

The Lessons of Vietnam

Pentagon's Study Uniquely Portrays The 'Greek Tragedy' of the U.S. Role

By MAX FRANKEL JUL 6 1971
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 5—The Pentagon papers on how the United States went to war in Indochina probably mark the end of an era in American foreign policy—a quarter of a century of virtually unchallenged Presidential management and manipulation of the instruments of war and the diplomacy bearing on war. Yet the papers cannot be more than the beginning of reflection on that era and its climax, the nation's painful, disillusioning and still unresolved involvement in Vietnam.

News Analysis

Massive but incomplete, comprehensive but by no means exhaustive, remarkably honest but undoubtedly warped by perspective and experience, the papers are

unlike any others ever composed in the midst of war and published within 3 to 10 years of the secret deliberations and calculations they describe.

They form a unique collection and they have been summerized under unique circumstances in nine installments in The New York Times—over unique legal challenge of the United States Government. The very novelty of the papers and the contest over their publication have tended to divert attention from the essential tale they bear. There has already been dispute not only about what they mean but also about what they say.

From the perspective of 1971, they could be read as an anatomy of failure: the

Continued on Page 14, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 3

misapplication of an earlier day's theories and techniques for containing Communism and the misfire of the political wisdom of that day that the United States would pay any price and bear any burden to prevent the loss of one more acre of ground to Communists anywhere.

Yet, paradoxically, the Pentagon papers tell the story of the successful application of those theories and they demonstrate the great and still-surviving force of those political convictions and fears.

But they could also be read as a chronicle of success: the tenacious collaboration of four—and now perhaps five — administrations of both major parties in the preservation of a commitment to an ally, the demonstration of American fidelity to an enterprise once begun and the denial of victory to Communist adversaries.

Yet the Pentagon papers show that despite the sacrifices of life, treasure and serenity to the Vietnam war, the predominant American objective was not victory over the enemy but merely the avoidance of defeat and humiliation.

How Did the Agony Begin?

In sum, the papers and the discussion now swirling about them command at least a preliminary appraisal—of what they are and what they are not, of what they reveal and what they neglect. Who really deceived whom? And how did all this agony really arise?

Essentially the Pentagon papers are raw material for history—an insiders' study of the decision-making processes of four administrations that struggled with Vietnam from 1945 to 1968. The papers embody 3,000 pages of often overlapping analyses and 4,000 pages of supporting documents. They were commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, in a period of frustration with a war that critics sardonically gave his name to. But they were written and compiled by 36 analysts, civilian and military, most of them still anonymous, and they were finally printed and bound into fewer than 20 sets in the early months of the Nixon Administration, which paid them no heed until they began to appear in The Times.

The study drew primarily upon Pentagon files that are still sealed and upon some of the most important Presidential orders and diplomatic materials of the time under review. The analysts did not have access to the most private White House documents bearing on the moods and motives of the Presidents. And in the form obtained by The Times, the study also lacked several of the 47 volumes, among them four devoted to the diplomacy that surrounded the war.

Many Draft Proposals

But the Pentagon papers also offer more than the most polished of histories. They present not only the directives, conclusions and decisions of government in an era of prolonged crisis, but also many of the loose memorandums, speculations, draft proposals and contingency plans composed by influential individuals and groups inside that government.

Whatever is missing, for lack of access or perception, is more than recompensed by the sheer sweep and drama of this contemporaneous record.

Unlike diary, which can never escape the moment, and unlike history, which must distill at a remote future, the Pentagon study was able to re-enact a fateful progression of attitudes and decisions while simultaneously viewing them from a perspective greater than that of any of the participants.

So whatever its shortcomings, the study will stand as a vast trove of insights, hind-sights and revelations about the plans and conceptions of small groups of men as they guided the nation into a distant but grievous venture, about how they talked and wrote to each other, to friend and foe, in public and in private. And the study is bound to stand as a new model for governmental analysis, raising questions normally reserved for literature: how powerful and sophisticated men take on commitments while they think themselves free, how they reach decisions while they see the mirage of choice, how they entrap themselves while they labor to induce or coerce others to do their will.

