

❖ REMEMBER VIETNAM ❖

The Pentagon Papers: An Introduction

In 1967, a history of the United States' involvement in Indochina was commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, who had become increasingly sceptical about the Vietnam War. The work continued for eighteen months, resulting in some 2.5 million words of narrative text and accompanying documents. The study was meant to be kept secret, but was leaked to the *New York Times* by Daniel Ellsberg, one of the government officials who had worked on it. Lengthy portions were published in 1971 by the *New York Times* and other newspapers under the title of *The Pentagon Papers*.

Covering the period from World War II to May of 1968, the study revealed that the announced U.S. policy on Indochina was based almost entirely on deliberate lies and myths. The war would continue for nearly five more years, with many other revelations and admissions to follow. But this review of the Vietnam War's historical background and early stages provides invaluable insight into the formation of U.S. policy and the deceptions practiced to conceal its true nature.

The study has never been called into question; given the source, it is difficult to see how it could be. Instead, it has simply been ignored, as the falsehoods it documents (for example, that in Vietnam the U.S. was merely trying to assist an ally, a sovereign nation subjected to alien communist aggression) have once again become the conventional wisdom on the Vietnam War in the United States and many other parts of the world. Nothing more stunningly illustrates the power of propaganda than this demonstrated capacity to bury the truth of unimpeachable disclosures under a steady barrage of the very lies and myths that have been disclosed as such by official sources.

For this and other reasons, *The Pentagon Papers* are at least as relevant today as they were upon initial publication over thirty years ago. The following, slightly edited summary by Max Gordon was originally published in the September-October 1971 edition of the now-defunct *Vista* magazine.

— Al Burke
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What The Pentagon Papers Tell Us

Max Gordon
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THE RECENTLY PUBLISHED PENTAGON PAPERS reveal a striking absence of concern about international law, except in one respect— a largely implicit regard for the *appearance* of legality, leading to an emphasis on clandestine military operations, myth-making and falsification of history on a rather grand scale.

No doubt many will say, "So what?" Does not realism dictate recognition that nations always exercise their power in behalf of alleged "national interests", without permitting abstract legal principles to inhibit them?

Maybe. But the Vietnam experience, confirmed by the Pentagon study, suggests that Washington's perception of realism is not necessarily the realism perceived by the targets of its power. These targets are sometimes capable of challenging our self-centered definition of the realistic and transforming it into unreality.

Moreover, the actual realities compel recognition that the tension between an international political outlook shaped by the pre-1945, Machiavellian, world and the world of nuclear weaponry cannot last forever. Hence the overriding need for a foreign policy responsive to international law as the means of avoiding war.

The Pentagon study lays bare the ways in which the tragedy of Vietnam grew out of Washington's contempt for UN Charter principles, and thus aids in alerting us to the necessity for fundamental change.

Early myth-making

The study indicates that Washington's myth-making began early. Its initial 1950 offer of aid to France's reconquest of Indochina was publicly rationalized on the ground that the Viet Minh struggle was part of Moscow's world conspiracy, and that the French-created Bao Dai regime was the genuine Indochinese government. The United States was thus not supporting a war to deny independence, since the Viet Minh was not an indigenous force but an agent of outside forces. It was an "aggressor" against

France and the legitimate Bao Dai regime, and the United States had the right to grant aid to defeat the aggression

The Pentagon account reveals that the facts in Washington's possession were quite otherwise. The State Department's intelligence apparatus reported in 1948 that it could find no evidence that Ho Chi Minh took orders from Moscow. (A later detailed study by American scholar Charles B. McLane concluded not only did Ho act independently of Moscow, but— like Mao— he may have owed his success to that independence.)

The Pentagon study also relates that repeated pleas by Ho to the United States and the United Nations in the immediate post-war years to aid Indochinese independence received no response. The silence included the U.S.S.R. in the U.N.

As regards the Bao Dai regime, the Papers inform us that in March of 1949 the State Department refused its support because "by failing to develop appeal among Vietnamese [it] might become virtually a puppet government separated from the people and existing only by the presence of French military forces."

