

THE FLASH FIRE of interest in the Pentagon Papers is subsiding. The documents have been published by Bantam Books, and a cynic in our business might well argue that an issue is journalistically dead once it has had time to crawl between the covers of a book — even a quickie paperback's covers.

There is a feeling, now, that the whole thing was overblown, its importance exaggerated. Polls, as usual, show that a great lump of the people never cared enough to figure out what the Pentagon Papers are. Most of the staff in the Papers was already known or guessed at. The Times probably overstated its case against Johnson. What wonder will fill the next nine days?

This attitude is understandable, but mistaken. The Papers did give a psychic jolt to people, at least to those with political interests. Yet these are precisely the ones who should have known (in general) what the Papers contained. Why did they give even nine days of wonder to such people?

Because the Pentagon Papers are just one of a series of blows we are going to receive. Even the knowledgeable have fooled themselves about Vietnam, have tried not to know what they should have known.

There is a certain "feel" about the way this country wages war. If the war is not fought "all-out," if we do not advert to it constantly, we advert to it hardly at all. Korea, by contrast with World War II, was a low-profile war. But Vietnam has been a no-profile war. We thought about it, halfheartedly, only when we had to; and welcomed any distraction from it. It has no glorious songs, myths, symbols. Its one quiet emblem of pride — the Green Beret — was discredited, and had to be retired from public consciousness.

A belief goes along with this "feel" of the kind of war it was — a belief more based on our feelings than on fact. We thought the war an accident, something we stumbled into by a mere chain of misfortunes. It was a war not willed or decided on, something that grew of its own accord, then sucked us insensibly into it.

That's what we believed, or wanted to believe. And nothing could be farther from the truth. No war was so consciously studied, computerized, scrutinized, controlled.

JOHNSON PROBABLY did not consciously lie in the 1964 campaign — he wanted to avoid war, and thought he could. Still, his rhetoric soothed men into thinking an Indochina War was out of the question. A vote against Goldwater was a vote against any such war, and would end the matter.

For a whole year the Institute of Policy Studies has been conducting a study of the Vietnam decisions. It will be published in two volumes as "The Planning of the Vietnam War." It uses the Pentagon Papers, but goes beyond them, interviewing many principals in the decision-making process. A portion of the first volume appears in the current New York Review of Books, and should be read very carefully.

The study's editor, Ralph Stavins, shows how President Kennedy reacted to the bad advice he felt was given him on the Bay of Pigs. He would center all military decisions in the White House. He would have his very own White House General (Maxwell Taylor) and his crack corps of White House shock troops (the Special Forces, to whom Kennedy restored the berets taken from them by Eisenhower. Ike feared military elites, from his experience with men like MacArthur and Patton). Everything now would be studied thirty ways by the President's own men, with the President himself making each key decision.

This was not the unconscious or accidental war. It was the over-conscious, fully computerized war, the war of professors and experts. A new kind of war, with a new kind of consciousness, and new kinds of responsibility. This is the haunting message of the Pentagon Papers, a message that will be reinforced because the Papers are incomplete. There is much more of the story to be told, and much difficult pondering to be done — since the word for one kind of responsibility is guilt. The computerized war "went wrong." And it may not be enough to say the computer went wrong.



Post 7-19-75
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Was Computer Wrong on War?