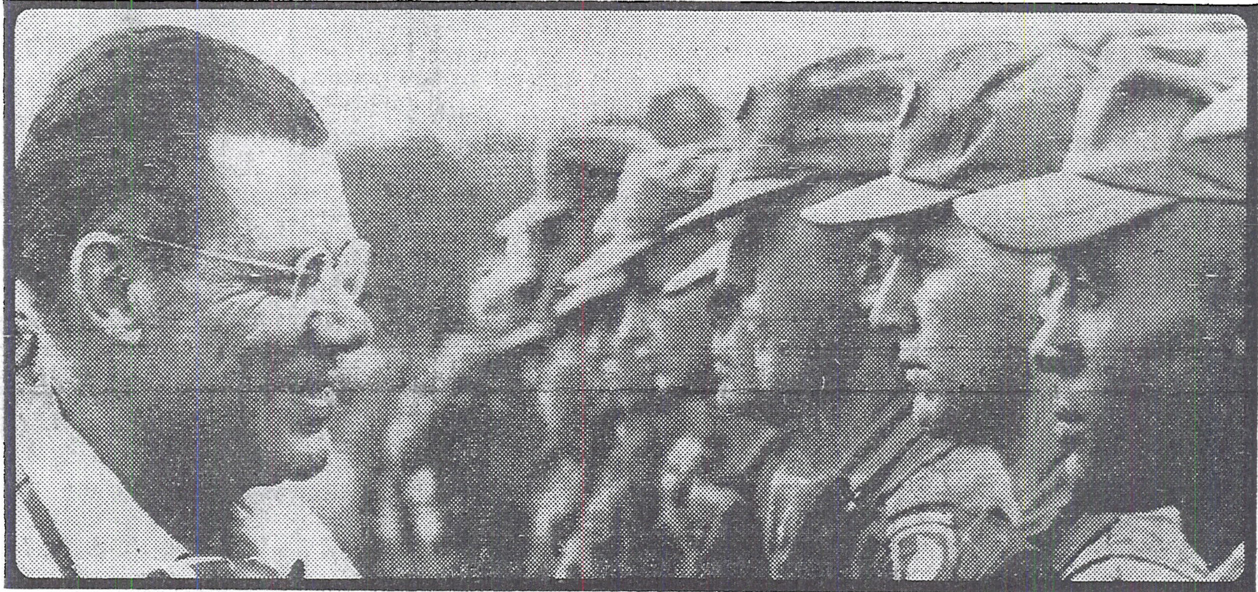
The War: The Record and the U.S.

1965: McNamara inspects American troops in Vietnam



Ellsberg: The Quagmire Myth

By DANIEL ELLSBERG

In South Vietnam, the U. S. had stumbled into a bog. It would be mired down there a long time.
—Nikita Khrushchev to Ambassador Thompson, July 1962

By the middle of the first Indochina War, French journalists, contradicting the generals, were telling French readers of a bog in Indochina. Lucien Bodard's account of the 1946-1950 period—which looks quasi-prophetic today—was entitled "The Quicksand War." By the mid-1960's Americans had similar stories to tell. The parallel account was David Halberstam's "The Making of a Quagmire," published just as the real build-up of American ground forces and air power was beginning.

For a great many, perhaps most Americans, images of "quagmire, morass, quicksand, bog" dominate their perception of America's relation to the second Indochina war. Along with the notion of "stumbling in," these metaphors convey a particular, widely shared understanding of the process of decision-making that has yielded a steadily expanding American military involvement in Indochina.

Yet the quagmire conception is a profoundly misleading one. The factual premises on which it is based, about what the President was told to expect from various courses, are mistaken.

* * *

For one critical decision period, at least—the fall of 1961—information now publicly available is sufficient to test, and indeed to establish, these propositions. That is possible mainly because of the revelation by the "Kennedy historians" of much previously concealed data relating to the decisions. For few other periods are the public data comparably adequate. Thus, until more such materials are made public, readers who have not had official access to them can only regard most of the propositions presented here with respect to periods other than 1961 as hypotheses.

1961: Walt Rostow and McGeorge Bundy confer

The fact is that [the Rostow-Taylor report to President Kennedy] described the sending of U. S. ground combat units as *essential* if the U. S. were to reverse the current downward trend of events. [Taylor] reported that he did not, in fact, believe that the program to save South Vietnam would succeed without it.