The puppet character of this regime and the wide popular backing given to Ho's Viet Minh (80 percent, according to Eisenhower) was repeatedly reported by official intelligence agencies and private observers right up to the French defeat. But the United States escalated aid to the French and Bao Dai until it reached 78 percent of the total cost of the war

A striking feature of the Pentagon account is the consistency with which it describes, and confirms as myth, the same pattern of official deception throughout our entire Vietnam intervention— with our officials depicting the Viet Cong struggle as the work of Hanoi (an "external" agency), and the various Saigon regimes as actually representative of the South Vietnamese.

Again, the aim after the Geneva Conference continued to be to provide a cover for the violence done to the UN Charter provisions respecting independence and self-determination. In the post-Geneva years, as will be noted, the Pentagon Papers added to these violated principles the Charter's prohibition against disruption of territorial integrity.

Coveted natural resources

Why did the United States undertake intervention in Indochina? The most detailed statement provided by the Pentagon account is a 1952 National Security Council declaration which cited, principally, protection of U.S. security interests in the Far East; retention of Southeast Asia as "the principal world source of natural rubber and tin," producer of "petroleum and other strategically important commodities," and exporter of "critically important" rice to India, Japan and other Asian nations; and the "domino" effect, whereby the "loss" of Indochina would lead to the "loss" of Southeast Asia, India and the Middle East, and would eventually threaten European security.

The Eisenhower Administration added the threatened loss of Japan as ally, and repeated the others *ad nauseam* until after the Geneva Conference. Fortified by two presidential commission reports on threatening future shortages of basic raw materials, it placed particular emphasis on the need to prevent loss of the rich natural resources of Southeast Asia.

Needless to say, the U.N. Charter does not permit members to block national independence, interfere with self-determination or disrupt the territorial integrity of other nations on any of the grounds cited.

After Geneva, the domino theory and U.S. security interests continued to be stressed "in endless variation", as the Pentagon account puts it, but the Vietnam War forged its own rationale as well— the loss of prestige and of the credibility of our commitments if we failed to crush the Viet Cong.

Needless to say, the UN Charter does not permit members to block national independence, interfere with self-determination or disrupt the territorial integrity of other nations on any of the grounds cited.

As the United States became increasingly involved in the French-Indochinese war, it had to grapple with the problem that faced the French: If the mass of Indochinese supported the Viet Minh, how could the Bao Dai regime survive except through the permanent presence of massive foreign military forces?

The Pentagon account cites a memorandum of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the eve of the Geneva Conference, suggesting a solution: "Seek to create conditions, by destroying effective communist forces . . . under which the, Associated Forces could assume responsibility for the defense of Indochina."

In other words, exterminate enough of the pro-Viet Minh population to permit the Bao Dai regime to maintain power without apparent violence to the principle of self-determination. In outlining a proposed course of U.S. action in alliance with France, the memorandum declared that the "employment of atomic weapons is contemplated in the event that such course is militarily advantageous."

As described in the Pentagon account, this pattern of population extermination by an expanding U.S. military power to permit the survival of Washington-selected regimes was put into practice in South Vietnam in the 1960s. As the arguments in defense of Lieutenant Calley

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“Peace has never been on the American agenda”

*From the Introduction to the
Gravel Edition of The Pentagon Papers*

These are agonizing times for America. This nation has been torn apart by a war that has seared its conscience. We have spent lives and wealth without limit in pursuit of an unworthy goal, preserving our own power and prestige while laying waste the unfortunate lands of Southeast Asia....

We were told that we had to make sacrifices to preserve freedom and liberty in Southeast Asia. We were told that South Vietnam was the victim of aggression, and it was our duty to punish aggression at its source. We were told that we had to fight on the continent of Asia so that we would not have to battle on the shores of America. One can accept these arguments only if he has failed to read *The Pentagon Papers*....

The terrible truth is that the Papers do not support our public statements. The Papers do not support our good intentions. The Papers prove that, from the beginning, the war has been an American war, serving only to perpetuate American military power in Asia. Peace has never been on the American agenda for Southeast Asia....

