
Vietnam Autopsy: Feeling Cold Air

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The reviewer has covered the Pentagon for a decade and served as *The Washington Post's* military consultant inside the courtroom when the *Pentagon Papers* case was being argued in secret sessions.

The worst way I know of to spend 12 hours is to read the Gravel edition of the *Pentagon Papers* at night; drive past a burial ceremony at Arlington Cemetery in the morning on the way to the Pentagon, and then lis-

ten to the Secretary of Defense explain the latest rationale for going back to bombing North Vietnam.

Yet, now that I have done that repeatedly, I wish the American government could shut down long enough to allow the policy makers to read the Gravel edition. Reading them of a piece gives the *Pentagon Papers* a chilling impact—almost like feeling the cold air from the grave. The papers are an autopsy report on Vietnam policy making. They show over and over again that one action in Washington leads to many reactions in Indochina—most of them unexpected.

Books

THE PENTAGON PAPERS: The Sen. Gravel Edition; The Defense Department History of United States Decision-making on Vietnam, Volumes I-IV.

(Beacon Press, 2 899 pp., hardcover \$45, paperback \$20)

It is bromidic to recall the old truism about those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. But that is the worth of something as long as the Gravel edition—the opportunity to learn, to profit. Sadly, there is little evidence that today's policy makers have read one paper, however.

Otherwise, why would President Nixon dig himself a credibility gap by declaring so quickly that the recent bombing offensive was a huge success? His military leaders assessing the results of the December raids have a far less rosy view of them. The *Pentagon Papers* flag the dangers of overstating

From the Grave

the case, with the Johnson administration's bright portrait of the results of bombing North Vietnam's petroleum facilities in 1966 but one example. Former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, after approving the raids, ended up opposing more of them on grounds the results fell far short of the promises of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

If the *Pentagon Papers* had been read all the way through, how could there be any surprise about the dynamics of the Vietnam war, such as more offense in the air will mean more defense or the ground? Yet recently

the Nixon administration has decried the stepped-up antiaircraft activity over the North—giving it as one reason for more bombing of North Vietnam.

"The inarticulate major premise has always been that bombing will somehow, someday and in some manner create pressure on Hanoi to stop the war," former Under Secretary of State George Ball wrote in a memo printed in Vol. IV of the Gravel edition.

"It is also widely accepted that for bombing to have this desired political effect,

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we must gradually extend our attack to increasingly vital targets. In this way—it is contended—we will constantly threaten Hanoi that if it continues its aggression, it will face mounting costs . . .

"As more SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) are installed," continued Ball, "we will be compelled to take them out in order to safeguard our aircraft. This will mean killing more Russians and Chinese and putting greater pressure on those two nations for increased effort. Each extension of our bombing to more sensitive areas will increase the risk to our aircraft and compel a further extension of bombing to protect the expanded bombing activities we have staked out . . ."

Such argumentation has been printed in other forms before, of course. But somehow the arguments on the larger canvas of the Gravel edition come through with more power, perhaps because the reader feels the atmosphere surrounding them. He also realizes with discomfort, that the same kind of arguments are going on right now. The names for the raids have changed—with "protective reaction" one of them—but the same dynamics Ball talked about are there.

Also, in leaping from Volume I to today's rhetoric, the reader travels all the way from the 1949 black hat vs. white hat rationale for the war to the scaled-down objective of giving the South Vietnamese a chance to decide their own destiny. "The extension of Communist authority in China represents a grievous political defeat for us; if Southeast Asia also is swept by communism we shall have suffered a major political rout, the repercussions of which will be felt throughout the rest of the world, especially in the Middle East and in a then critically exposed Aus-

tralia," asserts a National Security Council study of 1949.

The same memo quoted in Volume I seems to mock our Vietnam war over-the-hill gang as it states: "We must approach the problem from the Asiatic point of view insofar as possible and should refrain from taking the lead in movements which must of necessity be of Asian origin. It will therefore be of our interest wherever possible to encourage. The peoples of India, Pakistan, the Philippines and other Asian states to take the leadership in meeting the common problems of the area . . ."

Later on, in Volume IV of the Gravel edition, the U.S. policy makers are rejecting that advice and taking the leads on all fronts in Indochina. At one point, in 1966, the late John McNaughton, one of McNamara's deputies, tossed aside the broad worries of 1949 about the danger of communism sweeping Southeast Asia. He wrote in a memo quoted in Volume IV:

" . . . The reasons why we went into Vietnam to the present depth are varied; but they are now largely academic. Why we have not withdrawn from Vietnam is, by all odds, one reason: (1) to preserve our reputation as a guarantor, and thus to preserve our effectiveness in the rest of the world . . ."

McNamara, a few pages later, is quoted on the difficulty of trying to perform as "guarantor" by bombing a primitive nation: "The price paid for improving our image as a guarantor has been damage to our image as a country which eschews armed attacks on other nations . . ." The action-reaction dilemma is constant.

Such juxtaposition of memos, together with hearing the current Vietnam debate, is like reading in stereo. The quoted material in the Gravel edition is tied together by the narrative of the McNamara task force. The New York Times, in its paperback book on the Pen-

tagon Papers, selects quotations from this narrative. Thus, The Times book is shorter and easier to get through, but this compression costs in power. Much closer to the Gravel edition are the Pentagon Papers released by the Pentagon itself, remarkable for completeness. So complete, in fact, that Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird and his general counsel, J. Fred Buzhardt, also deserve plaudits for releasing so much formerly top secret material to the public.

Beyond that, the Pentagon's release raises the questions of why Congress cannot follow suit and publish more of the secret committee hearings on its Vietnam debates, and why the federal courts cannot release at least a partial transcript of the secret hearings on the Pentagon Papers.

Despite their surprising breadth, the Pentagon's 12 volumes are harder to read and not as complete as the Gravel edition—partly because the printing is rough, pages are left out occasionally from the hurry-up publication effort, and the 8½ by 10¼ inch size is hard to handle. The Government Printing Office charges \$50 for the set.

One advantage of the Pentagon Papers still classified top secret is their wonderfully complete footnotes—reference aids missed in the three public books of the Pentagon Papers.

But those are mechanical differences. The Gravel edition is still a monumental work peopled with no American heroes; nor geniuses, nor blackhearted, evil men. They come through instead as ordinary Americans striving to understand a situation which keeps getting away from them. There is fumbling, stumbling, orchestrating, deceiving.

If there are any heroes in the work Sen. Mike Gravel (D-Alaska) has made available, they are the GIs and airmen who felt the terror of combat in Vietnam but

did their best in the quagmire not of their making. Most of the civilian and military leaders who sent them there are still in comfortable jobs. Thousands of the men who served in Vietnam at their direction are dead or crippled. The Gravel edition of the Pentagon Papers helps show how it all happened. That is a real contribution.