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The Pentagon Papers, officially titled *United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense*, is a United States Department of Defense history of the United States' political-military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967. The papers were discovered and released by Daniel Ellsberg, and first brought to the attention of the public on the front page of *The New York Times* in 1971. A 1996 article in *The New York Times* said that the Pentagon Papers had demonstrated, among other things, that the Johnson Administration "systematically lied, not only to the public but also to Congress.

More specifically, the papers revealed that the U.S. had secretly enlarged the scale of the Vietnam War with the bombings of nearby Cambodia and Laos, coastal raids on North Vietnam, and Marine Corps attacks, none of which were reported in the mainstream media.

For his disclosure of the Pentagon Papers, Ellsberg was initially charged with conspiracy, espionage and theft of government property, but the charges were later dropped after prosecutors investigating the Watergate Scandal soon discovered that the Nixon administration had ordered the so-called White House Plumbers to engage in unlawful efforts to discredit Ellsberg.

In June 2011, the entire set of the Pentagon Papers were declassified and publicly released for the first time in history.

Shortly after their release in June 1971, the Pentagon Papers were featured on the cover of *Time* magazine for revealing "The Secret War" of the United States in Vietnam

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara created the Vietnam Study Task Force on June 17, 1967, for the purpose of writing an "encyclopedic history of the Vietnam War" McNamara claimed that he wanted to leave a written record for historians, to prevent policy errors in future administrations. McNamara neglected to inform either President Lyndon Johnson or Secretary of State Dean Rusk about the study. One report claimed that McNamara planned to give the work to his friend Robert F. Kennedy, who sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968. McNamara later denied this, although he also admitted that he should have informed Johnson and Rusk.

Instead of using existing Defense Department historians, McNamara assigned his close aide and Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton to collect the papers. McNaughton died in an air accident one month after work began in June 1967, but the project continued under the direction of Defense Department official Leslie H. Gelb. Thirty-six analysts—half of them active-duty military officers, the rest academics and civilian federal employees—worked on the study. The analysts largely used existing files in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and conducted no interviews or consultations with the armed forces, with the White House, or with other federal agencies in order to keep the study secret from others, including National Security

Advisor Walt W. Rostow.

McNamara left the Defense Department in February 1968 and his successor Clark M. Clifford received the finished study on January 15, 1969, five days before Richard Nixon's inauguration - although Clifford claimed he never read it. The study comprised 3,000 pages of historical analysis and 4,000 pages of original government documents in 47 volumes, and was classified as "Top Secret - Sensitive" ("Sensitive" is not an official security designation; it meant that access to the study should be controlled). The task force published 15 copies; the think-tank RAND Corp received two of the copies from Gelb, Morton Halperin, and Paul Warnke, with access granted if at least two of the three approved.

The actual objective of the Vietnam War: containment of China

Main article: China containment policy.

As laid out by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the Chinese containment policy of the United States was a long-run strategic effort to surround Beijing with the USSR, its satellite states, as well as:

- a) The Japan-Korea front,
- b) The India-Pakistan front, and
- c) The Southeast Asia front

Although President Lyndon B. Johnson insisted that the aim of the Vietnam War was to secure an "independent, non-Communist South Vietnam", a January 1965 memorandum by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara stated that the real U.S. goal was "not to help friend, but to contain China."

On November 3, 1965, McNamara sent a memorandum to President Johnson, in which he explained the "major policy decisions with respect to our course of action in Vietnam". The memorandum begins by disclosing the rationale behind the bombing of North Vietnam in February 1965:

The February decision to bomb North Vietnam and the July approval of Phase I deployments make sense only if they are in support of a long-run United States policy to contain China.

McNamara accused China of harboring imperial aspirations, just like Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. According to McNamara, the Chinese were conspiring to menacingly "organize all of Asia" against the United States:

China—like Germany in 1917, like Germany in the West and Japan in the East in the late 30's, and like the USSR in 1947—looms as a major power threatening to undercut our importance and effectiveness in the world and, more remotely but more menacingly, to organize

all of Asia against us.