As the coordinator of the Pentagon study, Leslie H. Gelb, recently said of this story, "It was and is a Greek tragedy."

No Villains or Heroes

As written at the Pentagon and as recounted by The Times, the study found no villains or heroes. It made no historical value judgments. It argued no brief.

The portraits of the principal actors—especially those such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who were wary of betraying their views in interagency meetings and memorandums—are far from complete or satisfying. The portraits of the Presidents, even if their own files had been available, would remain

inadequate until they were set against the political and international imperatives felt at the White House at every stage.

In the absence of a comparable study of the objectives and tactics of the Vietnam adversaries—notably the Government of North Vietnam and the coalition of insurgents in South Vietnam—the Pentagon papers could not presume to judge the morality or even the wisdom of the policies they record and describe.

And although many of the authors appear to have become disillusioned doves about the war, their study could stand almost as well as a

brief for frustratedawks; its central conclusion, that the nation simply pursued excessive aims with insufficient means, leaves entirely unresolved the central question of whether it would have been better to do more or to seek less.

Of all the revelations in the Pentagon papers, the most important deal with the patterns of thought and action that recur at almost every stage of the American involvement in Indochina:

¶This was a war not only decreed but closely managed by the civilian leaders of the United States. The military chiefs were in fact reluctant at the start, unimpressed by the strategic significance of Vietnam and worried throughout that they would never be allowed to expand the size and scope of the war to the point where they could achieve a clear advantage over the enemy.

¶This was not a war into which the United States stumbled blindly, step by step, on the basis of wrong intelligence or military advice that just a few more soldiers or a few more air raids would turn the tide. The nation's intelligence analysts were usually quite clear in their warnings that contemplated escalations of force and objective would probably fail.

¶Yet military considerations took precedence over political considerations at almost every stage. Since none of the Americans managing the Vietnam problem were prepared to walk away from it, they were forced to tolerate the petty political maneuvering in Saigon and Saigon's political and economic policies, even when Washington recognized them as harmful. As a result, even the military chiefs, and notably Gen. William C. Westmoreland, yielded to the temptation of seeking victory on the ground, although it was known that the enemy could always resupply just enough men to frustrate the American military machine.

¶The public claim that the United States was only assisting a beleaguered ally who really had to win his own battle was never more than a slogan. South Vietnam was essentially the creation of the United States. The American leaders, believing that they had to fight fire with fire to ward off a Communist success, hired agents, spies, generals and presi-

dents where they could find them in Indochina. They thought and wrote of them in almost proprietary terms as instruments of American policy. Ineluctably, the fortunes of these distant, often petty men became in their minds indistinguishable from the fortunes of the United States.

¶The views of the world and the estimate of the Communist world that led the United States to take its stand in Indochina remained virtually static for the men who managed the Vietnam war. The "domino theory"—that all the other nations of Asia would topple if Indochina fell into Communist hands—moves robustly through the Pentagon papers, even by momentous events such as the split between the Soviet Union and Communist China. Peking's preoccupation with its Cultural Revolution or the bloody destruction of the Communist challenge in Indonesia.

¶The American objective in Vietnam, although variously defined over the years, remained equally fixed. Disengagement, no matter how artfully it might have been arranged or managed was never seriously considered so long as a separate, pro-American and non-Communist government was not safely installed in Saigon.

¶The American Presidents, caught between the fear of a major war involving the Soviet Union or China and the fear of defeat and humiliation at the hands of a small band of insurgents, were hesitant about every major increase in military force. But they were unrestrained in both their public and private rhetorical commitments to "pay the price," to "stay the course" and to "do whatever is necessary."

