

Impact in Washington

Pentagon Papers a Major Fact of Life For All Three Branches of Government

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Whatever their merit as history and whatever their fate in the courts and in the press, the Pentagon papers on the origins of the Vietnam war have become a major fact of life for all three branches of the Government.

The executive's handling of secret information is headed for a major overhaul.

News The effort by Congress to recover a role in the making of foreign policy has been intensified.

The judiciary's reluctance to involve itself in questions of war and peace and the definition of national security has been challenged.

Moreover, the Pentagon archive, its revelations and its handling by the Government are bound to affect both the country's politics and its diplomacy.

Although most observers here think it is too early to judge the consequences, there is already much talk of the damage done by the revelations to Senator Hubert H. Humphrey's chances for a second run for the Presidency.

And even if the conduct of diplomacy is not injured as much as the Nixon Administration contends, its hope of diverting attention from Vietnam and impressing Hanoi with the solidarity of American opinion at this stage has been further frustrated.

The Political Equation

Above all, this is a political city, and the effects of any great issue, no matter what the stakes, are promptly translated into political calculation and gossip.

The White House was quick to state when the Pentagon study broke into print that President Nixon was pursuing a "new" Vietnam policy that should not be judged by the conduct of his predecessors. That theme was reasserted by the President's press secretary yesterday when, announcing the transmission of the 47-volume study to Congress, he pointed out that it related "primarily to the Johnson and Kennedy periods" and that Mr. Nixon could not vouch for its accuracy.

The President's potential rivals in the 1972 election have been equally wary of the document.

Only Representative Paul N. McCloskey Jr., the California Republican who plans to challenge Mr. Nixon in some primaries, has directly involved himself in the controversy over disclosure, gaining a great deal of publicity but — now that Congress has been promised a complete set — drawing back from further revelations from the texts he possesses.

Senator Humphrey is known to feel himself damaged by the new charges that the Administration in which he served as Vice President had misled Congress and the country about its course in Vietnam.

Mr. Humphrey's Hopes

Mr. Humphrey's hopes for another race against Mr. Nixon hinge, in his own estimation, on his chances of dissociating himself from the Johnson years and the war. He has said that he did not know much about the secret plans and decisions revealed by the Pentagon papers and opposed some of those he encountered. But he defended Mr. Johnson's reputation at the expense of the former President.

Senator Edmund S. Muskie,

the Vice-Presidential candidate in 1968 who is generally regarded as the front-runner for the Democratic nomination, has been moving even more rapidly away from the war policies that he helped to defend while campaigning with Mr. Humphrey. He reacted to the papers by demanding safeguards against so much secrecy and by proposing a system of rapid release of most Government documents.

Senator George McGovern the only announced candidate described himself as startled by revelations of "deception" and called on Congress never to trust the executive in foreign affairs. Senator Edward F. Kennedy urged the fullest possible disclosure, even without knowing what might be revealed about the policies of his brother, President John F. Kennedy.

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Few officials, former officials, potential officials or members of Congress have offered any definite view about how they would balance the Government's need to protect its diplomatic and military secrets against the need of the public to be informed—the difficult question that has now been posed to the courts.

Most of the opponents of President Nixon's conduct of the war, along with other critics of the executive, have thrown their support behind the move toward a full Congressional inquiry into the origins of the Indochina conflict.

Inspection by Legislators

That is the pressure that Mr. Nixon tried to deflect by granting Congress the right to inspect the Pentagon study, from which The New York Times and other newspapers have drawn revelations.

By expressing the fear that legislators would be "making judgments on the basis of incomplete data" if they could not read the study, Mr. Nixon left the further impression that he feared the impact of the revelations on Congressional moves to force an early end of the war.

The White House denied that it felt such concern, stressing that Mr. Nixon's decision to turn over the secret documents was made 48 hours before the Senate voted to demand a total withdrawal from Indochina within nine months. But the President did not disclose his decision until after that sentiment was written into the bill renewing the military draft.

A full-dress inquiry in Congress seems certain; committee rivalries may produce more than one. Those debates, in turn, will keep alive the pressure for even faster withdrawal from Vietnam and a more rigorous monitoring of other defense policies.

The White House and other departments appear determined, even without further goading from Congress, to change the system by which official documents are declared secret or fit for public inspection, with the emphasis to be on maximum disclosure. There is a growing feeling among officials that the Government's ability to protect national-security information depends directly on the reasonableness of the procedures. Almost everyone now concedes that the privileges of secrecy have been overused and abused.

New Restraints Expected

Some officials expect that after the courts have spoken on the rights of newspapers to publish material in their possession and the right of the Government to protect secrets, there will be a new move to write legislation that would define the issues, as well as the rights and duties of Presidents and other officials who now freely carry off Government secrets upon retirement, often for use in memoirs and other writings.

Other issues raised by the Pentagon papers are coming into focus slowly.

There is debate about whether the advice going to a President will be improved or damaged by the disclosure of past deliberations. Some say no adviser will ever again feel free to record a controversial opinion. Others say the fear of eventual exposure will cause Presidential aides to be more deliberate and careful.

There is debate about whether confidential relations with other countries will be compromised to the point where diplomacy is inhibited or frustrated. Some say no government will ever again feel safe in committing its secrets to an American representative. Others say the fear of disclosure might cut down on the amount of double-dealing that normally attends all diplomacy.

There is also debate among reporters, some of whom believe that many of the recent revelations could have been ferreted out much sooner by a more skeptical and diligent press corps.

There is deep anxiety among the military commanders—many already convinced that a less divided nation and more resolute political leadership might have produced "victory" in Vietnam. The collapse of discipline and trust that they see in the disclosure of the Pentagon papers and the debate that has ensued seems to many of them to be a more bitter loss than any yet sustained in Southeast Asia.