A force large enough to have the psychological effects required, Taylor suggested, must be more than a bare token, and must be capable of performing tasks of significant value.

Taylor underlined the urgency by making explicit his recognition of an impressive list of disadvantages of the proposed move. These included an increased engagement of U. S. prestige; the difficulty of resisting pressure to reinforce the first contingent if it were not enough (there was no limit to the possible commitment, he warned, if we sought ultimately to clean up the insurgents, unless we attacked the source in Hanoi); and the risk of escalation into a major war in Asia.

It was in the face of all these possible drawbacks that he made his recommendation to introduce a task force without delay—made it on the grounds that a U. S. program to save South Vietnam simply would not succeed without it.

In the spring of 1961, for an audience at the Fort Bragg Special Forces School and later in public writings, Rostow had described the "sending of men and arms across international boundaries and the direction of guerrilla war from outside a sovereign nation" as a new form of aggression, calling for unilateral retaliation against the "ultimate source of aggression" in the absence of international action. (Apparently the major lesson Rostow and Taylor had learned from the Bay of Pigs operation, which took place about the same time as Rostow's speech, was that Castro, or Khrushchev, had the right to bomb Florida and Washington.)

* * *

The initial program, as a whole, was presented as adequate for the short run; probably inadequate for the long run, requiring major additional measures; almost surely inadequate for both long-run and short-run aims without the vital element of the task force, for which there was no convincing substitute.

President Kennedy bought the program minus the task force.

It must be understood that there was no haziness in internal discussion about the distinction between U. S. ground combat units, on the one hand, and the mixed bag of advisers, logistics, and combat support troops, including intelligence, communications, and helicopter personnel, on the other. These two categories were regarded by all as posing very different risks and benefits; and by October 1961, even prior to Taylor's trip, it was regarded as almost a foregone conclusion that the latter would be supplied

Given the expectation prior to the Taylor-Rostow mission that at least the advisory build-up and other measures short of troops would be approved, and given the recommendations he actually received, it seems likely that the President himself and his high-level advisers regarded his rejection of the proposal to send combat units immediately as his most, perhaps only significant decision of the period (although, as such, it was successfully concealed from the public).

There is no basis whatever for describing the President in this instance as taking a "small step" [Arthur Schlesinger's phrase] because he was promised success with it. His decisions, he was assured, held out the almost certain prospect that new, larger steps, or else retreat, would present

themselves as hard choices in the not-distant future.

It appears, in the light of internal documentation, that the elements of paradox apply virtually across-the-board to major Presidential initiatives on Vietnam over the last two decades. No more than in 1961 were the measures of increased involvment that were actually adopted promised or expected to be adequate "last steps" or, indeed, anything but holding actions, adequate to avoid defeat in the short run but long shots so far as ultimate success was concerned. This is true of each of the major years of decision over that generation:

(1) 1950, when the first $10 million in credits were granted by the Truman Administration to the French and Vietnamese efforts against the Vietminh (in May, a month before the Korean invasion);

(2) 1954, when direct entry into the war was considered and rejected by Eisenhower, followed by a gradually hardening commitment to the support of Diem;

(3) late-1961;

(4) 1963, the Kennedy decision to encourage the overthrow of Diem;

(5) 1965, the Johnson decisions to bomb North Vietnam, then to deploy U. S. troops in limited numbers to South Vietnam and employ U. S. air support, then after mid-July, to accept open-ended ground force commitment;

(6) 1968, when proposals to mobilize reserves and expand the war to Cambodia and Laos were considered and rejected, followed by "Vietnamization" and talks.

Almost regardless of his attitudes on the war, a reader is likely to rise from a survey of internal evidence baffled and troubled, with the question on his mind: "How could they?" How could four Presidents—Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson—in the face of estimates and program analyses and recommendations like these, so persistently have chosen what were almost always presented at the time of decision as long shots, almost surely inadequate in the long run, potentially costly and risky, in favor either of measures purported to be more effective or of lesser involvement?

* * *

Kennedy did not live either to win the election or to leave the war. Instead he willed the war to a President determined not to be the first to lose one, leaving an unchanged U. S. policy toward Vietnam to an insecure successor who had some reason to fear the political consequences—even at the hands of the dead President's heirs, officials and supporters—of publicly abandoning it.