¶The American military and civilian bureaucracies, therefore, viewed themselves as being on a fixed course. They took seriously and for the most part literally the proclaimed doctrines of successive National Security Council papers that Indochina was vital to the security interests of the nation. They thus regarded themselves as obligated to concentrate always on the

questions of *what* to do next, not *whether* they should be doing it.

But the principal findings of the Pentagon papers cannot be fully understood without some recollection of the traditions, the training and the attitudes of the men who led the United States in the generation following World War II.

As The Economist of London has observed, these men were reared in the habits of the internationalist Presidents, notably Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who also felt duty-bound to lead the nation into war after vowing to avoid it. The British Weekly goes so far as to suggest that secret maneuver and public deception may be the only way to take great democracies to war.

Moreover, as Senator Frank Church of Idaho, one of the early Congressional critics of the war in Vietnam, remarked in Washington the other day, President Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson were all reared to the conviction that only Presidents and their experts can have the perspective and knowledge needed to define the national interest in a hostile world.

They lived with the memory of Congress destroying Wilson's League of Nations and hampering Roosevelt's quest for safety in alliances against Germany and Japan.

They lived with the memory of two costly world wars, both of which they judged avoidable if American power had been arrayed soon enough against distant aggression.

The Lesson of Munich

They lived with the nightmare that "appeasement" would only invite more aggression and lead directly to World War III, as the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia to Hitler at Munich led to World War II.

And they lived with the knowledge that another major war would be a nuclear war unless it were deterred with frequent demonstrations of American resolve and readiness to honor promises to friends and threats against adversaries.

These are the convictions that the men who made the Vietnam war carried into the post-world-war rivalry against the Soviet Union and against what they regarded for many years as a highly disciplined international Communist conspiracy, directed from Moscow and aimed at worldwide revolution and conquest.

After the "loss" of half of Europe to Communism, the American leaders set out to draw the line, wherever possible, to "contain" the Communists without major war.

They were imaginative and cold-blooded about the techniques they used in this effort. They broke the Berlin blockade without firing a shot. They poured \$12-billion in economic aid into the revival of the economies of Western Europe. They led the United Nations into war in defense of South Korea. They sent military missions, military equipment, spies and agitators to all parts of the world. They sought to make and to destroy governments. They tried to "build" nations where none had existed before.

A Long Hunt at Home

But they paid a profound psychological price. Their summons to sacrifice at home gave the contest an uncontrollable ideological fervor. The "loss" of China to Communism in 1949 and the further frustration of war in Korea in 1950 inspired a long hunt at home for knaves and traitors, in the White House and below, from which American politics is only beginning to recover.

Politicians and the politicians who became Presidents goaded each other to the conclusion that they could not "lose" another inch of territory to Communism, anywhere. The Republicans took after Democrats by saying they had been weak or treacherous about China and had accepted less than total victory in Korea. The Democrats took after Republicans by saying they had lost Cuba and dissipated American prestige and missile strength.

As President Eisenhower reached the end of his Administration, his greatest fear was the "loss" of Laos. And as President Kennedy assumed office, the Government's greatest ambition was the "liberation" of Cuba. No matter how small the nations or how marginal their threat to the United States, their "loss" came to be seen as an intolerable humiliation of American purpose and a dangerous invitation to aggression elsewhere.

Instinctive of Force

Thus whenever aid and intrigue had failed, the cold-war instinct was resort to overt force. And the failure of force in one place only magnified the temptation to use it elsewhere. The simultaneous fiasco at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba and dissolution

of anti-Communist forces in Laos in 1961 was uppermost in the minds of the Kennedy men who then proceeded to raise the stakes in Vietnam.

As the Pentagon papers show, they were motivated by the desire to contain China and what they considered to be the Asian branch of "international Communism," to protect the "dominoes" of

non-Communist Asia, to discredit the Communist theories of guerrilla war and "wars of national liberation" and to demonstrate to allies everywhere that the United States would honor its pledges and make good on its threats no matter how difficult the task or insignificant the terrain.

