

Retired Admiral Discounts Viet War Link to Defense

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LOS ANGELES, March 2—A retired Navy admiral told the Pentagon papers trial jury today that "nothing the United States did in Vietnam had any relation to the national defense."

Rear Adm. Gene LaRocque, now director of the Center for Defense Information in Washington and a defense witness for Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony J. Russo Jr., said that in his view, "to defend the United States, you have to have a credible foe against the United States."

LaRocque was put on the witness stand by the defense in an effort to show that disclosure of the Pentagon papers and other top-secret documents duplicated in 1969 by Ellsberg and Russo had no effect on this country's "national defense interests."

But for two days now, he has been under intensive cross-examination by the chief prosecutor in the case, David R. Nissen, who apparently has sought to show that LaRocque has a narrow view of what the "national defense" is.

The retired Navy man, eager to return to his ailing wife in Washington, has become increasingly exasperated with the prosecutor's questions, but has stuck to his opinions.

Today the cross-examination produced exactly what Nissen declared at the outset should not be involved in this trial—detailed discussion in open court of the propriety of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war and other American military policies.

In one answer, LaRocque told the jury, "The sending of troops to South Vietnam did not involve the national defense of the United States in

any way. We were not threatened in Vietnam. We went through a very tortuous period resolving whether we should be involved in that adventure or not."

Nissen, who has portrayed the Center for Defense Information as a group that opposes a strong U.S. defense posture, repeatedly asked the admiral whether he had opposed the American role in Southeast Asia.

"In 1965, Sir, I volunteered to serve in Vietnam," LaRocque replied at one point. "I sent my oldest son to Vietnam where he was wounded . . . My next eldest sons is now a lieutenant in the Navy."

Defense attorneys, who want the war to be litigated during the trial, raised no objections to Nissen's line of questioning.

But as the prosecutor pressed his question again, U.S. District Court Judge W. Matt Byrne Jr. cut in to "Impose my own objection."

Turning to the jury, the judge said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are not here to determine whether someone opposed or didn't oppose the conflict in Vietnam."

Given another opportunity to question the defense witness, Leonard I. Weinglass, Russo's attorney, asked LaRocque how he had formulated his opinion that the national defense of the United States was not at stake in Vietnam.

The admiral said he was relying in part on the statements of the late President Johnson and former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara.

President Johnson "said we were there to help the South Vietnamese," LaRocque explained, and McNamara "clearly indicated it was a Vietnamese war."