

Pentagon Papers -- Their Meaning For the Nation

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The Pentagon papers on how the United States went to war in Indochina probably mark the end of an era in American foreign policy—a quarter of a century of virtually unchallenged presidential management and manipulation of the instruments of war and the diplomacy bearing on war.

Yet the papers cannot be more than the beginnings of reflection on that era and its climax, the Nation's painful, disillusioning and still unresolved involvement in Vietnam.

Massive but incomplete, comprehensive but by no means exhaustive, remarkably honest but undoubtedly

warped by perspective, and experience, the papers are unlike any others ever com-

posed in the midst of war and published within three to ten years of the secret deliberations and calculations they describe.

CHALLENGE

They form a unique collection and they have been summarized under unique circumstances in nine installments in the New York Times—over the unique legal challenge of the U.S. government. The very novelty of the papers and the contest over their publication have tended to divert attention from the essential tale they bear. There has already been dispute not only about what they mean but also about what they say.

A
News
Analysis

From the perspective of 1971, they could be read as an anatomy of failure: The misapplication of an earlier day's theories and techniques for containing Communism and the misfire of the political wisdom of that day that the United States would pay any price and bear any burden to prevent the loss of one more acre of ground to Communists anywhere.

Yet, paradoxically, the Pentagon papers tell the story of the successful application of those theories and they demonstrate the great and still-surviving force of those political convictions and fears.

SUCCESS

But they could also be read as a chronicle of success: The tenacious collaboration of four — and now perhaps five — administrations of both major parties in the preservation of a commitment to an ally, the demonstration of American fidelity to an enterprise once begun and the denial of victory to Communist adversaries.

The Pentagon papers show that despite the sacrifices of life, treasure and serenity to the Vietnam war, the pre-

dominant American objective was not victory over the enemy but merely the avoidance of defeat and humiliation.

As written at the Pentagon and as recounted by the Times, the study found no villains or heroes. It made no historical value judgments. It argued no brief.

The portraits of the principal actors — especially those such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who were wary of betraying their views in interagency meetings and memorandum — are far from complete or satisfying. The portraits of the presidents, even if their own files had been available, would remain inadequate until they were set against the political and international imperatives felt at the White House at every stage.

ABSENCE

In the absence of a comparable study of the objectives and tactics of the Vietnam adversaries — notably the government of North Vietnam and the coalition of insurgents in South Vietnam — the Pentagon papers could not presume to judge the morality or even the wisdom of the policies they record and describe.

And although many of the authors appear to have become disillusioned doves about the war, their study could stand almost as well as a brief for frustrated hawks; its central conclusion, that the nation simply pursued excessive aims with insufficient means, leaves entirely unresolved the central question of whether it could have been better to do more or to seek less.

Of all the revelations in the Pentagon papers, the most important deal with the patterns of thought and action that recur at almost every stage of the American involvement in Indochina:

• This was a war not only decreed but closely managed by the civilian leaders of the United States. The military chiefs were in fact reluctant at the start, unimpressed by the strategic significance of

Vietnam and worried throughout that they OULD NEVER BE ALLOWED TO EXPAND THE SIZE AND SCOPE OF THE WAR TO THE POINT WHERE THEY COULD ACHIEVE A CLEAR ADVANTAGE OVER THE ENEMY.

● This was not a war into which the United States stumbled blindly, step by step, on the basis of wrong intelligence or military advice that just a few more soldiers or a few more air raids would turn the tide. The nation's intelligence analysts were usually quite clear in their warnings that contemplated escalations of force and objective would probably fail.

● Yet military considerations took precedence over political considerations at almost every stage.

Since none of the Americans managing the Vietnam problem were prepared to

walk away from it, they were forced to tolerate the petty political maneuvering in Saigon and Saigon's political and economic policies, even when Washington recognized them as harmful. As a result, even the military chiefs, and notably General William C. Westmoreland, yielded to the temptation of seeking victory on the ground, although it was known that the enemy could always resupply just enough men to frustrate the American military machine.

● The public claim that the United States was only assisting a beleaguered ally who really had to win his own battle was never more than a slogan. South Vietnam was essentially the creation of the United States. The American leaders, believing that they had to fight fire with fire to ward off a Communist success, hired agents, spies, generals and presidents where they could find them in Indochina. They thought and wrote of them in almost proprietary terms as instruments of American policy.