The Pentagon Papers reveal the inner workings of a government bureaucracy set up to defend this country, but now out of control, managing an international empire by garrisoning American troops around the world. It created an artificial client state in South Vietnam, lamented its unpopularity among its own people, eventually encouraged the overthrow of that government, and then supported a series of military dictators who served their own ends, and at times our government's ends, but never the cause of their own people.

The Pentagon Papers show that our leaders never understood the human commitments which underlay the nationalist movement in Vietnam, or the degree to which the Vietnamese were willing to sacrifice in

what they considered to be a century-long struggle to eliminate colonialism from their land. Like the empires that have gone before us, our government has viewed as legitimate only those regimes which it had established, regardless of the views of those governed. It has viewed the Viet Minh and their successors, the Viet Cong, as insurgents rebelling against a legitimate government, failing to see that their success demonstrated the people's disaffection from the regime we supported. Our leaders lived in an isolated, dehumanized world of “surgical air strikes” and “Viet Cong infrastructure”, when the reality was the maiming of women and children and the rise of a popular movement.

The *Papers* show that there was no concern in the decision-making process for the impact of our actions upon the Vietnamese people. American objectives were always to preserve the power and prestige of this country. In the light of the devastation we have brought to that unhappy land, it is hard to believe that any consideration was given to the costs of our policies that would be borne by the very people we claimed to be helping....

If ever there was a time for change, it is now. It is in this spirit that I hope the past, as revealed in the Pentagon Papers, will help us make a new beginning, toward that better America which we all seek.

*Senator Mike Gravel
Washington, D.C.
August 1971*

From *The Pentagon Papers*. Senator Mike Gravel, editor. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971-1972

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have revealed, the legal prohibition against war on civilians is necessarily violated when the politics of a conflict call for military protection of alien-imposed regimes against a recalcitrant people.

Watershed conference

The Geneva Conference was a watershed in the decades-long struggle for Indochina. The decision to negotiate an end to the war at Geneva in May, 1954, was made at a Big Four* Ministers Conference in February. As the conference date approached, Washington sought desperately to prevent the negotiations. In the light of the political and military realities, no settlement was possible without substantial concessions to Ho Chi Minh's government. In April, the Pentagon account relates, the National Security Council defined U.S. policy as follows: (a) nothing short of military victory in Indochina is acceptable; (b) if France disagrees, the United States will oppose any settlement at Geneva and enter the war actively with or without French participation.

The policy was triply contemptuous of international law. In addition to ignoring the principles of independence and self-determination, it was flouting the UN Charter's requirement for negotiation of disputes and its prohibition against aggressive war. What made the violations even more crude, as the U.S. general posture as simply an interested bystander. It was seeking to block settlement of an eight-year war in which it was not a participant.

[The defeat of the French at] Dien Bien Phu, and the refusal of either Congress or Washington's allies to go along with unilateral military intervention, finally persuaded Washington that it would have to acquiesce in some compromise at Geneva. While the Pentagon Papers say little about the Geneva negotiations, a "secret" cablegram from Secretary of State Dulles refers to the seven "U.S.-U.K. terms" for settlement. These terms became the basis for all future U.S. actions in Vietnam, though those respecting Vietnam

*Editor's note: The "Big Four" countries following World War II were the United States, England, France and the Soviet Union.

were explicitly rejected by the Conference. They included division of Vietnam, no political arrangements likely to result in the "loss" of the south to the Communists, no restrictions on importation of arms or military advisers into the south, and "possible" later unification by peaceful means.

In his cablegram Dulles explained that in order to forestall peaceful unification of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, the unifying elections projected at the Conference should be held as far in the future as possible, and he urged the U.S. delegation to prevent a date from being set altogether.

The continued aim after the Geneva Conference was to provide a cover for the violence done to the UN Charter provisions respecting independence and self-determination.

Sabotage

As the Pentagon account confirms, the Conference did not partition Vietnam. It established two regrouping zones for armistice purposes and elections for a single government in 1956. The introduction of foreign troops or bases and the use of Vietnamese territory for military purposes were forbidden.

