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A State Department History of the Vietnam War

A week or so ago a man identifying himself only as "Art" telephoned us to say he was sending us something in the mail which he thought might be of interest—a State Department study of the Vietnam War, was the way it was put—and the next day there appeared, in a plain white envelope, a document entitled "An Explanation of the War in Vietnam for Primary School Children." After studying it carefully, we called up the only "Art" we know (an author and playwright who contributes a column of satire to this newspaper) who would do a thing like that, and were told he had left the country. At this point, we were prepared to dismiss the whole thing as a put-on. Just to be sure, we got in touch with a friend at the State Department's Bureau of Public Affairs who swore to the document's authenticity. It was prepared, he said, after the Department had received "thousands" of requests from school children, many of whom had been assigned compositions about the Vietnam War, and from many teachers as well. He said it is in wide circulation. Having in mind the ongoing struggle in the courts over the publication of secret documents and the restraining order which still hangs over us, we inquired whether it contained any classified information. We were informed that it had been assembled entirely from public statements by the President and the Secretary of State and other officials. After careful consideration, we decided to publish it anyway. The full text appears elsewhere on this page today.

Leaving aside the question of whether this document is fit history for impressionable young minds, the thought struck us that it is not entirely unrelated to the classified material from the Pentagon papers which has been appearing in this and other newspapers over the last two weeks. Representing, as it surely does, a thoughtful distillation of the official line on Vietnam over the past 17 years, it marks the other extreme, so to speak, in the broad spectrum of information available about our involvement in the war—a spectrum which runs all the way from the contents of classified cables and

memoranda through the not-for-attribution news stories that grow out of background conversations with un-named officials and on to the public record. In the end, historians will need all of it, for what is becoming so glaringly apparent now is the breadth of the spectrum and the depth of the discrepancy between what was happening and what we were told was happening. That is what is so interesting about the State Department's explanation of the war for school children—it was not only drawn from the public record; it reads like the public record:

"So we decided to help the South Vietnamese people—That way we hoped to keep the war in Viet-Nam from becoming a big war . . . we have done well and the soldiers from the North are not winning anymore . . . if the Communists go back home to the North and leave the South alone, the war will end . . . if we take all of our soldiers out of South Viet-Nam before the peace is made or before we are sure that the South Vietnamese can take care of themselves, we would be breaking our promise to them. Other countries which are our allies would then believe that our word was no good and they would not respect us. . . ."

Well, maybe so. But the single most striking aspect of the Pentagon papers is the evidence they offer that our involvement in the war in Vietnam *did not* happen in the way we were led to believe it happened or would happen or for the reasons that we were given publicly. That is why The Washington Post feels so strongly its obligation to publish that material—not because it is complete, or even balanced in its raw form, but because it contains, in bits and pieces, some harsh, unpleasant facts of recent history which the public has a need, and a right, to know about. And that is why we also feel that the press has a responsibility to work across the full spectrum of information available about the conduct of the government, to seek out what is being withheld as well as to print what is being put forth. For when you start down the road of "prior restraint" you are in great danger of ending a government feeding pap, not only to school children, but to all of us.