These objectives were widely supported in the United States throughout the widely supported in the United States throughout the nineteen-sixties. But the Presidents who progressively decided on an ultimate test in Vietnam never shared with the Congress and the public what is now seen to have been their private knowledge of the remoteness of success.

As the Pentagon papers show, every President from Truman to Johnson passed down the problem of Vietnam in worse shape than he had received it. The study gives special point to President Johnson's recently disclosed remark to his wife in the spring of 1965, at the very start of his massive commitment of troops:

"I can't get out. I can't finish it with what I have got. So what the hell can I do?"

What he and his predecessors did not do was to inform the country of the dilemma and invite it to help make the choice.

The Pentagon papers reveal that all the difficulties of defining the Indochina problem date from the very earliest American experiences there, under Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. They show that Gen. George C. Marshall, a Secretary of State for Mr. Truman, recognized the Vietnamese Communists to be also the leaders of a legitimate Vietnamese anti-colonialism. He thus recognized their challenge as different from any other Communist bid for power, but the distinction was soon lost.

The papers show that even after President Eisenhower reluctantly let the French go

down to defeat in Indochina, his Administration refused to accept the compromise settlement of Geneva in 1954. It set out to supplant the French and to carry on the struggle, with hastily organized acts of sabotage, terror and psychological warfare against the new Communist Government in North Vietnam and with programs of aid and military training to establish a rival anti-Communist nation of South Vietnam.

A Complicating Factor

The stories now revealed make vastly more complicated the official American version of Vietnam history, in which the Hanoi Communists alone were charged with aggression and a ruthless refusal to leave "their neighbors" alone. Clearly, the American commitment to save at least half of Vietnam from Communism antedates the whole succession of Saigon governments to which it was nominally given.

Even in these early years of American involvement, the Governments of South Vietnam were perceived as mere instruments of larger American objectives. It was Gen. J. Lawton Collins, acting as President Eisenhower's personal representative in Indochina, who first proposed the ouster of Ngo Dinh Diem. The Vietnamese leader was saved at the time by agents of the Central Intelligence Agency, but several of those agents were still available to help arrange a coup against Mr. Diem eight years later.

Even in those early years, the Pentagon papers show, Washington's public optimism about the prospects for anti-Communists in Vietnam masked a private pessimism.

And even then the North Vietnamese Communists were being held responsible for the direction of the insurgency in the South, even though it was not for lack of trying that the Americans in the South failed to cause equal difficulty in the North.

Much More of the Same

In hindsight, with the benefit of the Pentagon papers, it is plain that the Kennedy years brought more, much more of the same.

The "domino theory" was now expanded to embrace concern about the fate of Indonesia, loosely regarded as also in Southeast Asia. The fiasco in Cuba and tension over Berlin made it seem even more imperative to take a stand somewhere, if only for demonstration purposes.

Despite the Eisenhower warnings, Laos was deemed to be a poor place to make a stand. So it was partitioned among three rival factions, with the North Vietnamese gaining a convenient corridor for systematic infiltration into South Vietnam.

The deal had the effect of making the defense of South Vietnam vastly more difficult at the very moment when the American commitment to its defense was taking deeper root. The same paradoxical effect was achieved many times during the years of American involvement in Indochina.

The character of that involvement, it is now clear, also underwent a portentous though subtle change during the Kennedy years: American military and political activities came to be valued less for their intrinsic benefits than for the general en-

couragement they might give to the struggling South Vietnamese. They also came to be valued less for the damage they might inflict on the North Vietnamese than for the fear of still greater American involvement they were supposed to arouse.

Even though the Kennedy Administration knew the sad facts of instability, corruption and tyranny in South Vietnam, it consistently gave priority to military measures that would express its activism and bespeak its determination. Its vain but constant hope was that morale would improve in Saigon and that the threat of massive American intervention would somehow persuade Hanoi to relent.

