Where's the outrage?

On media leaks great and small.

Bob Dole may have lost the election to Bill Clinton in 1996, but he asked the campaign’s best question: “Where’s the outrage?” Mr. Dole would be asking that again were he to contemplate the behavior of the press. We’re thinking of the comparison that the journalist Max Boot recently made in his syndicated column between the way the press handled the revelation that Valerie Plame, who worked for the CIA, actually, er, worked for the CIA, and the orgy of obloquy that has greeted news of secret CIA prisons, etc. Only yesterday, Mr. Boot noted, “every high-minded politician, pundit and professional activist was in high dudgeon about the threat posed to national security" by that small-earthquake-in-Chile revelation. What a fuss there was, and what self-righteousness about "threats to national security," the integrity of our intelligence services, etc., etc.

Well, that was yesterday. But today, as Mr. Boot points out, there is a much more serious threat to security.

Major media organs have broken news about secret prisons run by the CIA, the interrogation techniques employed therein, and the use of "renditions" to capture suspects, right down to the tail numbers of covert CIA aircraft. They have also reported on a secret National Security Agency program to monitor calls and e-mails from people in the U.S. to suspected terrorists abroad, and about the Pentagon’s Counterintelligence Field Activity designed to protect military bases worldwide.

Much of this information, Mr. Boot notes, concerned classified programs whose revelation "could provide real aid to our enemies," by the way, who think nothing of plowing airplanes into skyscrapers when they can commandeer the planes and who content themselves with beheading innocent civilians on Al-Jazeera when nothing more murderous is at hand.

So where’s the outrage? Where, as Mr. Boot put it, is "the righteous indignation from the Plame Platoon about the spilling of secrets in wartime and its impassioned calls for an independent counsel to prosecute the leakers?" Where, indeed. Like Mr. Boot, we suspect that it will be a long time coming.
Because when it comes to outrage, it is a one-way street.

The rule of thumb seems to be that although it’s treasonous for pro-Bush partisans to spill secrets that might embarrass an administration critic, it’s a public service for anti-Bush partisans to spill secrets that might embarrass the administration. The determination of which secrets are OK to reveal is, of course, to be made not by officials charged with protecting our nation but by journalists charged with selling newspapers.

Mr. Boot is right to say “of course.” But how much had to happen to our culture—to our instincts for self-preservation as well as to our notions of journalistic integrity—for that depressing judgment to stand?