In order to encircle the Chinese, the United States aimed to establish "three fronts" as part of a "long-run effort to contain China":

There are three fronts to a long-run effort to contain China (realizing that the USSR "contains" China on the north and northwest):

- (a) the Japan-Korea front;
- (b) the India-Pakistan front; and
- (c) the Southeast Asia front.

However, McNamara admitted that the containment of China will ultimately sacrifice a significant amount of America's time, money and lives.

Internal affairs of Vietnam

Timeline

1950 – The United States provided large-scale military equipment to the French colonial empire in its fight against the Viet Minh

1954 – The United States begins to engage in "acts of sabotage and terror warfare" against North Vietnam

1955 – The United States encouraged and directly assisted the South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm's rise to power

1963 – The United States encouraged and directly assisted the overthrow of the South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm

August 2, 1964 – Following the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the United States manipulated public opinion in its preparation for open warfare

Years before the Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred on 2 August 1964, the U.S. government was directly interfering in the internal affairs of Vietnam:

Under President Harry S. Truman, the U.S. government aided the French colonial empire in its war against the communist-led Viet Minh during the First Indochina War.

Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the U.S. government played a "direct role in the

ultimate breakdown of the Geneva settlement" in 1954 by covertly undermining the communist country of North Vietnam.

Under President John F. Kennedy, the U.S. government transformed its policy towards Vietnam from a limited "gamble" to a broad "commitment".

Under President Lyndon B. Johnson, the U.S. government began waging covert military operations against North Vietnam.

Role of the United States in the rise of President Diem

In a section of the Pentagon Papers titled "Kennedy Commitments and Programs", America's commitment to South Vietnam was attributed to the creation of the country by the United States. As acknowledged by the papers:

"We must note that South Vietnam, (unlike any of the other countries in Southeast Asia) was essentially the creation of the United States.

In a sub-section carrying the title "Special American Commitment to Vietnam", the papers emphasized once again the role played by the United States:

"Without U.S. support Diem almost certainly could not have consolidated his hold on the South during 1955 and 1956."

"Without the threat of U.S. intervention, South Vietnam could not have refused to even discuss the elections called for in 1956 under the Geneva settlement without being immediately overrun by the Viet Minh armies."

"Without U.S. aid in the years following, the Diem regime certainly, and an independent South Vietnam almost as certainly, could not have survived".

More specifically, the United States sent US\$28.4 million worth of equipment and supplies to help the Diem regime strengthen its army. In addition, 32,000 men from South Vietnam's Civil Guard were trained by the United States at a cost of US\$12.7 million. After receiving a significant amount of U.S. assistance, it was hoped that Diem's regime would be able to withstand the Viet Cong.

The papers identified General Edward Lansdale, who served in the Office of Strategic Services and worked for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), as a "key figure" in the establishment of Ngo Dinh Diem as the President of South Vietnam, and the backing of Diem's regime thereafter. As written by Lansdale in a 1961 memorandum: "We (the U.S.) must support Ngo Dinh Diem until another strong executive can replace him legally."

Role of the United States in the overthrow of Diem's regime

According to the Pentagon Papers, the U.S. government played a key role in the 1963 South Vietnamese coup, in which President Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated. While maintaining "clandestine contact" with Vietnamese generals planning a coup, the U.S. cut off its aid to President Diem and openly supported a successor government in what the authors called an "essentially leaderless Vietnam":

"For the military coup d'etat against Ngo Dinh Diem, the U.S. must accept its full share of responsibility. Beginning in August 1963 we variously authorized, sanctioned and encouraged the coup efforts of the Vietnamese generals and offered full support for a successor government.

In October we cut off aid to Diem in a direct rebuff, giving a green light to the generals. We maintained clandestine contact with them throughout the planning and execution of the coup and sought to review their operational plans and proposed new government.

Thus, as the nine-year rule of Diem came to a bloody end, our complicity in his overthrow heightened our responsibilities and our commitment in an essentially leaderless Vietnam."

As early as 23 August 1963, an unnamed U.S. representative had met with Vietnamese generals planning a coup against President Diem. According to The New York Times, this U.S. representative was later identified to be CIA agent Lucien Conein.