Covert Operations Started

So for practical as well as domestic political reasons, private realism yielded even further to public expressions of optimism and confidence. Three weeks after the Bay of Pigs in April, 1961, Mr. Kennedy felt it necessary to order the start of new covert operations against the territory of North Vietnam and Communist regions in Laos.

Later in 1961, he heard so much debate about the growing need for American ground troops in Vietnam that the decisions to send several thousand military "advisers" seemed a relatively modest and cautious move.

But the pressure built for a more direct American management of the entire war, an impulse that found its ultimate expression in Washington's complicity in the

overthrow of President Diem. Once again, more than the President realized and perhaps more than he wanted, the obligation of the United States had been simultaneously deepened and made more difficult to redeem.

Along with the Kennedy term and the Kennedy men, President Johnson thus inherited a broad Kennedy men, President Johnson thus inherited a broad Kennedy commitment to South Vietnam. And twice in Mr. Johnson's first four months in office, Secretary McNamara returned from Saigon with the news that things were going from bad to miserable. Stable government now seemed impossible to achieve and the countryside was fast falling into Vietcong control.

Mr. McNamara and many other officials began to press for action, including new covert attacks against North Vietnam and at least urgent planning for open bombing and border patrols. They acknowledged privately that the real problems were in the South, but they could not yet conceive of any effective form of intervention.

So they built on the old formula of the Kennedy years—action for action's sake, not because it would achieve anything tangible but because it might help morale in Saigon and cause Hanoi to recognize that it could never "win" the war without confronting American power.

Gamesmanship a Policy

As the Pentagon papers show, these "scenarios" for threat and escalation were written in the glib, cold but confident spirit of efficiency experts—the same experts whose careful plotting of moves and countermoves against the Soviet Union in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis had so gloriously vindicated the new political science of gamesmanship and probability theory.

Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton, who eventually turned against the war with a pathetic confession of ignorance of the Vietnamese people, best typified this style of thought and planning at the upper levels of government.

In his memorandums, choices of more or less war were reduced to "options": "B—fast full squeeze. Present policies plus a systematic program of military pressures against the North . . ."; "C—progressive squeeze-and-talk. Present policies plus an orchestration of communications with Hanoi and a crescendo of additional military moves. . ."

Countries and peoples became "audiences": "The relevant audiences" of United actions are the Communists (who must feel strong pressures), the South Vietnamese (whose morale must be buoyed), our allies (who must trust us as 'underwriters'), and the U. S. public (which must support our risk-taking with U. S. lives and prestige) . . . Because of the lack of 'rebuttal time' before election to justify particular actions which may be distorted to the U. S. public, we must act with special care — signaling to the D.R.V. that initiatives are being taken, to the GVN that we are behaving energetically despite the restraints of our political season, and to the U. S. public that we are behaving with good purpose and restraint."

Definition of Objectives

Many of these memorandums were only "contingency plans" that contemplated what else the United States might do in one or another eventuality. But there was nothing contingent in their definition of American purposes and objectives, in their analyses — in the crucial years of 1964-65 — of the rapidly deteriorating

situation in South Vietnam and in their revelation of the state of mind of the dozen or so top officials whose persistent clamor for action could be delayed but never ultimately denied by a President who shared their purpose.

And there was nothing "contingent" about the direct orders of the National Security Council and the Presidential messages that have turned up with the Pentagon papers. The lines of reasoning and decision from the action papers to the contingency papers are direct and unmistakable.

The Pentagon papers and The Times's reports on them confirm the judgment of contemporary observers that President Johnson was reluctant and hesitant to take the final decision at every fateful turn of his plunge into large-scale war.

Mr. Johnson and other officials were often evasive or coy with the press by creating the impression that plans for bombing were only "recommendations" without "decision" or that "requests" for more troops from the field were not "on my desk at this moment" because they lay

formally elsewhere.

But these are not the most important deceptions revealed in the Pentagon papers.

