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The Pentagon Papers, Continued

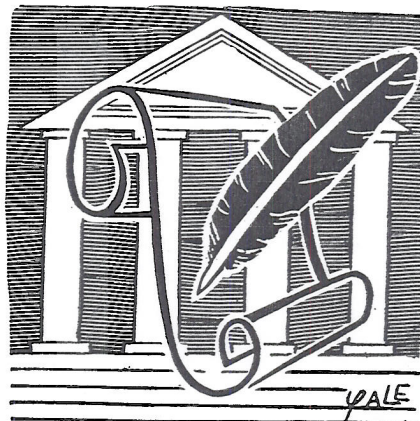
Ultimately, what is most disturbing about the Pentagon papers is the fact that they came from the Pentagon. When historians come to assess these astounding documents, they may place as much significance on the auspices of the papers as on the papers themselves. The fact that the military should have carried out a secret study concerned with foreign policy may be an ominous reflection of the extent to which the Pentagon has arrogated to itself a major role in decision-making heretofore reserved under the Constitution for the President and the Secretary of State.

We now learn that Dean Rusk, while Secretary of State, was not even informed about the secret Pentagon study, much less consulted. Statements from the White House about the Pentagon papers have been contradictory. At first, surprise was expressed about the existence of the documents. Then the President had to be protected against any public impression that he was unaware of important things going on deep within the government. An attempt was made to show he was fully informed without at the same time involving him in any responsibility for the secret report. Either way, the very existence of the report says a great deal about the giant cracks in what was once a wall of separation between the civilian and the military in the formulation and conduct of American foreign policy.

Nothing was more apparent to the shapers of the American Constitution than the ease with which force becomes institutionalized. They surveyed

history and found it thick with examples of governments being controlled by the very force they created for their own protection. Military primacy was the rule rather than the exception in the long chronicle of government. The records of the Philadelphia Constitutional debates show that the young Founding Fathers were determined to do everything possible to prevent military authority from exceeding its proper functions. They put strong emphasis on moral power as a source of national security.

In this light, our essential failure in Vietnam has been a moral failure. We have had no moral purpose in Vietnam. The fact that we *proclaimed* a moral purpose has no historical standing because there was nothing to back it up. Our real purpose, as the Pentagon documents reveal, was to extend power. And the deeper we got involved in Vietnam, the greater became the gap between the proclaimed purpose



and the real purpose. The full authority of the Presidency was used to convince the world that the United States had gone into Vietnam in order to assure the right of self-determination of the Vietnamese people. Yet one of the items in the secret Pentagon papers shows that our government leaders actually believed that only 10 per cent of our reason for being in Vietnam had anything to do with self-determination. The dominant reason for being there, once we got in, was to avoid the humiliation of withdrawal or of defeat. Thus, the prestige of the American military was more important than the lives of the Vietnamese we said we were there to protect—more important, too, than the lives of the American soldiers who, it was declared, were defending the principle that aggression by any nation is intolerable.

How can men in government delude themselves into thinking their real policies can be successfully disguised? As someone who has occasionally undertaken minor government business, I can bear witness to the kind of atmosphere or ambience in which government strategists operate. There is first of all a pervasive sense of gamesmanship. The world becomes a vast chessboard; each piece is assessed for its maneuverability and potential power. In such a game it is almost embarrassing to speak of truth or moral purpose. The highest value is not truth but sophistication. One accepts without question the need to concoct "cover stories" (an acceptable euphemism for "lying") or to manipulate public opinion.

The justification for this cynicism is to be found in the rules of the game. It is taken for granted that everyone does it and, indeed, that survival may depend upon it. But now it turns out that the gamesmanship and the super-sophistication and the cynicism are actually liabilities far more damaging to the American people than any withdrawal from or even defeat in Vietnam.

We went into Vietnam in order to demonstrate our readiness to make military commitments and to make them work. When they proved unworkable, we multiplied the power. In so doing, we discovered that the power was being used not just against the Vietnamese but against our own history. So we now learn the hard way that a nation cannot separate itself from moral purpose; that force added to cynicism makes for self-destruction; that the prestige of the American military is not as important as the prestige of the American people; and that gamesmanship and super-sophistication can turn into authorized insanity. All this we now know, but how do we make it right with the Vietnamese or with history? How do we make it right with ourselves?
—N.C.