Planned operations to provoke North Vietnam

In order to provoke North Vietnam into launching a major military strike that justifies a large-scale retaliation by the United States, the Director of Central Intelligence, John A. McCone, proposed the following categories of military action:

Category 1 - Air raids on major Viet Cong supply centers, conducted simultaneously by the South Vietnam's air force and the United States Air Force (codenamed Farmgate)

Category 2 - Cross-border raids on major Viet Cong supply centers, conducted by South Vietnamese units and US military advisors.

Category 3 - Limited air strikes on North Vietnamese targets by unmarked planes flown exclusively by non-US aircrews.

However, McCone did not believe that these military actions alone could lead to an escalation of the situation because the "fear of escalation would probably restrain the Communists". In a memorandum addressed to President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 28, 1964, McCone explained:

In response to the first or second categories of action, local Communist military forces in

the areas of actual attack would react vigorously, but we believe that none of the Communist powers involved would respond with major military moves designed to change the nature of the conflict...

Air strikes on North Vietnam itself (Category 3) would evoke sharper Communist reactions than air strikes confined to targets in Laos, but even in this case fear of escalation would probably restrain the Communists from a major military response...

Barely a month after the Gulf of Tonkin incident on August 2, 1964, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy warned that further provocations should not be undertaken until October, when the government of South Vietnam (GVN) becomes fully prepared for a full-scale war against North Vietnam. In a memorandum addressed to President Lyndon B. Johnson on September 8, 1964, Bundy wrote:

The main further question is the extent to which we should add elements to the above actions that would tend deliberately to provoke a DRV reaction, and consequent retaliation by us.

Examples of actions to be considered would be running US naval patrols increasingly close to the North Vietnamese coast and/or associating them with 34A operations.

We believe such deliberately provocative elements should not be added in the immediate future while the GVN is still struggling to its feet. By early October, however, we may recommend such actions depending on GVN progress and Communist reaction in the meantime, especially to US naval patrols.

While maritime operations played a key role in the provocation of North Vietnam, U.S. military officials had initially proposed to fly a Lockheed U-2 reconnaissance aircraft over the country, but this was to be replaced by other plans.

Leak

Daniel Ellsberg knew the leaders of the task force well. He had worked as an aide to McNaughton from 1964 to 1965, had worked on the study for several months in 1967, and in 1969 Gelb and Halperin approved his access to the work at RAND. Now opposing the war, Ellsberg and his friend Anthony Russo photocopied the study in October 1969 intending to disclose it. He approached Nixon's National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Senators William Fulbright and George McGovern, and others, but none were interested.

In February 1971 Ellsberg discussed the study with New York Times reporter Neil Sheehan, and gave 43 of the volumes to him in March. Before publication, The New York Times sought legal advice. The paper's regular outside counsel, Lord Day & Lord, advised against publication, but house counsel James Goodale prevailed with his argument that the press had a First Amendment right to publish information significant to the people's understanding of their

government's policy.

The New York Times began publishing excerpts on June 13, 1971; the first article in the series was titled "Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces Three Decades of Growing US Involvement". The name "Pentagon Papers" for the study arose during the resulting media publicity. Street protests, political controversy and lawsuits followed.

To ensure the possibility of public debate about the content of the papers, on June 29, US Senator Mike Gravel entered 4,100 pages of the Papers to the record of his Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds. These portions of the Papers were subsequently published by Beacon Press, the publishing arm of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

Article I, Section 6 of the United States Constitution provides that "for any Speech or Debate in either House, [a Senator or Representative] shall not be questioned in any other Place", thus the Senator could not be prosecuted for anything said on the Senate floor, and, by extension, for anything entered to the Congressional Record, allowing the Papers to be publicly read without threat of a treason trial and conviction. The Supreme Court denied to extend this protection to Gravel or his legislative aide, Leonard Rodberg, because the grand jury subpoena served on them related to a third party rather than any act they themselves committed for the preparation of materials later entered into the Congressional Record. See, *Gravel v. United States*. 408 U.S. 606, 627-29(1972).

Later, Ellsberg said the documents "demonstrated unconstitutional behavior by a succession of presidents, the violation of their oath and the violation of the oath of every one of their subordinates". He added that he leaked the Papers to end what he perceived to be "a wrongful war".