The United States pledged, in the name of its U.N. obligation, to respect independence and territorial integrity, not to disturb the Agreement forcibly. But the Pentagon study reveals that, even before the Conference was over, Washington sent its chief counter-insurgency expert, Colonel Edward Lansdale, to Saigon in order to stabilize a government in the south and to organize sabotage in the north.

The account says that by early August, 1954, the National Security Council concluded that the Geneva Accords were a "disaster" which might lead to the "loss" of all Southeast Asia. It called for ousting the French, who were the guarantors of the settlement in the south, then setting up a "viable" southern regime under Ngo Dinh Diem who had been brought from exile in the United States for the purpose, and for preventing "a communist victory through

all-Vietnam elections." In fact, Dulles had signaled Washington's intent to sabotage the accords two days after they were signed. He told the press on July 23: "One of the good aspects of the Geneva Conference is that it advances the truly independent status of Cambodia, Laos and Southern Vietnam."

The Pentagon account of Diem's refusal to permit the mandated 1956 elections has been interpreted in the press as implying that Washington had no hand in this. The United States, the Pentagon account explains, urged Diem not to oppose the mandated discussions to arrange the elections, but to insist upon conditions which Hanoi could not accept.

In May of 1956, Washington sent a military force to Saigon on the pretext of helping the Vietnamese recover and redistribute equipment abandoned by the French. This, the Pentagon study declares, was "a thinly veiled device to increase the number of Americans in Vietnam" in violation of the accords. The account concludes that without U.S. support Diem "almost certainly could not have consolidated his hold on the south": without the threat of U.S. intervention, he "could not have refused" to cancel the unifying elections; and without U.S. aid, he "could not have survived."

In brief, it states, "South Vietnam was essentially the creation of the United States."

Pernicious war crimes

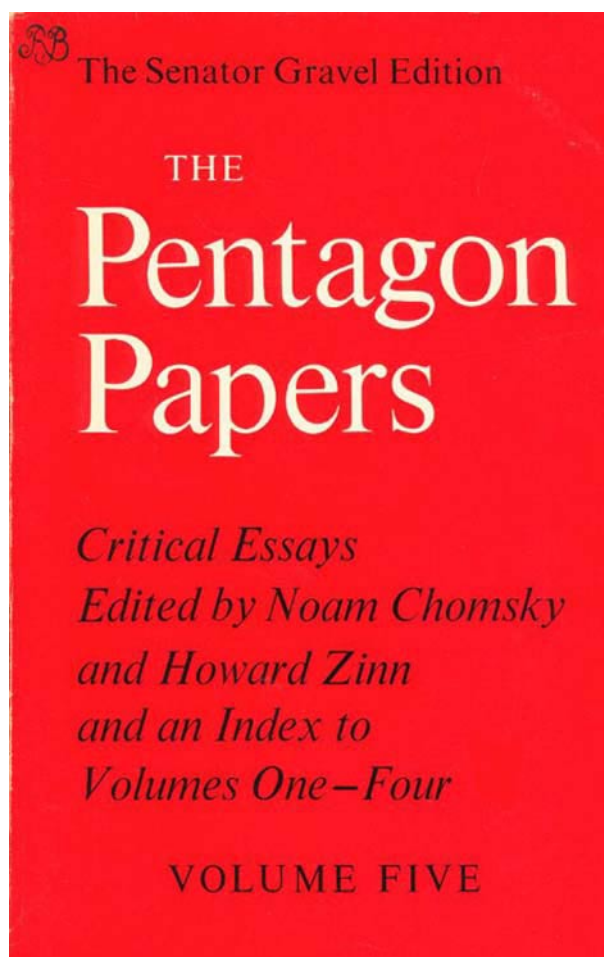
The study thus makes it clear that the United States, in explicit violation of its pledge at Geneva and its obligations under the UN Charter, disrupted the territorial integrity of Vietnam, interfered with its independence, and denied self-determination to the people of the South.

Its actions were clearly illegal. When it resorted to war to enforce these illegal actions, its behavior became criminal under the terms of the Nuremberg Charter, which defines war waged in violation of treaties and agreements as the most pernicious of all war crimes.

