

Panel discussion: What the Pentagon Papers do and do not reveal

Moderator: Bill Northwood

Participants: John Livingstone, of The Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars  
 Marty Gehlen (phonetic) }  
 Franz Schurmann } of the Bay Area Institute  
 Jim Peck }  
 Peter Dale Scott, co-author with Franz Schurmann of "The Politics of Escalation in Vietnam"  
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- 66 (Speaker?) ~~[The documents] talk about a Pathet Lao invasion of May of 64, when most of us believe that no such invasion o~~
- 40 (Schurman) ... There are very notable omissions..... I'll just mention one of them. All the analyses get remarkably vague right around the period of the Kennedy assassination, even though we know that there were very important documents on Vietnam included in that collection.
- 66 (Speaker?) [The documents] talk about a Pathet Lao invasion of May of 64, when most of us believe that no such invasion occurred, or if it did it was in response to provocations from our side; they talk about the second Tonkin Gulf incident as if it really occurred, and many of us believe that it didn't.....
- 96 (Schurmann) If you read [Neil] Sheehan's articles and you read the documents, not just in the Times but in other publications, one thing comes out very clear, namely, that according to National Security Council directive 273, formulated four days after the assassination, on Nov. 26th, on the basis of a meeting ... that occurred two days before in the White House, that is Sunday, [on] the morning before even Lee Harvey Oswald was assassinated, a major document, committing the United States to what in effect would be victory in Vietnam, was authorized.
- 115 (Schurmann) What is rather prominently mentioned in the documents - excuse me, not prominently mentioned but mentioned and not enough detail gone into - is the fact that the ... Kennedy administration adopted a program for the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam which was publicly announced on October 2nd, 1963, for the first time, a plan which, according to the Christian Science Monitor, was started to be formulated in June 1962 at the time of the agreement for the neutralization of Laos.....  
 On November 20th, two days before the assassintion, a very important Honolulu conference took place..... At that Honolulu conference only one public announcement was made, that the United States would withdraw a thousand troops by December 1963. .... A thousand troops were not withdrawn (Sheehan called it an accounting operation - they sent in as many new troops as they pulled out)..... Now, what Kennedy had in mind, as far as withdrawal from Vietnam is concerned, we don't know.....  
 The point I wanted to make here ... [is that] the talk of withdrawal peters out, there's a weak reaffirmation of it in NSC273 four days after the assassination, a few more very weak references to it subsequently, and by the spring of that year it's completely forgotten.....  
 The point I wanted to make here is, that ... Honolulu conference of Nov. 20th, 1963, [was] attended by every major official including Dean Rusk and Robert Strange McNamara, with one exception - John McCone, the head of the CIA. He was not there, explicitly not there, although McCone plays a very key role immediately after the

assassination in the conferences with Johnson on Vietnam. McCone is a very hard-liner, completely in favor of 34A Ops [operation plan, 1964, covering covert ground, air and sea raids against North Vietnam] and sort of hard-line operations.

The key point here is [that] on what obviously, if not a reversal of policy, [is] certainly a rather remarkable shift of policy that occurred right at the time of the Kennedy assassination, these documents and the analytical articles are very, very silent; they gloss over them.

175 (Schurmann) So you could say, with the transfer of power that occurred as a result of the assassination, the military group (symbolized by Krulak and of course the whole military chain of command, JCS and CINPAC in Honolulu) ... won out. In other words, in that power struggle centering around the assassination period, the military group won out against whatever kind of group that Kennedy had gathered around himself that was involved in the plot against Diem.

210 (Speaker?) I think that where Peter was right, it's the covert side of the operation that was Kennedy's contribution to this effort, and it was the nation-building and all that paraphernalia that was part of it, too. But the military becomes very involved in that crucial period with Kennedy's assassination - I mean that's where you start to see it really emerging in the documentation. We don't know too much about that yet.

252 (Schurmann) One thing that's always struck me is the rapidity with which the meeting was held, that is to say, two days after the assassination.....