The Nixon administration's restraint of the media

President Nixon's first reaction to the publication was that since the study embarrassed the Johnson and Kennedy administrations, not his, he should do nothing. However, Kissinger convinced the president that not opposing publication set a negative precedent for future secrets. The administration argued Ellsberg and Russo were guilty of a felony under the Espionage Act of 1917, because they had no authority to publish classified documents. After failing to persuade the Times to voluntarily cease publication on June 14, Attorney General John N. Mitchell and Nixon obtained a federal court injunction forcing the Times to cease publication after three articles. Times publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger said:

Newspapers, as our editorial said this morning, we're really a part of history that should have been made available, considerably longer ago. I just didn't feel there was any breach of national security, in the sense that we were giving secrets to the enemy.

The newspaper appealed the injunction, and the case *New York Times Co. v. United States* (403

U.S. 713) quickly rose through the U.S. legal system to the Supreme Court.

On June 18, 1971, The Washington Post began publishing its own series of articles based upon the Pentagon Papers; Ellsberg gave portions to editor Ben Bradlee. That day, Assistant U.S. Attorney General William Rehnquist asked the Post to cease publication. After the paper refused, Rehnquist sought an injunction in U.S. district court. Judge Murray Gurfein declined to issue such an injunction, writing that "[t]he security of the Nation is not at the ramparts alone. Security also lies in the value of our free institutions. A cantankerous press, an obstinate press, an ubiquitous press must be suffered by those in authority in order to preserve the even greater values of freedom of expression and the right of the people to know." The government appealed that decision, and on June 26 the Supreme Court agreed to hear it jointly with the New York Times case. Fifteen other newspapers received copies of the study and began publishing it.

The Supreme Court allows further publication

On June 30, 1971, the Supreme Court decided, 6–3, that the government failed to meet the heavy burden of proof required for prior restraint injunction. The nine justices wrote nine opinions disagreeing on significant, substantive matters.

Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell.

—Justice Black

Thomas Tedford and Dale Herbeck summarize the reaction of editors and journalists at the time:

As the press rooms of the Times and the Post began to hum to the lifting of the censorship order, the journalists of America pondered with grave concern the fact that for fifteen days the 'free press' of the nation had been prevented from publishing an important document and for their troubles had been given an inconclusive and uninspiring 'burden-of-proof' decision by a sharply divided Supreme Court. There was relief, but no great rejoicing, in the editorial offices of America's publishers and broadcasters.

—Tedford and Herbeck, pp. 225–226.

Legal charges against Ellsberg

Ellsberg surrendered to authorities in Boston, and admitted that he had given the papers to the press.

I felt that as an American citizen, as a responsible citizen, I could no longer cooperate in concealing this information from the American public. I did this clearly at my own jeopardy and I am prepared to answer to all the consequences of this decision.

— Ellsberg on why he released the Pentagon Papers to the press.

He was later indicted on charges of stealing and holding secret documents by a grand jury in Los Angeles. Federal District Judge William Matthew Byrne, Jr. declared a mistrial and dismissed all charges against Ellsberg and Russo on May 11, 1973, after several irregularities appeared in the government's case, including its claim that it had lost records of illegal wiretapping against Ellsberg conducted by the White House Plumbers in the contemporaneous Watergate scandal. Byrne ruled: "The totality of the circumstances of this case which I have only briefly sketched offend a sense of justice. The bizarre events have incurably infected the prosecution of this case." Ellsberg and Russo were not acquitted of violating the Espionage Act, but they were freed due to the mistrial.

Times v. United States is generally considered a victory for an extensive reading of the First Amendment, but as the Supreme Court ruled on whether the government had made a successful case for prior restraint, its decision did not void the Espionage Act or give the press unlimited freedom to publish classified documents.

In March 1972, political scientist Samuel L. Popkin, then assistant professor of Government at the University of California, San Diego, was jailed for a week for his refusal to answer questions before a grand jury investigating the Pentagon Papers case, during a hearing before the Boston Federal District Court. The Faculty Council later passed a resolution condemning the government's interrogation of scholars on the grounds that "an unlimited right of grand juries to ask any question and to expose a witness to citations for contempt could easily threaten scholarly research."