In order to provide a legal cover for its objective of partitioning Vietnam permanently and establishing a "non-communist" regime in the South, Washington proceeded to rewrite history. It decreed that the Geneva Accords had established two Vietnamese states and that the South

was to be non-communist, without regard to popular will. The U.S. terms for settlement were substituted for the actual terms.

The myth that Geneva established two Vietnams, promoted almost universally for years in the United States by all communications media, was essential to the formal justification for U.S. intervention—"aggression" from North Vietnam against the independence of South Vietnam, and the right of the United States to defend South Vietnam from such aggression. As one of America's foremost authorities on international law, the late Quincy Wright, has written: Once the 1956 elections were canceled the North had every legal right to restore the nation's territorial integrity by whatever means available. Hence the reality of the Geneva Accords had to be buried.



The Gravel edition of The Pentagon Papers includes an additional volume with analyses and commentaries by experts on various aspects of the war, its origins and its consequences.

The Pentagon account does suggest that Hanoi can be charged with some responsibility for the war in that it passively permitted cancellation of the 1956 elections, as well as Diem's campaign of repression against the former Viet Minh cadres who had fought the French. The insurrection in the South, according to the account, developed indigenously in self-defense against this repression long before Hanoi was charged with "intervention". In fact, the Pentagon study tells us, the Vietnamese communist leadership in Hanoi was insisting on peaceful political activity in the South until 1959, when it was compelled by the spreading insurrection to take charge.

Diem's mass arrests of Viet Minh cadre, the study states, had put from 50,000 to 100,000 in detention camps by 1955. Instructed to confine themselves to "political struggle," the Viet Minh failed to resist Diem's repression, which almost wiped them out. They began their insurrection against instructions around 1956 to preserve their forces and for three years fought alone, isolated from the North. The insurrection, according to the Pentagon study, expanded with the increasingly oppressive and corrupt behavior of the Diem regime.

C.I.A. reports indicated that Diem had alienated virtually all elements of the population before 1959, and had thus inspired the insurrection which, in the words of the Pentagon study, was "by no means contrived in North Vietnam."

Diem returned to the landlords the lands given to the peasants by the Viet Minh during the French War, and he replaced the traditional, popularly-elected village councils with northern Catholic refugees personally loyal to him. (French journalists and scholars in Vietnam estimated that 60 to 90 percent of southern villages were governed by Viet Minh cadre at the time of Geneva.) C.I.A. reports indicated that Diem had alienated virtually all elements of the population before 1959, and had thus inspired the insurrection which, in the words of the Pentagon study, was "by no means contrived in North Vietnam."

Meanwhile, the study tells us, Hanoi concentrated on its internal development, apparently

hoping to achieve reunification through the mandated elections or through the natural collapse of the weak Diem regime. But it was under pressure, both from southern insurrectionists and from restive southerners who had been grouped north under the terms of the Geneva Accords, presumably until reunification in 1956.

Striking restraint

In May of 1959, the Pentagon study states, the Lao Dong (Communist) Party's Central Committee decided "to take control of the growing insurgency". The Pentagon analyst ascribed the decision to "North Vietnam's leaders," although in fact the Lao Dong party was an all-Vietnamese body, many of whose most prominent members, including its general secretary, were southerners. It operated publicly from Hanoi; but after the decision to back the insurrection, some of its members went south to give it leadership. From the viewpoint of the U.S. propaganda position, this constituted "external" direction of the insurrection.

According to the Pentagon account, the communist decision to throw its weight behind the insurrection took the form chiefly of providing some supplies and "infiltrating" back south cadre members who had been regrouped north. The first report of the presence of individual North Vietnamese troops in the south occurred in October, 1964, when there were already some 25,000 U.S. "combat-support" troops actually engaged in the fighting. A single North Vietnamese regiment was said to have been observed in February, 1965, when the bombing of the North was initiated. According to military intelligence, that one regiment was not augmented until after U.S. combat troops had entered the war overtly in massive numbers in the summer and fall of 1965.

It thus appears clear, from the actual Pentagon record, that even though Hanoi would have been legitimately defending Vietnam's independence and territorial integrity had it initiated the war, it did not in fact do so. Far from being aggressive, it was rather strikingly restrained—doubtless hoping to ward off America's massive military power.

