Thinking Foolishly

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, July 7 — Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson has entered the controversy over publication of the Pentagon Papers, suggesting that an “ethical issue, or its ghost” has continued to “haunt” The New York Times. More specifically, he called for a “severe official secrets act” and a self-governing body for the press “to stimulate more ethical professional relations with the Government.”

Mr. Acheson’s so-called “ethical question” rests on his notion that the Pentagon Papers were simply stolen items and that, as Chief Justice Burger put it, “a duty rests on taxi drivers, justices and The New York Times” to report such thefts to “responsible public officers.” Mr. Acheson drew a further comparison; the Pentagon Papers, he said, were property that belonged “to the United States of America as clearly as does the battleship Missouri or the White House silver.”

Now it may seem strange to consider the duties of a justice, a taxi driver and a newspaper as one and the same, at that crucial moment when any one of them comes into possession of the Pentagon Papers. It may seem downright frivolous to compare these documents to tangible items of determinable value, like a battleship or the White House silver. But according to Mr. Acheson it is Neil Sheehan of The Times who has violated Samuel Johnson’s advice to Boswell not to “think foolishly.”

Mr. Sheehan is thus dismissed for having said that the history contained in the Pentagon Papers “belongs to the people ... they own it and have the right to know of its contents.” Aside from the question whether there is not some considerable sense in which the people also own the Missouri and the White House dinner knives, the people having paid for them, the real issue here, political and ethical, is the publication of information; and the real cost is to try to suggest that the issue is instead a matter of stolen items.

Former Secretary McNamara ordered this history compiled, according to its authors, so that it might be seen where and how errors had been made and so that others might therefore profit by those errors—perhaps even avoid them. But who was to study the record—the Johnson Administration? Virtually all its high officials went out of office, like Secretary Rusk, not knowing that the Pentagon Papers existed.

The Nixon Administration? The record is clear that few of its high officials even knew the record existed, and none had studied it; it took the State Department a day or two even to locate its copy.