Gelb estimated that the Times only published about 5% of the study's 7,000 pages. The Beacon Press edition was also incomplete. Halperin, who had originally classified the study as secret, obtained most of the unpublished portions under the Freedom of Information Act and the University of Texas published them in 1983. The National Security Archive published the remaining portions in 2002. The study remained formally classified, however, until 2011.

Impact

The Papers revealed that the U.S. had expanded its war with bombing of Cambodia and Laos, coastal raids on North Vietnam, and Marine Corps attacks, none of which had been reported by media in the US.[3] The most damaging revelations in the papers revealed that four administrations, from Truman to Johnson, had misled the public regarding their intentions. For example, the John F. Kennedy administration had planned to overthrow South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem before his death in a November 1963 coup. President Johnson had decided to expand the war while promising "we seek no wider war" during his 1964 presidential campaign,[8] including plans to bomb North Vietnam well before the 1964 Election. President Johnson had been outspoken against doing so during the election and claimed that his opponent Barry Goldwater was the one that wanted to bomb North Vietnam.[28]

In another example, a memo from the Defense Department under the Johnson Administration listed the reasons for American persistence:

70% - To avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat.

20% - To keep [South Vietnam] (and the adjacent) territory from Chinese hands.

10% - To permit the people [of South Vietnam] to enjoy a better, freer way of life.

ALSO - To emerge from the crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used.

NOT - To help a friend'

Another controversy was that President Johnson sent combat troops to Vietnam by July 17, 1965, before pretending to consult his advisors on July 21–27, per the cable stating that "Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance informs McNamara that President had approved 34 Battalion Plan and will try to push through reserve call-up." In 1988, when that cable was declassified, it revealed "there was a continuing uncertainty as to [Johnson's] final decision, which would have to await Secretary McNamara's recommendation and the views of Congressional leaders, particularly the views of Senator [Richard] Russell."

Nixon Solicitor General Erwin N. Griswold later called the Papers an example of "massive overclassification" with "no trace of a threat to the national security". The Papers' publication had little or no effect on the ongoing war because they dealt with documents written years before publication.

After the release of the Pentagon Papers, Goldwater said:

During the campaign, President Johnson kept reiterating that he would never send American boys to fight in Vietnam. As I say, he knew at the time that American boys were going to be sent. In fact, I knew about ten days before the Republican Convention. You see I was being called trigger-happy, warmonger, bomb happy, and all the time Johnson was saying, he would never send American boys, I knew damn well he would.

Senator Birch Bayh, who thought the publishing of the Pentagon Papers was justified, said:

The existence of these documents, and the fact that they said one thing and the people were led to believe something else, is a reason we have a credibility gap today, the reason people don't believe the government. This is the same thing that's been going on over the last two-and-a-half years of this administration. There is a difference between what the President says and what the government actually does, and I have confidence that they are going to make the right decision, if they have all the facts.

Full release in 2011

On May 4, 2011 the National Archives and Records Administration announced that the Papers

would be declassified and released to the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California on June 13, 2011. The release date included the Nixon, Kennedy, and LBJ Libraries, and the Archives office in College Park, Maryland.

The full release was coordinated by the Archives's National Declassification Center (NDC) as a special project to mark the anniversary of the report. The NDC worked with the agencies having classification control over the material to prevent the redaction of the last 11 words of the Papers that would not have been made available. It is unknown which 11 words were at issue.

Films

The Pentagon Papers (2003) is a historical film made for FX Network in association with Paramount Television and City Entertainment, directed by Rod Holcomb and Executive Produced by Joshua D. Maurer, about the Pentagon Papers and Daniel Ellsberg's involvement in their publication. The film represents Ellsberg's life, beginning with his work for RAND Corp., and ending with the day on which his espionage trial was declared a mistrial by a federal court judge. The film starred James Spader, Paul Giamatti, Alan Arkin and Claire Forlani.

The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers (2009) is a documentary film directed by Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith. The film follows Daniel Ellsberg and explores the events leading up to the publication of the Pentagon Papers.