(Northwood) Is it clear at whose request this meeting was held ... ?

(Schurmann) No, that doesn't come clear in the documents... What has always struck me is the urgency, and this brings us back to the South Vietnamese situation .....

289 (Speaker?) What's happening from the assassination of Diem to the assassination of Kennedy - what's going on in that period, both within Vietnam and [in] policy debates?

(Speaker?) That's where there's an absolute zero gap in all the documents.

(Schurmann) The absolute zero gap in all the documents. In today's account in the New York Times that I read very, very quickly ... Hedrick Smith sort of ends at the Diem assassination and the documents have Lodge's last conversations with Diem by phone - and then NSC273 four days after the assassination.

295 (Speaker?) It's quite conceivable to me that some of the people who compiled the Pentagon papers did not have access to a lot of the intelligence covert operations that were being worked on at this period, which is a very crucial period for the undercover work.....

(Schurmann) The Honolulu conference documents must have been in the Pentagon...

(Speaker?) Yes, we have documents of the June 64 Honolulu conference, why not the Nov. 20th, 1963, conference?

.....

(Speaker?) It doesn't seem to me, from what we've said so far that the situation Nov. 26th was any less or more critical than Nov. 15, and why is it that not until after the Kennedy assassination all of a sudden this meeting is called with such urgency? If the situation was so critical within Vietnam itself prior to that?

(Speaker?) I'd like to be blunter about it. I think that a group of people met in Honolulu Nov. 20th, the Wednesday, and decided that things were essentially all right and the Council on Foreign Relations' history for that year says that they

proceeded quietly to implement plans for withdrawal. And then the following Sunday, two days after the assassination, the same people met again in Washington, knowing the same facts, dealing with the same reports, and somehow the balance of power had shifted within that group of people ... there's no new input of material at all.

407 (Schurmann) McNamara goes back to South Vietnam in March 1964 and he stops in Honolulu to talk to the CINCPAC people. Then when he comes back he issues a series of 12 recommendations to the National Security Council, to be adopted. It doesn't say so explicitly but the implication is that this is a scenario, sort of going from 1 to 12, first you do 1 and then you do 2 and then 3 and 4 until you get to 12. And No. 12 - it's all in the documents - No. 12 is the implementation of preparations for Laotian-Cambodian border control operations, and preparations for aerial bombardment of North Vietnam. The covert operations have been going on, anyway. Lo and behold what happens: NSC when it meets the following day adopts another directive, NSC 288, which adopts recommendation No. 12. It's right there in the documents. No. 12 is immediately adopted. In other words, what McNamara envisaged as the last of that scenario.

The picture of McNamara that comes out is complicated. I don't see him as a tragic figure; I don't see any of these people as tragic figures. But it's a man who opens the door little by little, and the heavies just crush right through. Either they feel they can control it, or their fantastic intelligence will do it, but once the door is opened one millimeter, you know, they come crashing through. My feeling is that there is a whole CIA story that doesn't come out, because as Peter says, there are no CIA documents in this. But there certainly are military documents, and they show as I say the military crashing through. And by March of 1964 the essential decisions had been made that led irrevocably to Tonkin, and then beyond that to the wider war.

430 (Northwood) Franz, you mentioned before we began that there's very little mention of China in the documents themselves. Is this something that comes to bear here?

(Schurmann) Well, it gets to the omissions - if you just go back and look at Time, Newseek and so on, they were saying - not only talking about Chinese expansionism but saying that We'll show the Chinese we're not a paper tiger. That was in 1964, Americans and South Vietnamese saying it..... There had to have been discussions on China, not just in the State Department but in the JCS. The word China probably appears ... a couple of dozen times in the whole documents, but there's not one document nor anything in the analysis that suggests ... [incomplete sentence]. The only thing that's come out, by the way, was what Senator Gravel was reading: Dean Rusk saying that if the Chinese come in we'll use tactical nukes against them. .... And Admiral Felt said that, too, in the Honolulu conference of 64..... So there's that whole area of omission.

[Program ends at 570.]