

Deception in the Capital

CONCERNING the New York Times Pentagon papers, a few observations:

They haven't all been published yet, and it is too early to pass judgment on either their historical or their moral significance. It is plain, however, that there was deception practiced by the President of the United States.

AT A TIME when he was telling us that it would be wrong to send American troops to South Vietnam, he clearly foresaw the necessity to do so. I say "necessity," he clearly foresaw that that is what would be done.

In this respect, Lyndon Johnson acted almost exactly like his idol, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who in his re-election campaign in 1940 spoke again and again about how he would not send American boys to fight on foreign soil. There was great bitterness felt by many Americans who would know very soon how they had been deceived by Mr. Roosevelt.

Candor apart, the Pentagon Papers do not appear, so far, seriously to disturb the thesis that we did what had to be done. If it was right that the United States should come to the rescue of South Vietnam, then the way we approached our mission appears to have been realistic.

Australia is up in arms because the papers would appear to reveal that it was the United States that urged the Vietnamese government to urge Australia to send a fighting battalion. For heaven's sake, what is so humiliating about that? During the summer of 1964, the South Vietnamese government could not get itself up off the floor.

That the United States should have initiated the suggestion as regards Australia, rather than wait for a Vietnamese secretary of state to think of it, is testimony to American enterprise, not American duplicity.

It is very plain that there are immediate political consequences attaching to the publication of the papers, and the insistence that they will not result in the death of a single American is fatuous. The same page in which the New York Times publishes congratulations to itself on its ingenuity and audacity is presided over by an eight-column headline: "Hanoi and Vietcong at Paris Talks Cite Times Series As Proof U. S. Is Aggressor."

"These documents," — a Hanoi spokesman is quoted — "confirm a truth that we have often expressed at this table, to wit, that the American Administration with the goal of imposing a neo-colonialist regime in Vietnam conceived plans for unleashing war and to spread it stage by stage." Does that suggest that it is inconceivable that the publication of the papers will delay the achievement of a cease-fire in Paris?

AND OF COURSE, domestically, the publication gave a great transfusion to the critics. Professor Henry Steele Commager, who has been seeing a slave state looming under his mattress for years, turned on his record yet again. "Not since the Presidency of John Adams has any administration so instinctively distrusted the exercise of freedom of speech and of press by the American people as the present one..."

What is going on is, fundamentally, a political operation.