The risk that "losing" Vietnam would pose some risk from a faction within the President's own party was one that Johnson in 1964 shared with Eisenhower in 1954. Even Richard Nixon has seen himself as facing comparable problems in 1969-1971, his special assistant, Henry A. Kissinger, has reported in numerous "backgrounders": "If we had done in our first year what our loudest critics called on us to do, the 13 per cent that voted for Wallace would have grown to 35 or 40 per cent; the first thing the President set out to do was to neutralize that faction."

In any case, it appears that an appropriate abstraction of elements of the initial 1950 decision to intervene —despite the lack of major prior commitment or involvement—fits very well all the major subsequent decisions to escalate or to prolong the war, at least through 1968 and probably beyond.

We have already seen one Presidential ruling at work both in 1950 and 1961: "This is a bad year for me to lose Vietnam to Communism."

In brief: A decade before what Schlesinger calls Kennedy's "low-level crisis" in South Vietnam, the right wing of the Republican party tattooed on the skins of politicians and bureaucrats alike some vivid impressions of what could happen to a liberal administration that chanced to be in office the day a red flag rose over Saigon.

Starting in early 1950, the first Administration to learn painfully this "lesson of China" began to undertake —as in a game of Old Maid—to pass that contingency on to its successor. And each Administration since has found itself caught in the same game.

Rule 1 of that game is: "Do not lose the rest of Vietnam to Communist control before the next election."

* * *

It is not, after all, only Presidents and Cabinet members who have a powerful need and reason to deny their responsibility for this war. And who succeed at it. Just as Presidents and their partisans find comfort and political safety in the quicksand image of the President-as-victim, so Americans at large are reassured in sudden moments of doubt by the same image drawn large, America-as-victim. It is no more real than the first, and neither national understanding nor extrication truly lie that way.

To understand the process as it emerges in the documents behind public statements, the concerns never written that moved decisions, the history scratched on the minds of bureaucrats: to translate that understanding into images that can guide actions close-related to reality, one must begin by seeing that it is Americans, our leaders and ourselves, that build the bog, a trap much more for other victims: our policies, our politics the quagmire in which Indochina drowns.

These are excerpts from an article in Public Policy Kennedy Institute quarterly, by Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, research associate, M.I.T., who has been reported to have given the Pentagon documents to The Times.

NYT

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Shirer: History as the Loser

By WILLIAM L. SHIRER

LENOX, Mass. — Long before the Attorney General turned on The Times to try to suppress publication of classified documents, historians had suffered from the Government's denial of access to confidential records without which they could not write serious history.

By coincidence, at the very moment The Times began publishing its revelations, more than one hundred American historians were meeting in Washington with some of their European colleagues and with officials of the Pentagon and the State Department in an effort to pry loose too-long-classified documents going back to World War II. Not surprisingly, the historians were given the polite run-around to which they have long been accustomed. Many of them hoped The Times would be more successful.

What we have seen in Washington is a conspiracy of officials from Presidents on down to keep the public from learning about what they really did. It was easy to do. Documents were simply "classified" secret. No argument was permitted—or at least listened to. Historians have howled against this evasion for years and been rebuffed unless they were writing books pleasing to Government officials.

Consider the roadblocks thrown up in the path of the plodding historians. At the Pentagon, after being fingerprinted, he must swear that he has never belonged to Communist or Communist-front organizations and submit to a security check which can take as long as six months.

Once cleared, the historian is not allowed to make notes of classified material. He may review it only for "background purposes." These notes must be cleared, a lengthy process. Worst of all, the historian must submit his finished manuscript for clearance—a humiliation for a serious historian and one to which I myself have never submitted.

The State Department is somewhat less rigid. Its principal problem is the time-lag in making documents available. Generally they are not open to inspection until published in the department's series on "Foreign Relations of the United States." A department spokesman informed the meeting of histo ians last week that the publication of this series would continue to be 25 years behind events. Thus no confidential papers are available for the Korean war, the Vietnam war, the Cuban missile crisis and other events the public might like to know about.

But even the "Foreign Relations" volumes, good as they are, omit many important documents. I found, for example, that many of the most revealing dispatches of Ambassadors Joseph Kennedy and William Bullitt from London and Paris were not published in the volumes covering 1939-40.