● The views of the world and the estimate of the Communist world that led the United States to take its stand in Indochina remained virtually static for the men who managed the Vietnam war. The "domino theory" — that all the other nations of Asia would topple if Indochina fell into Communist hands — moves robustly through the Pentagon papers. Unshaken over two decades even by momentous events such as the split between the Soviet Union and Communist China, Peking's preoccupation with its cultural revolution or the bloody destruction of the Communist challenge in Indonesia.

● The American objective in Vietnam, although variously defined over the years, remained equally fixed. Disengagement, no matter how artfully it might have been arranged or managed, was never seriously considered.

● The American presidents, caught between the fear of a major war involv-

ing the Soviet Union or China and the fear of defeat and humiliation at the hands of a small band of insurgents, were hesitant about every major increase in military force. But they were unrestrained in both their public and private rhetorical commitments to "pay the price," to "stay the course" and to "do whatever is necessary."

● The American military and civilian bureaucracies, therefore, viewed themselves as being on a fixed course. They took seriously and for the most part literally the proclaimed doctrines of successive National Security Council papers that Indochina was vital to the security interests of the nation.

FINDINGS

But the principal findings of the Pentagon papers cannot be fully understood without some recollection of the traditions, the training and the attitudes of the men who led the United States in the generation following World War II.

As the Economist of London has observed, there men were reared in the habits of the internationalist presidents, notably Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who also felt dutybound to lead the nation into war after vowing to avoid it. The British weekly goes so far as to suggest that secret maneuver and public deception may be the only way to take great democracies to war.

Moreover, as Senator Frank Church of Idaho, one of the early Congressional critics of the war in Vietnam, remarked in Washington the

other day, Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson were all reared to the conviction that only presidents and their experts can have the perspective and knowledge needed to define the national interest in a hostile world.

They lived with the memory of Congress destroying President Wilson's League of

Nations and hampering President Roosevelt's quest for safety in alliances against Germany and Japan and of two costly world wars, both of which they judged avoidable if American power had been arrayed soon enough against distant aggression.

DETERRENCE

And they lived with the knowledge that another major war would be a nuclear war unless it were deterred with frequent demonstrations of American resolve and readiness to honor promises to friends and threats against adversaries.

These are the convictions that the men who made the Vietnam war carried into the post-World-War rivalry against the Soviet Union and against what they regarded for many years as a highly disciplined international Communist conspiracy, directed from Moscow and aimed at worldwide revolution and conquest.

CONTAINMENT

After the "loss" of half of Europe to Communism, the American leaders set out to draw the line, wherever possible, to "contain" the Communists without major war.

They were imaginative and cold-blooded about the techniques they used in this effort. They broke the Berlin Blockade without firing a

shot. They poured \$12 billion in economic aid into the revival of the economies of Western Europe. They led the United Nations into war in defense of South Korea. They sent military missions, military equipment, spies and agitators to all parts of the world.

PRICE

They sought to make and to destroy governments. They tried to "build" nations where none had existed before.

But they paid a profound psychological price. Their summons to sacrifice at home gave the contest an uncontrollable ideological fervor. The "loss" of China to Communism in 1949 and the further frustration of war in Korea in 1950 inspired a long hunt at home for knaves and traitors, in the White House and below, from which American politics is only beginning to recover.

Whenever aid and intrigue had failed, the cold-war in-

stinct was resort to overt force. And the failure of force in one place only magnified the temptation to use it elsewhere. The simultaneous fiasco at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba and dissolution of anti-Communist forces in Laos in 1961 was uppermost in the minds of the Kennedy men who then proceed to raise the stakes in Vietnam.

But the presidents who progressively decided on an ulti-

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mate test in Vietnam never shared with the Congress and the public what is now seen to have been their private knowledge of the remoteness of success.

As the Pentagon papers show, every president from Mr. Truman to Mr. Johnson passed down the problem of Vietnam in worse shape than he had received it. The study gives special point to Mr. Johnson's recently disclosed remark to his wife in the spring of 1965, at the very start of his massive commitment of troops:

"I can't get out. I can't finish it with what I have got. So what the hell can I do?"

