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All Governments Must Lie

CONCERNING the unfolding drama of the Pentagon Papers, a few observations:

The general naivete is distressing. Conservatives, who distrust government and rail against the aggrandizement of it, precisely do so because they know how government tends to operate, how government saps social energy, and distorts ethical norms.

BUT TO EXPECT that government will operate otherwise than it does is quite simply unrealistic. One can simultaneously disapprove in the abstract of a particular practice, while recognizing that the practice is essential to the performance of a particular duty. For instance lying.

General Eisenhower, who by contrast with his successors was our Ethelred the Just, quite simply "lied" when asked if the airplane that had been brought down over Soviet Russia was an American spy plane. A day or so later, when it was obvious that the lie would not be digested, President Eisenhower's assistants morosely admitted to the truth, and whiff! there went the Spirit of Camp David which had been bottled only a few months before.

So it goes with the Pentagon Papers. The principal complaints have to do with government dissimulation. Governments must dissimulate.

Everybody knows that totalitarian governments lie to the people. Not everybody knows that democratic governments lie to the people. Only we do not call it "lying" — for a very good reason.

We feel, in our pores, the ethical difference between, let us say, a Khrushchev who insists that he desires democracy for Hungary, which is why he sent the tanks to Budapest; and an Eisenhower, who said he knew nothing of spy planes over Russia, when what he wished to do was to protect government secrets the accumulation of which was designed not to give the United States such power as is necessary to crush Freedom Fighters in Budapest and in other capitals of the world, but to

give the United States such power as is necessary to restrain Russian tanks from rolling over Freedom Fighters in other capitals of the world.

The Pentagon Papers reveal that there was considerable pessimism in official Washington during 1964, which pessimism Lyndon Johnson and the State Department suppressed the expression of. Now I ask you, is that to pass as A Revelation? If so, then we should have up for perjury the football coach of South Indiana State who tells his players during the half that he KNOWS that in the second half they are destined to mow down Notre Dame.

It is sometimes the business of government to reveal how bad is the situation. But not often. That is why, on a famous occasion, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said that the only thing we had to fear was fear itself. That was an epigrammatic way of saying that he, Roosevelt, would take a cultivatedly optimistic line, because he was temperamentally optimistic.

When he said those words, about the American economy, said economy looked a great deal worse than even the military situation in Saigon.

The pity of it is that people are not going to read the Pentagon Papers — well, to begin with, they're not going to read them at all. Second, they are not likely to understand them in a worldly way.

UNLIKELY, FOR INSTANCE, to know that these papers, so solemnly midwived, are nothing more than memoranda expressing attitudes, contingency plans; encyclopedic lists of alternative approaches to particular problems, routine exercises in the necessary dissimulations of government. What they may breed, however, is such a demoralization as will translate itself into a cynical suspicion of the essential vitality of democratic mechanisms. That is why we must concentrate, concentrate hard, on what the papers actually reveal, and ask why it is that, already, we go about so shamefaced.