

Thinking Foolishly

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, July 7 — Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson has entered the controversy over publication of the Pentagon Papers, suggesting that an "ethical issue, or its ghost" has continued to "haunt" The New York Times. More specifically, he called for a "severe official secrets act" and a self-governing body for the press "to stimulate more ethical professional relations with the Government."

Mr. Acheson's so-called "ethical question" rests on his notion that the Pentagon Papers were simply stolen items and that, as Chief Justice Burger put it, "a duty rests on taxi drivers, justices and The New York Times" to report such thefts to "responsible public officers." Mr. Acheson drew a further comparison; the Pentagon Papers, he said, were property that belong "to the United States of America as clearly as does the battleship Missouri or the White House silver."

Now it may seem strange to consider the duties of a justice, a taxi driver and a newspaper as one and the same, at that crucial moment when any one of them comes into possession of the Pentagon Papers. It may seem downright frivolous to compare these documents to tangible items of determinable value, like a battleship or the White House silver. But according to Mr. Acheson it is Neil Sheehan of The Times who has violated Samuel Johnson's advice to Boswell not "to think foolishly."

Mr. Sheehan is thus dismissed for having said that the history contained in the Pentagon Papers "belongs to the people . . . they own it and have the right to know of its contents." Aside from the question whether there is not some considerable sense in which the people also own the Missouri and the White House dinner knives, the people having paid for them, the real issue here, political and ethical, is the publication of information; and the real cant is to try to suggest that the issue is instead a matter of stolen items.

Former Secretary McNamara ordered this history compiled, according to its authors, so that it might be seen where and how errors had been made and so that others might therefore profit by those errors—perhaps even avoid them. But who was to study the record—the Johnson Administra-

Congress? Senator Fulbright's request for the study was rejected by a low-level official in the Pentagon who testified in court that he had not known the study existed until the Senator asked for it.

There remain, of course, the same people who paid for the Missouri, the White House silver and Vietnam. They now know most of what was in the Pentagon record, and even their Congressmen and Senator Fulbright—as a result of the papers' publication—have been given limited access to this historical matter.

So how foolishly was Mr. Sheehan thinking after all? As a practical matter, the people who read these documents in The Times were the first to study them; and as a theoretical matter, they are the ones for whom the history was intended in the first place. Mr. McNamara himself sought to declassify and publish them, but was overruled at the White House.

As for an official secrets act, no doubt such a law would have effectively prevented publication of the Pentagon Papers. It is not likely that comparable documents would have been published in Britain, for instance, where there is an Official Secrets Act as severe as the one Mr. Acheson wants.

But assuming such an act could be squared with the First Amendment—a long assumption—Mr. Acheson's final point is remarkable. The press, he says, should police itself into "more ethical professional relations with the Government." But who, pray, in that case, is going to police the Government into more ethical professional relations with the people?

However the words "deceit" and "misled" may be deplored, even cursory examination of the Pentagon Papers discloses how little successive Administrations told the public. From the U-2 incident to Cambodia, the record of those Administrations is replete with dissembling, sophistries and outright lies. As far back as 1949, even Mr. Acheson "propagated myths" about Chinese-American relations, according to recent testimony before the Foreign Relations Committee by Allen Whiting of the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan.

Yet, here is a formula that would give the Government immensely greater power to make and keep secrets, while the press was policing itself against "publishing material ethically undesirable." Samuel Johnson would know what to say to that: "The mass of every people must be barbarous where there is no printing."

tion? Virtually all its high officials went out of office, like Secretary Rusk, not knowing that the Pentagon Papers existed.

The Nixon Administration? The record is clear that few of its high officials even knew the record existed, and none had studied it; it took the State Department a day or two even to locate its copy.