



So Who, Please, Is Guilty Now?

Joseph Alsop

IF THE newspaper business is to have any claim to forthrightness, a last footnote on the stolen Pentagon documents is obviously needed. One must, so to say, de-classify the forgotten role of the "New York Times" in the Vietnamese war.

The cold light of history will show that "The Times," and in lesser degree, some other newspapers, indirectly but importantly helped to force the grim, final U.S. decision to intervene in Vietnam in deadly earnest. Indeed, it is quite possible that there would have been no war at all, if it had not been for "The Times" and the present Senate Majority Leader, Mike Mansfield of Montana.

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IN 1954, all the evidence indicates that the French Prime Minister, Pierre Mendes France, made a rather ugly deal with the Russians at Geneva. France would scuttle the European defense community. The Russians in return, would organize a temporary partition of North and South Vietnam.

The French also tried to keep this secret bargain, by persuading the Americans to withdraw support from President Ngo Dinh Diem. They did not tell the U.S. Ambassador, General L. Lawton Collins, that they hoped to replace Diem with Saigon's Al Capone, General Bai Vien.

Ambassador Collins therefore took the French view, on the ground that the courageous nationalist, President Diem, had become "nonviable" as the leader of the South Vietnamese government.

Colonel (now General) Edward Lansdale meanwhile correctly reported to the CIA that only President Diem could prevent a communist take-over in South Viet-

nam. "The Times" was also warmly pro-Diem.

Senator Mansfield took the same line as "The Times." The Secretary of State of that period, John Foster Dulles, had to choose between dropping Diem or continuing to back him. There is no doubt that a major factor in his decision was the row Mansfield and "The Times" would surely have made if Ambassador Collins had not been overruled.

By importantly helping to block the French effort to flush South Vietnam down the communist drain in 1955, it is therefore clear that "The Times" also contributed importantly to the ultimate choice President Johnson had to make ten years later. There would have been no choice for President Johnson, or indeed for President Kennedy, if the French had had their way. This deserves gratitude.

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LESS GRATITUDE is perhaps deserved for "The Times" leading role in the later destruction of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

In a small, heavily dependent, rather primitive society, like South Vietnam in those days, the American front pages can have a devastating effect. Without those front pages in 1962-63, for example, the dissident Vietnamese Buddhist would have had little real importance.

Diem was the loser in 1963, however. Chaos duly followed. And on the above-noted assumption about a communist take-over, full scale U.S. intervention — always strongly opposed by President Diem — then became ultimately unavoidable.

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