Deep Sense of Frustration

There is, above all, much evidence that the four administrations that progressively deepened the American involvement in the war felt a private commitment to resist Communist advance, and then a private readiness to wage war against North Vietnam and finally a private sense of frustration with the entire effort much sooner and to a much greater extent than they ever acknowledged to the Congress and the nation.

There is evidence in the papers that the Congress was rushed into passing a resolution to sanction the use of force in Vietnam in 1964, ostensibly to justify retaliation for an "unprovoked" attack on American vessels, even though the Administration really intended to use the resolution as the equivalent of a declaration of war and withheld information that have shown the North Vietnamese to have had ample reason for "retaliating" against the United States.

There is evidence that all the elaborately staged offers of negotiation and compromise with the Communist adversary were privately acknowledged in the Administration as demands for his virtual "surrender."

And there is evidence, scattered over the years, that the oft-proclaimed goal of achieving "self-determination" for the South Vietnamese was in fact acceptable to the United States only as long as no South Vietnamese leader chose neutralism or any other form of nonalignment. As President Johnson put it in a cablegram to his ambassador in early 1964, "Your mission is precisely for the purpose of knocking down the idea of neutralization wherever it rears its ugly head."

The evidence for two very specific charges of deception that have been leveled against President Johnson since publication of the Pentagon papers is much less clear.

The Pentagon study itself did not make any charges, and neither did The Times in its reports on the findings of the study. But many readers concluded that Mr. Johnson had lied to the country in 1964, when he denounced his Republican opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater, for advocating full-scale air attacks

against North Vietnam, and again in April, 1965, when he secretly authorized the use of American troops in an offensive combat role.

The Pentagon study describes a "general consensus" among the President's advisers, two months before the 1964 election, that air attacks against North Vietnam would probably have to be launched. It reports an expectation among them that these would begin early in the new year. As The Times report added, the papers also showed the President "moving and being moved toward war, but reluctant and hesitant to act until the end."

Search Through the Files

Mr. Johnson and those who defend his public statements at the time are undoubtedly right in their contention that the President made no formal decision to authorize more bombing until there were additional attacks on American bases in February, 1965.

But the President also knew that most of his major advisers regarded such a decision as "inevitable"—because they thought South Vietnam to be in danger of imminent collapse, because the forces to conduct more air attacks were in place, because the target lists had long ago been prepared and because even sustained bombing was destined to be merely a stopgap measure until more troops could be rushed to South Vietnam.

In a search through his own dispatches from Washington at the time, this reporter has come upon three interesting accounts that help to explain the confusion but

tend to support the much more thoroughly researched judgment of the Pentagon papers.

On Oct. 9, 1964, The Times reported on a news conference question to Secretary Rusk about reports "here and in Saigon that the Administration was considering a 'major turn' in policy but deferring a decision until after Election Day, Nov. 3." Mr. Rusk refused to predict "future events" but said that domestic politics had no bearing on any such decisions.

On Feb. 13, 1965, after a new "retaliatory" raid on North Vietnam but before the start of sustained bombing, this reporter quoted two unidentified high officials as follows:

"There is no doubt that the President remains skeptical about a deeper involvement in Asia, but he is getting some very belligerent advice from very intimate quarters."

"History may determine that it was already too late, that the die is cast, but I am sure that the Government's strategy is not yet determined."

In other words, even high officials sensed that their President was still reserving final judgment and "decision," but they did not really know how much real choice remained.

After the Decision

Even after the decision had been made, however, there was no simple way to get a straight answer from the Johnson Administration in those days, as is evident in the opening lines of a dispatch on March 2, 1965:

"The Administration described today's air strikes against North Vietnam as part of a 'continuing' effort to resist aggression and made no effort, as in the past, to relate them to particular provocation. . . . The White House said only that there had been no change in policy. The State Department said nothing. . . ."

Some officials at the time, and Mr. Johnson on at least one occasion since then, suggested that such coyness after decision had been deemed necessary to avoid provoking intervention in the war by Soviet or Chinese Communist forces. They never explained, however, why either nation would make such a grave decision on the basis of announcements in Washington rather than on the facts of the bombing, which were well known to them.

