create a climate that allows individuals to seek therapy without fear of being stigmatized.

Instead, he took the occasion to observe that "If I hadn't worked in the White House, no question would ever have been raised about this," and to try to justify his action by distorting the American Medical Association's code of ethics. "Section 9 of the Principles of Medical Ethics prevents a doctor from revealing the confidences entrusted to him 'in the course of medical attendance,' " he said in an official statement that looked like a deliberate effort at distortion because of what it left out. The full AMA principle reads, "A physician may not reveal confidences entrusted to him in the course of medical attendance or deficiencies he may observe in the character of patients *unless he is required to do so by law*" (emphasis added).

Bourne also has come under attack for choosing Quaalude rather than some other sedative for his patient, even though, as he has pointed out, 1.3 million Quaalude prescriptions were written last year. It is a difficult question for an outsider to judge, but it it true that many physicians have turned to other drugs in place of Quaalude. According to scientists knowledgeable in the field, Quaalude was believed to have advantages over barbiturates, especially with respect to REM or deep sleep. As one pharmacologist put it, "Barbiturates knock the hell out of REM sleep. Theoretically, Quaalude doesn't, but that assumption doesn't seem to be holding up. In any event, there are a number of perfectly good sleeping pills that aren't controlled substances."

Whether Bourne's choice of Quaalude was medically sound or not, he was plainly irked by the fact that within 24 hours of the fictitious prescription story's breaking, newspapers were full of stories questioning his medical judgment as well as his legal and ethical behavior. His letter of resignation suggests he departed the White House beset by the "seige mentality" other Administrations have felt but without acknowledgement that it was his own actions that were his untimely undoing. He wrote:

Dear Mr. President:

I regret that I must tender you my resignation. You are aware of the difficulty which I face regarding a prescription written in good faith to a troubled person. I believe that you have known me long enough to know that even though I make mistakes, they are of the heart and not of the mind. . . .

Last evening . . . and this morning I watched and read the press and television reports of my problem. In the last 18 hours, I have seen law enforcement officers release to the world the name of my patient, other articles containing the grossest innuendo and obviously emanating from law enforcement sources, a prosecuting attorney discuss my case on national television, references not merely to the wisdom of my medical judgment, and articles about the abuse of methaqualone with no mention of the 1.3 million physician prescriptions for the medication last year. Now the attacks move from my medical conduct to my personal conduct.

Underlying all of these developments are constant and unrelenting attacks upon me by those who seek to hurt you through my disparagement. . . .

I presume that somehow the traditional system of justice will work toward my vindication. Finally, my friend, I know that you know that it is ever more difficult for people of good will to enter public service. . . .

I fear for the future of the nation far more than I do for the future of

Your friend,
PETER G. BOURNE

Although Bourne has resigned, the episode is not yet over. Legal questions remain to be resolved but, more important, are questions about what will happen in the White House with respect to drug policy, initiatives in international health, and other matters in which Bourne was so active. As yet, there is no word on that.—BARBARA J. CULLITON

American-Soviet Relations: The Canceled Computer

The art of reprisal, as understood everywhere from childrens' playgrounds to the arenas of international politics, requires being nasty enough to your opponent for what he did to you that you don't lose face with your friends, yet not being so mean that you drive him to the next step in the reprisal cycle.

The White House's recent actions against the Soviet Union—killing the sale of a largish computer and canceling visits to Moscow by the President's science adviser and others—seem well calculated to this end. The measures accord with the widespread preconceptions that the Soviet Union desperately needs American computers and scientific exchanges, and yet they in fact do the Russians no substantive damage.

But the reprisals, even if politically necessary, are not cost free. Sale of the $6.8 million Sperry-Univac computer to Tass, like any other item of trade, would have been mutually beneficial, and its cancellation has disturbed the computer industry and the Commerce Department alike. Commerce Secretary Juanita Kreps is said by an aide to have agreed to Carter's actions only with grave reservations. As for scientists, though deeply concerned about Shcharansky and the more important case of Yuriy Orlov, they are far from wishing to see exchanges with the Soviet Union brought to a halt.

Trade restrictions have often been the government's first thought when desiring to express disapproval with other countries. This is less widely regarded as an excellent policy now that America no longer enjoys an abundantly positive balance of trade. "No longer can we afford to cut off exports as a first reaction to not liking someone. For knee-jerk reactions, we really ought to think of something less out of the imperialistic mode," says a Treasury official concerned with raising exports.

Computer exports to the Soviet Union have long been regarded with particular suspicion in Congress. One fear is that the transfer of technology will help the Soviets catch up in an area where they are perceived to be far behind. Another is that the Russians will surreptitiously divert their openly purchased American computers to military uses.

Neither apprehension is unreasonable

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