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WASHINGTON — The top secret documents stolen a few weeks ago from Daniel Ellsberg contain startling evidence that the Pentagon in 1958 tried to trick President Eisenhower into using nuclear weapons against Communist China.

The military brass plotted, according to the documents, to test their new tactical nuclear weapons in combat. The opportunity came in 1958 during a crisis over two tiny, nationalist-held islands, Quemoy and Matsu, which the Communists threatened to seize.

The generals deliberately deceived the White House, which was misled, therefore, into tentatively approving the use of nuclear weapons to defend the islands. In other words, the United States was ready to fight a nuclear war 16 years ago over two insignificant islands, which today draw no more than a shrug from our policy-makers.

The story of the Pentagon's deception, of course, has been swept under the top secret stamp. But in 1967, the shocking details were summarized in a secret Rand study by Morton Halpern, who later was to become a top White House security adviser.

While Daniel Ellsberg was with Rand, he had official access to the Halpern report and later made a copy of it in hopes he could someday testify about it to Congress. Halpern, who had classified the two-inch thick document in the first place, has now sought unsuccessfully to declassify it, but had no idea Ellsberg had a copy.

A few weeks ago, sneak thieves broke into Ellsberg's home and hauled off some valuables, including his private papers. Among them was a secret photo copy. Police recovered the papers, which the Justice Department then sought to obtain. But Ellsberg successfully arranged for Congress to get custody.

The explosive Rand report gives a chilling account of the Quemoy-Matsu crisis. Here are the highlights:

The two offshore islands came under intensive Communist artillery attack in 1958. The United States, which was sworn to help General Chiang Kai-shek defend the islands, assumed the Communists were softening them up for an imminent invasion.

This led to some urgent contingency planning in the Pentagon and the White House. The military brass, according to the report, wanted to sue tactical nuclear weapons to destroy China's underground munitions dumps and gun emplacements.

The Pentagon, therefore, falsely informed the White House that the available Air force planes had no bomb

racks that could accommodate high-explosive conventional bombs powerful enough to knock out the underground installations. It would take "nukes," the Pentagon insisted, to do the job.

A copy of this false Pentagon message reached a top commander in the Pacific, who was also eager to test tactical nuclear weapons against the Chinese mainland, but who was too honest to mislead the White House.

By secret "back channel" cable, privy only to the top brass, he informed them that they were wrong about the bomb racks. There were adequate racks, he reminded the Pentagon, to handle the most powerful conventional bombs.

The Pentagon fired back a hot order to the honest commander to "shut up," according to the Rand report, and the deception of the White House continued.

Impressed by this and other false

information from the Pentagon, President Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and their advisers went ahead with tentative plans to use nuclear weapons against Communist China.

Wisely, Eisenhower kept in his own hands the final decision when the nuclear button was to be pushed. Meanwhile, the Quemoy-Matsu crisis happily simmered down.

While the Pentagon maneuvered the nation to the brink of nuclear war, the American people were kept in blissful ignorance of the danger. One of the most compelling comments on this secrecy was made by Christiana Herter, the thoughtful, decent man who played a subordinate role in the 1958 crisis before succeeding Dulles as secretary of state the following year.

Those who lived through the Quemoy-Matsu developments, he once recounted, were acutely aware that they were in the midst of America's first nuclear crisis since the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet to this day, the American people haven't been told how close they came to nuclear war.

Footnote: The deception described in the Rand report has been all too typical of the military brass. They continue to use "back channel" communications to exchange messages that they don't want their civilian superiors to see.

In the 1950s, the admirals ordered the Marine receptionist in Navy Secretary Francis Matthews' office to slip them a complete list of people who called upon the secretary and the exact number of minutes they remained.

More recently, the Joint Chiefs used the same system to spy on Henry Kissinger. A Navy yeoman actually rifled through burn bags and pilfered papers from Kissinger's briefcase for the brass.

Unfortunately, the investigation of this incident was entrusted to Senate Armed Services Chairman John Stennis, D-Miss., an apologist for the Pentagon, who ignored evidence implicating Adm. Thomas H. Moorer and let the former Joint Chiefs chairman off the hook.

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