

# It Was and Is the Most

By BARRY ZORTHIAN

Having spent some four and a half years in Vietnam during the period covered by the Pentagon Papers on the task of dealing with the press and informing the public, I have more than a passing interest in the broad charges of deception and lying by the Government which have developed from the publication of the papers by The Times and other newspapers.

Before the charges take on the semblance of proven historical fact, I want to enter a strong demurrer.

I can speak only to the Saigon of 1964-1968 and only to my personal knowledge, of course, but I knew enough of what was going on so that there is little in the thrust of the documents published for the period that comes as any surprise and, based on that knowledge, I simply reject flatly and unequivocally any charge that there was a deliberate, systematic deception of the press or the public from Saigon during the years with which I am familiar.

I recognize that such a denial is both predictable and self-serving. I make it nonetheless. It is also an absolute answer to an absolute charge. I suggest the situation deserves fewer extremes from all sides if we are to distill lessons from the experience of

Vietnam for application to the future.

Somewhere in all those 7,000 pages of the papers must be a copy of a directive issued from Washington to the U.S. Mission in Saigon in July 1964. That document, approved by the President and his senior foreign policy advisers, called for an extensive public information program based on the principle of "maximum candor and disclosure consistent with the requirements of security." At no time in the next four years was I ever instructed by anyone in authority to deceive the press deliberately. Nor did I or anyone in a position of authority do so consciously to the best of my knowledge. Instead, with the support and active participation of Ambassadors Taylor, Lodge and Bunker, and General Westmoreland, we tried to apply the intent and spirit of that directive as effectively as we could.

A notable feature of this effort, which seems somehow to have been forgotten in the rush of current events, is that this was and is the most open war in history. Despite many pressures to the contrary, censorship has never been imposed and correspondents have been free to write what they wish except for some limited restrictions on tactical military information.

Morover, the provision of informa-

tion by the Government was extensive—on the record, on background, in terms of access. The various ambassadors and General Westmoreland, as well as other senior members and specialists within the mission, spent substantial amounts of their time with the press—making available the facts as they knew them and discussing their own evaluation of those facts.

It would be fatuous to claim that this effort was not without its shortcomings and errors. Some of the criticisms by correspondents of the Government's efforts were well-founded though, most often, the shortcomings they cited were the results of institutional or human inadequacies rather than official design. But, in addition, not all members of a huge and diverse civilian and military mission were equally fervent in their commitment to the principle of maximum candor. Then too, the range of strongly held opinion within the mission led to inconsistency and contradiction.

More critical even was the problem of what information could be made available and when. I suggest the key question in regard to the disclosure *then* of documents which do not seem sensitive *now* is the question of their impact publicly at that time, not five or six or seven years later. Certainly, the mission in Saigon restricted the

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release of some information in terms of either detail or time on grounds of military security or diplomatic consideration. That covers a pretty broad spectrum, of course, but nevertheless I contend that we made as much information available as could reasonably be expected, particularly during the critical 1964-1965 period.

What we did not do much of is provide a comprehensive picture of the staff work that went into the making of the decisions or judgments. Here, it seems to me, is a legitimate area for more extensive consideration. What is the obligation of the Government (ultimately the President) to make public the nature and form of the gestation period of policy determination? I would suggest that many of the Pentagon papers reflect that aspect of the Government's deliberations and should be weighed in that context. At least some of the documents that are now being widely publicized had very brief days in court simply because they were overtaken by subsequent considerations and developments and thus never had very much effect on the conduct of the war.

At any rate, it is true that we did not make available to the press this type of preliminary staff work and judgment in most cases. In the temper of those times, I do not regard this

as either restrictive or dissembling. For we did make available the substance of our plans and actions and, where we were constrained by overriding considerations from doing even this, the press usually obtained the information from sources of its own.

For all these reasons, it is accurate to say that most competent journalists in Vietnam at the time had a knowledge of at least the main points of the Pentagon Papers which have appeared to date—and, in many cases, much more. That broad contention extends as well to many of the classified operations conducted at various times outside Vietnam's borders.

What the correspondents—and their editors—did with this information is quite another question, of course. One early task might be an examination of the files of the period to see how much of the new information is actually new. And, subsequently, it might be useful for the press to turn its very well-developed powers of analysis to an examination of its own performance in that period as searching as the one directed at the Government.

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