A far more plausible explanation, one that sounds strange in matters of such weight but rings true to those who could observe Lyndon Johnson closely and sympathetically in those days, has been offered by Stewart Alsop in Newsweek: "President Johnson was trying to fool not the people but himself—and temporarily succeeding."

What really emerges from the Pentagon papers, Mr. Alsop wrote approvingly, "is a picture of a desperately troubled man resisting the awful pressures to plunge deeper into the Vietnam quagmire—resisting them as instinctively as an old horse resists being led to the knackers. The President bucks, whinnies and shies away, but always in the end the reins tighten—

the pressures are too much for him."

And, he adds: "A precisely similar sequence of events—mounting pressure from his advisers, instinctive resistance by the President, final agonized agreement—preceded the President's decision to commit additional troops and to give the marines an offensive role. When he made these decisions, the President did not realize—because he did not want to realize—that he had crossed his Rubicon. He still hoped and prayed that a bit more air power, a few more troops on the ground, would bring the Communists to the conference table in a mood to 'reason together.' Hence there really had been, in his own mind, nothing 'very dramatic'

about his decisions, no 'far-reaching strategy.' "

As the Pentagon papers further show, Mr. Johnson was to make two or three other big decisions about troop commitments and carve them up into smaller, more digestible numbers, as if this could hide the magnitude of the American involvement. He knew that he was not winning the war and he knew that he was playing only for some unforeseeable stroke of good fortune, and it may be that his sense of statesmanship led him to conclude that the nation would be preserved longer if he minimized the task.

Whatever the motives, the methods for handling the awkwardness of Vietnam had then become almost traditional. But it was Mr. Johnson's misfortune to be President, as Mr. Gelb, the coordinator of the study has written, when the "minimum necessary became the functional equivalent of gradual escalation" and the "minimal necessity became the maximum" that international and domestic constraints would allow.

The overriding evidence in the Pentagon papers, quite apart from the timing of decisions or the candor with which they were disclosed, is that the United States Government involved itself deeply and consciously in a war that its leaders felt they probably could not win but that they also felt they could not afford to lose.

Gradually, some of the leading advocates of the war lost their enthusiasm for it, but even in disillusionment they felt a higher duty of loyalty to the President and his policy than to the public that had become deeply divided and tormented by the war.

As early as 1966, Mr. McNaughton perceived an "enormous miscalculation" and an "escalating military stalemate." By 1967, Mr. McNamara and probably others were recommending a reduction of objectives and perhaps a face-saving exit through the formation of a coalition government in Saigon.

But Mr. Johnson thought more unhappy Americans were hawks than doves and he was also forced, amid fears of noisy resignations, to negotiate with his military leaders, who were demanding more, rather than less, commitment.

Decisive Shock at Tet

Not until the shock of the enemy's Tet offensive in 1968, and the need to mobilize reserves if he was to meet the military's request for 206,000 additional men for the combat zone, did Mr. Johnson set a final limit on the American commitment, cut back the bombing of North Vietnam and announce his plan to retire without seeking a second term.

No one knows to this day whether by these moves the President intended to hurry out of the war in some face-saving manner or merely to buy still more time from the American voters for a final effort at vindication.

As the Pentagon papers disclose, his Administration did not expect much from the bombing limitation or the new offer to negotiate with Hanoi.

"We are not giving up anything really serious in this time frame" of four weeks, the State Department informed its embassies, noting that poor weather would have curtailed the raids for that period in any case. It said that some of the air power would be switched to targets in Laos and South Vietnam and that in any case Hanoi was expected to reject the bid for talks and this would "free our hand after a short period."

Hanoi accepted the bid for talks, but has offered very little so far that interests Washington. Neither on the way in nor on the way out, it is now clear, was the American hand in Vietnam ever "free."