

Soul-Searching The Viet War

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In mid-1967, at a time of great personal disenchantment with the Indochina war and rising frustration among his colleagues at the Pentagon, former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara commissioned a major study of how and why the United States had become so deeply involved in Vietnam.

The project took a year to complete and yielded a vast and highly unusual report of government self-analysis.

It was compiled by a team of several dozen officials and researchers, civilian and military many of whom had helped to develop or carry

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out the policies that they were asked to evaluate and some of whom were simultaneously active in the debates that changed the course of those policies.

While McNamara turned over his job to Clark M. Clifford, while the war reached a military peak in the 1968 Tet offensive, while President Johnson cut back the bombing of North Vietnam and announced his plan to retire, and while the peace talks began in Paris, the Pentagon research teams burrowed through Government files.

PROBE

They sought to probe American policy toward Southeast Asia from the World War II pronouncements of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the start of the Vietnam peace talks in the spring of 1968.

They wrote nearly 40 volumes. Most of them the length of an average book and backed up by annexes of cables, memoranda, draft proposals, dissents and other documents.

Their report runs to nearly 7000 pages — 1.5 million words of historical narratives plus a million words of documents — enough to fill a small crate.

Even so, it is not a complete or polished history. It contains many inconsistencies and lacks a single all-embracing summary. Some important situations were assessed from differing angles. Other situations were dealt with only lightly.

The Pentagon's internal critique is documentary record, which the researchers make no effort to supplement with personal interviews, partly because they were pressed for time.

VIEW

The study emerged as a middle-echelon and official view of the war, incorporating material from the top-level files of the Defense Department into which flow documents from the White House, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Some important gaps appear in the study. The researchers did not have access to the complete files of Presidents or to all memoranda of conversations and decisions by the Presidents.

Moreover, there are other important gaps in the copy of the Pentagon study obtained by the New York Times. It lacks the section on the secret diplomacy of the Johnson period.

Throughout the narrative there is ample evidence of vigorous, even acrimonious, debate within the Government — far more than Congress, the press and the public were permitted to discover from official pronouncements.

DEBATE

But the Pentagon account and its accompanying documents also reveal that once the basic objective of policy was set, the internal debate on Vietnam from 1950 until mid-1967 dealt almost entirely with how to reach those objectives rather than with the basic direction of policy.

The study related that American governments from the Truman Administration onward felt it necessary to take action to prevent Communist control of South Vietnam. As the years passed, the study reveals, internal policy papers became more specific in defining this objective. As a rationale for policy, the domino theory — that if South Vietnam fell, other countries would inevitably follow — was repeated in endless variations for nearly two decades.

As some top policy makers came to question the effectiveness of the American effort in mid-1967, the report shows, their policy papers began not only to seek to limit the military strategies on the ground and in the air but also to worry about the impact of the war on American society.

"A feeling is widely and strongly held that 'the establishment' is out of its mind," wrote John T. McNaughton, assistant secretary of defense, in a note to McNamara in early May, 1967. McNaughton, who three years earlier had been one of the principal planners of the air war against North Vietnam, went on to say:

"The feeling is that we are trying to impose some U.S. image on distant peoples we cannot understand (any more than we can the younger generation here at home), and that we are carrying the thing to absurd lengths. Related to this feeling is the increased polarization that is taking place in the United States with seeds of the worst split in our people in more than a century."

At the end of June, 1967, McNamara — deeply disillusioned with the war — decided to commission the Pentagon study of Vietnam policy that McNaughton and other high officials had encouraged him to undertake.

The Pentagon researchers aimed at the broadest possible interpretation of events. They examined not only the policies and motives of American administrations, but also the effectiveness of intelligence, the mechanics and consequences of bureaucratic compromises, the difficulties of imposing American tactics on the South Vietnamese, the governmental uses of the American press, the effects of personality clashes and many other tributaries of their main story.

The authors reveal, for example, that the American intelligence community repeatedly provided the policy makers with what proved to be accurate warnings that desired goals were either unattainable or likely to provoke costly reactions from the enemy.

The Pentagon researchers relate many examples of bureaucratic compromise forged by presidents from the conflicting proposals of their advisers.

In the mid-'50s, they found, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were a restraining force, warning that successful defense of South Vietnam could not be guaranteed under the limits imposed by the 1954 Geneva Accords and agreeing to send in American military advisers only on the insistence of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.

COMPROMISES

In the 1960s the report found, both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson chose partial measures, overriding advice that some military proposals were valid only as packages and could not be adopted piecemeal.

In examining Washington's constant difficulties with the governments in Saigon, the study found the United States so heavily committed to the regime of the moment and so fearful of instability that it was unable to persuade the South Vietnamese to make the political and economic reforms that Americans deemed necessary to win the allegiance of the people.

The research project was organized in the Pentagon's office of International Security Affairs — ISA, as it is known to government insiders — the politico-military affairs branch, whose head is the third-ranking official in the Defense Department. This was Assistant Secretary McNaughton when the study was commissioned and Assistant Secretary Paul C. Warnke when the study was completed.

In the fall of 1968, it was transmitted to Warnke, who reportedly "signed off" on it. Former officials say this meant that he acknowledged completion of the work without endorsing its contents and forwarded it to Clifford.

Although it had been completed during Clifford's tenure, "in everyone's mind it always remained McNamara's study," one official said.

Because of its extreme sensitivity, very few copies were reproduced — from 6 to 15, by various accounts. One copy was delivered by hand to McNamara, then president of the World Bank. His reaction is not known, but at least one other former policy maker was reportedly displeased by the study's candor.