

Foul-ups in the Pentagon

CONFIRM OR DENY: Informing the People on National Security. By Phil G. Goulding. Harper & Row. 369 pp. \$7.95.

By John Chancellor

This is a disturbing book.

- An American photographic reconnaissance plane flies over the French atomic plant at Pierrelatte, and the French are furious. The American Air Force tells the office of the Secretary of Defense in the Pentagon that the plane was forced off course by a thunderstorm, and the news is duly announced in Washington. In fact, the skies were clear, and the incident occurred because of a communications mix-up. But the Secretary of Defense was given wrong information.

- The American communications reconnaissance ship *Liberty* is cruising off the coast of Sinai during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The Pentagon sends orders for it to move farther off shore. But the orders are sent by mistake first to the Pacific, back to Fort Meade, Md., and finally to a shore station in Morocco. But the *Liberty* was listening for signals from Ethiopia which never came. Israeli planes and ships attacked the *Liberty*, and many men were killed or injured.

- The Pentagon orders the Commander-in-Chief, U. S. Pacific Command, to investigate Soviet charges that American planes strafed a Russian ship in a North Vietnamese harbor. CINCPAC replies that no American planes were over the harbor, which is announced by the Pentagon. Two weeks later, the Secretary of Defense discovers that American planes *had* been firing at anti-aircraft guns in the harbor, and could, indeed, have hit the Russian ship.

Phil Goulding was Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs when these things happened, and his book is a remarkably candid and unsettling chronicle of one foul-up after another. Nobody's perfect, but there are times, reading Goulding's memoir, when you wonder if the Pentagon isn't lowering the national average.

What is truly disturbing about some of these incidents is the degree to which the office of the Secretary of Defense is either uninformed or misinformed. While it

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Secretary of Defense McNamara during a Pentagon news conference, 1965

is surely difficult to maintain instant communication with about five million people in the defense establishment, uniformed and civilian, in just about every place on earth, Goulding destroys the image we have, or the hope, perhaps, that somewhere, somebody must know what's happening. For people who worry about Presidents with fingers on the nuclear button, this kind of reading leads to bad dreams.

Goulding says, "In our office, the Secretary's office or the White House, we never knew how much we did not know." He served for four years as the senior public relations officer of the Department of Defense, and of those years, he says, "I misled and misinformed the American people a good many times in a good many ways — through my own lack of foresight, through carelessness, through relaying incomplete information which the originators considered complete, through transmitting reports which had been falsified deliberately at lower levels." That last phrase is very plain talk in the growing community of former Defense officials who are jotting down their recollections of public service.

Moreover, Goulding says that in almost every instance he operated from the very same reports which

were going to his bosses, Secretaries McNamara and Clifford.

Goulding believes Lyndon Johnson fired McNamara because the Secretary of Defense had lost faith in the bombing of North Vietnam. Further, Goulding is convinced that McNamara was opposed to the military request for 206,000 more troops for Vietnam in 1968, and would have resigned if the President had pushed through any significant increase in troop levels.

As it was, McNamara was on his way out, being replaced by Clark Clifford. Goulding first regarded Clifford as a hard-line crony of the President who would be inflexible on the war. As it turned out, it took only two months for Clifford to decide that the effort in Vietnam was no longer essential to the national security of the United States.

Goulding belonged to that small, influential group of Pentagon civilians who were against further escalation of the war as early as 1967 (Cyrus Vance, Paul Nitze, Paul Warnke and the late John McNaughton). His testimony confirms the brilliant reconstruction of that period written by the former Under Secretary of the Air Force, Townsend Hoopes, called *The Limits of Intervention*. Curiously, Goulding makes no mention of a long paper he wrote on the perils of escalation. According to Hoopes, the Goulding paper was a decisive document.

Nor is there any mention in either book of a proposal from Dean Rusk to limit the bombing of North Vietnam, as described by Lyndon Johnson on television. In fairness, Goulding and Hoopes might not have known of such an unexpected development from such an uncharacteristic source, but neither account supports the Johnson version of what happened.

What does come through in Goulding's book is the picture of a very human, often disorganized, divided Pentagon, being held together by civilians in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The book is flawed by too much insider's stuff, too many organizational outlines, plugs for parts of the bureaucracy — but it is nevertheless vivid contemporary history, of great value to people who wonder what's really going on in the Pentagon. We can, perhaps, take some perverse comfort in the fact that even the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs didn't always know what was going on himself. *