

By WILLIAM BRAGG EWALD JR.

GREENWICH, Conn.—Several years ago—long after I had left Washington, long after President Johnson had sent thousands upon thousands of American troops into Vietnam, long after hundreds of them had died there in battle—the phone rang on a warm summer Saturday afternoon at my home here.

"I'm calling from Washington at the request of the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, William Bundy," a voice said. And he had what I thought an excellent question: "What legal grounds do we have for being in Vietnam? Specifically, what binding commitment did President Eisenhower make to President Diem?"

I was dumbfounded. Could the caller and his superiors really be so ignorant?

In any event, I told him where to find the text of a letter from Eisenhower to Diem, publicly released on Oct. 25, 1954, warning him that it committed the United States to nothing. In recent days this strange telephone call has returned to mind with

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the publication of the Pentagon papers. In reading these I resent the suggestion that a common thread of deception ran through four Administrations. For, leaving aside the Truman and Kennedy records, I can say without qualification that a clear distinction exists between the Eisenhower performance and the central, shocking disclosure in these documents, the evident, sustained duplicity of Lyndon Johnson.

What—apart from clandestine escapades, which in a cold war we have always with us—do the Pentagon papers "reveal" about President Eisenhower and Vietnam? Three things, it is asserted.

First, that "the American people have never been told how seriously the Eisenhower inner circle debated intervening." Well, on April 16, 1954, Vice President Nixon told them, in a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, no less: "If to avoid further Communist expansion in

Asia and Indochina we must take the risk now by putting our boys in, I think the executive has to take the politically unpopular decision and do it." President Eisenhower told them himself in his memoirs: "The question (of intervention) was under constant study." And from the newspaper Mr. Eisenhower's old boyhood friend, Captain E. E. Hazlett, got the message loud and clear: "At one time," he wrote General Eisenhower in October, 1954, "you contemplated some really drastic action in Indochina."

But the key thing is not the absence of official secrecy around this grim possible course but Mr. Eisenhower's reason for rejecting that course itself—a reason summed up in a hitherto unpublished reply to Hazlett dated Oct. 23: "What I really attempted to do was to get established in that region the conditions under which I felt the United States could properly intervene to protect its own interests."

The second "revelation": that President Eisenhower had Dulles rough-draft a Congressional resolution committing American forces to fight in Indochina. Given Eisenhower's iron precondition, this "revelation" only brings him credit: it was not for him, in Noam Chomsky's trenchant phrase, to wage an "executive war."

The third "revelation": that the U.S. in August, 1954, committed itself to "assume the burden of defending South Vietnam," though it kept this decision secret "for months." This brings me back to my phone call from Lyndon Johnson's State Department. If the National Security Council adopted its Vietnam policy on Aug. 20, 1954, even Diem didn't get the word formally and directly from President Eisenhower until Oct. 1, in the letter I've mentioned.

All the hell and executive arrogance and Presidential deceit didn't break loose until later—much later, after Dwight Eisenhower left office.

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