FAILURE

What he and his predecessors did not do was to inform the country of the dilemma and invite it to help make the choice.

The Pentagon papers reveal that all the difficulties of defending the Indochina problem date from the very earliest American experiences there, under Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. They show that General George C. Marshall, a secretary of state for Truman, recognized the Vietnamese Communists to be also to leaders of a legitimate Vietnamese anticolonialism. He thus recognized their challenge as different from any other Communist bid for power, but the distinction was soon lost.

The papers show that even after General Eisenhower reluctantly let the French go down to defeat in Indochina, his administration refused to accept the compromise settlement of Geneva in 1954. It

set out to supplant the French and to carry on the struggle, with hastily organized acts of sabotage, terror and psychological warfare against the new Communist government in North Vietnam and with programs of aid and military training to establish a rival anticommunist nation of South Vietnam.

EVIDENCE

The stories now revealed make vastly more complicated the past official American version of Vietnam history, in which the Hanoi Communists alone were charged with aggression and a ruthless refusal to leave "their neighbors" alone. Clearly, the American commitment to save at least half of Vietnam from Communism antedates the whole succession of Saigon governments to which it was nominally given.

There is evidence that all the elaborately staged offers of negotiation and compromise with the Communist adversary were privately acknowledged in the administration as demands for his virtual "surrender."

CONSENSUS

And there is evidence, scattered over the years, that the oft-proclaimed goal of achieving "self-determination" for the South Vietnamese was in fact acceptable to the United States only as long as no South Vietnamese leader chose neutralism or any other form of non-alignment. As Mr. Johnson put it in a cablegram to his ambassador in early 1964, "Your mission is precisely for the purpose of knocking down the idea of neutralization wherever it rears its

ugly head."

The Pentagon study describes a "general consensus" among the President's advisers, two months before the 1964 election, that air attacks against North Vietnam would probably have to be launched. It reports an expectation among them that these would begin early in the new year. As the Times report added, the papers also showed the President "moving and being moved toward war, but reluctant and hesitant to act until the end."

The Pentagon papers show that Mr. Johnson was to take big decisions about troop commitments and carve them up into smaller, more digestible numbers, as if this could hide the magnitude of the American involvement. He knew that he was not winning the war and he knew

that he was playing only for some unforeseeable stroke of good fortune, and it may be that his sense of statesmanship led him to conclude that the nation would be preserved longer if he minimized the task.

Whatever the motives, the methods for handling the awkwardness of Vietnam had by then become almost traditional. But it was Mr. Johnson's misfortune to be president, as the coordinator of the study, Leslie H. Gelb, has written, when the "minimum necessary became the functional equivalent of gradual escalation and the "minimal necessity became the maximum" that international and domestic constraints would allow.

The overriding evidence in the Pentagon papers, quite apart from the timing of de-

isions or the candor with which they were disclosed, is that the United States government involved itself deeply and consciously in a war that its leaders felt they probably could not win but that they also felt they could not afford to lose.

LOYALTY

Gradually, some of the leading advocates of the war lost their enthusiasm for it, but even in disillusionment they felt a higher duty of loyalty to the President and his policy than to the public that had become deeply divided and tormented by the war.

But Mr. Johnson thought more unhappy Americans were hawks than doves and he was also forced, amid fears of noisy resignations, to negotiate with his military leaders, who were demanding more, rather than less,

commitment.

Not until the shock of the enemy's Tet offensive in 1968, and the need to mobilize reserves if he was to meet the military's request for 206,000 additional men for the combat zone, did Mr. Johnson set a final limit on the American commitment, cut back the bombing of

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North Vietnam and announce his plan to retire without seeking a second term.

No one knows to this day whether by these moves the President intended to hurry out of the war in some face-saving manner or merely to buy still more time from the American voters for a final effort at vindication.

As the Pentagon papers disclose, his administration did not expect much from the bombing limitation or the new offer to negotiate with Hanoi.

Hanoi accepted the bid for talks, but has offered very little so far that interests Washington. Neither on the way in nor on the way out, it is now clear, was the American hand in Vietnam ever "free."