

wxs Stav 7/6/71

'Papers, Papers, Who's Got 'em?'

By ORR KELLY

The good guys clearly won in the dispute between the government and the press over the Pentagon papers. The Supreme Court was quite right in holding that the government could not exercise prior restraint and thus prevent a newspaper from printing something the government did not want it to print.

But the righteous tones in which the good guys hailed the victory have been a little much, considering the press's spotty performance throughout this fascinating episode.

The main argument of the press was that it represented the public's right to know what its government was up to. But the evidence now available indicates that the result of much of what was printed based on the Pentagon papers—or scattered portions of them—served not to inform, but to misinform the public about some vital decisions in recent history.

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First to be considered, of course, is the New York Times, which says it had three months to study the sizable portions of the papers in its possession—although you'd never guess it from looking at the typographical mish-mash in which the reports were presented.

From the three articles printed before the courts cut off publication, two major conclusions emerged: That the Johnson administration had decided, in the fall of 1964, to begin bombing the North and hid the decision from the people until after the

election; and that the administration decided in April of 1965 to assign a major ground combat role to its forces in Vietnam and withheld this vital decision from the public until late in July.

Whatever deceit the administration may have practiced on its potential enemies as well as on its own people, these two criticisms do not seem to stand up in the light of information now available.

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There is every evidence of a vigorous and anguished debate within the administration over whether or not to bomb North Vietnam, and what kind of bombing campaign to conduct, right up to the beginning of the Rolling Thunder campaign in March of 1965.

Similarly, the evidence now available indicates — conclusively, in this reporter's opinion—that the decision in April on use of ground combat forces was still in the context of protecting the air bases from which the planes bombing the North were operating. It was not until late in July, again after much anguished debate, that the decision was made to commit ground combat forces to shore up the crumbling South Vietnamese forces — a decision that was promptly announced by President Johnson.

Second to pop into print with an account of the Vietnam story was the Washington Post —and here is one of the most peculiar incidents in the whole episode. Before it was enjoined from publishing, the

Post printed two news stories covering two phases of the Vietnam story. The impression the reader got was that the Post had the documents. But in an affidavit filed during the court case — and reported by the Times — the Post's executive editor said its stories were based on a manuscript whose authors had had access to the Pentagon papers, and not on the papers themselves, of which the Post at that time had only "two fragments."

Virtually as soon as the Post and Times were cut off from publishing, papers in various parts of the country began coming up with bits and pieces of the documents and hurried into print with tidbits of old news—much of it already thoroughly documented in some of the standard reference works on the long history of the war.

To a disinterested observer, it must have seemed as though much of the nation's press was involved in a rather juvenile game of "papers, papers, who's got the papers?" rather than in a serious effort to present their readers with a balanced and informative insight into this important period in the nation's history.

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Newspapers, as has been said, do a pretty good job of providing a rough first draft of history. As this episode indicates, they are not—despite the freedom reinforced by the Supreme Court decision—entirely satisfactory in polishing up a final draft of history.