Based on my own experience here and abroad of trying to get at the truth in writing history, I have been forced to conclude that governments deny access to secret documents not because publication endangers "national security" or "national interests" (what crimes have been committed in their name!) but because governments are afraid of letting the people know the facts.

Though I'm not recommending it, the overthrow of regimes is a great aid to historians in learning what governments have been up to. We would know much less than we do about the origins of World War I and the conduct of the Great Powers had not the Governments of Republican Germany and Soviet Russia made public the secret documents of the regimes they replaced.

We have escaped the experience of having our documents published by a conqueror. But the scandal is that officials and bureaucrats, out of fear or whim, classify them and keep them from the citizenry long after there is any justification for it. To declassify takes more courage than most of our officials seem to possess.

Should The Times case fail, history will be the loser. General Taylor said last week that the disclosures of The Times "were laying a foundation of bad history." I think most historians believe just the opposite. Any history of our involvement in the Vietnam war which left out the documents so far published by The Times would be bad history.

Good history can only be based on the truth.

William L. Shirer, journalist and historian, is author of "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich."

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Hoopes: Some Painful Lessons

By TOWNSEND HOOPES

WASHINGTON—The Pentagon study disclosures engender mixed emotions, although the elements in the mix are not of equal weight. Not even a determined opponent of a damnable war can, I think, greet the episode with undiluted joy, for it adds new ingredients of unmeasurable consequence to what has become a Greek tragedy without a last act.

Moreover, anyone seriously concerned with the need to preserve the orderly processes of government as a barrier against anarchy must be disturbed by the rising tendency to flaunt and subvert legal and procedural norms in every sphere of our society. For that practice feeds on itself, producing a progressive disrespect for all properly constituted authority. It could end by making coherent government (already immensely difficult) nearly impossible.

But these points having been made, it is plain that other and higher considerations are at issue. The most compelling is the cruel, senseless war itself and its ambiguous, persistent waging by both Democratic and Republican Presidents. Reaffirming the discredited myths of a vital United States interest in Vietnam and of a militarily powerful China, clinging to unattainable objectives, hailing the success of policies which now appear to three-quarters of the citizenry as a guaranteed prescription for endless war, scorning numberless Congressional offers to share responsibility for our necessary extrication, Mr. Nixon has become the present embodiment of a disastrous continuity.

Such an official posture has generated widespread distrust, long nurtured by frustration, and this has now moved men of conscience to act against the letter of the law.

But if the handing over of classified documents to The Times is not a wholly rational or justifiable act, how much more so is the endless stream of American air strikes (counted in the thousands per month) raining destruction down upon villages and people without noticeably reducing the military capacity of the other side? And how rational is the Government's claim of "irreparable damage" from the disclosure of information that has rather clearly passed into the realm of history?

A District Court has wisely concluded that this damage does not extend beyond "embarrassment." One must be saddened by the further dark shadows cast across the reputations of eminent men, but it is not possible to accept the argument that public knowledge of their past actions can now jeopardize the lives of American military men, compromise strategic plans, or adversely affect the national security in any tangible sense. Indeed, the disclosures point up the quite subjective and discretionary nature of the classification system.

Congress could strike a major blow for public enlightenment by moving quickly to require far more objective standards for the release of official papers to scholars and the general public (the average release time for State Department papers now exceeds twenty years; and, owing to a lack of money for staffing the historical division, it is growing longer).

It is now clear, really for the first time, that the American people will not avoid a serious, comprehensive effort to explain and resolve the awkward truths of their protracted involvement in Indochina. We should welcome this development. For while the effort will drag us through painful bogs of learning, such an act of searching self-examination and self-explanation is the absolute prerequisite to establishing a healthy and supportable basis for the conduct of our foreign policy in the years ahead. By all odds, the most important lesson to be learned is that our system cannot survive decisions for military involvement that are presented to Congress and the public as *faits accomplis.* I cannot improve upon the words of Kenneth Galbraith as set down in these pages just a few days ago:

"The worst policy is one made in secrecy by the experts. Our safety lies, and lies exclusively, in making public decisions subject to the test of public debate. What cannot survive public debate . . . we must not do."

Townsend Hoopes served as Under Secretary of the Air Force, 1967-69. He is author of "The Limits of Intervention."