

# The Secrecy Tangle

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, June 24—The partial disclosure of the Pentagon Papers has already produced two important developments. It has forced the Administration to turn over all the documents in the McNamara study to Congress for analysis, and it has started a powerful movement to reform the present system of distributing and classifying official information.

Even before the invention of the Xerox copying machine, the Government regulations for dealing with official documents was disorganized and capricious. Since that invention, which enables many more officials to make and retain copies of classified papers, the "system," if that's the word for it, has become chaotic.

For example, William G. Florence, a recently retired Pentagon security expert, has just estimated for Congress that the Government now has "at least twenty million classified documents, including reproduced copies," on file. These include, he said, published commercial information and even newspaper clippings, which never should have been classified. Disclosure of information in at least 99½ per cent of these classified documents, he said, "could not be prejudicial to the defense interests of the United States."

There are rules under Executive Order 10501 on who can classify official information and how it should be classified, but the higher up the executive ladder you go, the greater the confusion over who can retain copies of classified material.

Some officials, like former Secretary of State Acheson, were so scrupulous about abiding by the rules that they even lost many valuable private letters which contained official information. Similarly, some officials who have been criticized for their contributions

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to the Pentagon Papers—McGeorge Bundy, for example—find themselves in the awkward position of not having copies of their own memos which are now the object of public criticism.

Examples of the confusion abound. Former Secretary of Defense McNamara, who ordered the Pentagon study in the first place, was advised that he did not have authority to declassify the Pentagon Papers, but former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles personally declassified the top secret Yalta papers and gave them to this reporter.

It is not at all clear what papers officials are permitted to take away with them when they leave office, what is regarded as a private paper and what a public paper. Ever since Herbert Hoover, Presidents have tended to take whatever papers they like and to keep them secret, even when they are the only record available.

Another problem is the selective release of historical documents to scholars noted for their professional skill and sometimes for their sympathetic natures.

During the first Eisenhower Administration, Sherman Adams asked Robert Donovan, then of The New York Herald Tribune and now of The Los Angeles Times, to write a book on the first Eisenhower term. He agreed to do so on the conditions that he should have access to the relevant secret documents and that his manuscript not be edited. These conditions were met, he was granted a "Q clearance" to see the documents not available to others, and wrote a very fine book.

There is, then, a difference between

the public reaction to the publication of "secret documents" and the reaction of many men and women here, who know how unpredictable, personal and disorganized the classifying and declassifying procedures are.

Documents are released sometimes for political reasons, sometimes to promote or block policies, sometimes to keep the whole record from being distorted by selective documents taken out of context.

This is not an everyday occurrence, but it is common, always condemned by those who want a better system both for classifying and declassifying confidential information or by those who get hurt by the "leaks," but usually practiced by those who stand to gain by disclosures.

So while there are undoubtedly distortions and even misleading interpretations coming out of the Pentagon Papers, even many officials here who decry so massive a disclosure concede that something good may come out of the controversy.

At least the Senators and Congressmen elected by the people are now to have the information available to many officials and newspapermen who were not elected by the people, and if a well-balanced committee or committees of the Congress now take time to analyze the material, some of the lessons of the past will eventually come out, which was what Robert McNamara had in mind in the first place.

Beyond that, the organized confusion of the rubber-stamp brigade may now be reformed by new Congressional or Executive regulation. It will never be quite brought under orderly control, not with a photocopying machine in every bureaucratic closet; but it will be changed and it cannot possibly be changed without being improved.