The record also makes it clear that the Viet Cong was doing quite well without North Vietnamese troops or even supplies, at least until the entry of U.S. combat troops, that it held the allegiance of southerners throughout the period covered by the Pentagon study, that the Saigon regime had virtually no political support, and that this led the United States to expand the conflict into what amounted to an American invasion aimed at exterminating enough southern Vietnamese to pacify the country in the U.S. "national interest".

Local resistance

President Kennedy's decision to expand the force of "military advisers" (referred to as "combat support" troops) to some 10,000 in the fall of 1961 was prompted by intelligence reports that large areas of the south were under Viet Cong control and that the situation was critical for Saigon. The National Liberation Front, the formal political body of the insurrection, had been officially organized in December of 1960, and within a year had 300,000 members, according to intelligence reports.

The military arm, known to Americans as the Viet Cong ("V.C."), had some 17,000 troops, the bulk locally recruited, with little evidence that it relied on external supplies. Saigon's army then numbered 170,000—ten times as large—and the Saigon regime was on the verge of collapse! In order to justify the violations of the Geneva Accords involved in expanding U.S. combat-support troops, the U.S. administration made elaborate plans for releasing a "White Paper" on North Vietnamese aggression.

A December, 1962, intelligence report estimated that the V.C. had expanded to 23,000 elite fighting personnel plus about 100,000 irregulars, that it controlled some two-thirds of the villages wholly or in varying degree, and that its influence had expanded in urban areas. Hanoi's role is mentioned briefly, solely in a political context. In March, 1964, Secretary McNamara informed President Johnson that desertion rates for the Saigon army and paramilitary forces were high and increasing, that the political control structure from Saigon down to the hamlets had "disappeared" and that the V.C. were recruiting "energetically and effectively".

An intelligence analysis at the same time stated that "the primary sources of communist strength in South Vietnam are indigenous", arising out of the revolutionary social aims of the Communists and their identification with the nationalist struggle against France in the 1950s. The analysis said that bombing the North, then being debated, would be ineffective since the V.C. was not dependent on it for men or supplies.

These reports did not deter the president from publicly declaring that the United States was aiding the people of South Vietnam "to win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy". Nor did it deter him from undertaking secret offensive operations against the North or from calling for another document proving Hanoi intervention. While ordering publication of such a document, he and Secretary of State Rusk resisted military pressures for rapid and public escalation of attacks on the North on the grounds that the Administration "lacked adequate information concerning the nature and magnitude" of infiltration from the North!

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By early 1966, both Secretary of Defense McNamara and Assistant Secretary McNaughton had decided that the ground war in the South could not be won, short of exterminating the entire population. A McNaughton memo complained that the Saigon army was "passive and accommodation-prone," that the government infrastructure was moribund and the V.C. infrastructure strong. In a later note, McNaughton observed: "We control next to no territory" (emphasis added). A few months later McNamara, returning from a trip to Saigon, confirmed that "we" control little, if any, more of the population than before the entry of U.S. combat troops.

In January of 1968, the massive Tet offensive caught the United States by surprise, according to the Pentagon account. General Westmoreland reported that the offensive was a VC. operation, with northerners filling in gaps. He pleaded for

a step-up in U.S. troop reinforcements to offset the "casualties and desertions" resulting from the offensive, a request which finally compelled Johnson to call a halt to the war's continuous escalation.

The Pentagon's office of Systems Analysis declared that, despite the influx of 500,000 men, 1.2 million tons of bombs a year and 400,000 attack sorties annually, "our control of the countryside and the defense of the urban areas is now essentially at pre-August, 1965, levels. We have achieved stalemate at a high commitment." The Pentagon study thus records Washington's readiness to visit staggering destruction upon the Vietnamese in the full knowledge that the regime it was seeking to impose had no popular support.

The bombing of the North and the persistent refusal to negotiate the war's end were explicit consequences of this knowledge. In early 1964 the Johnson Administration launched secret air and commando attacks against North Vietnam under Plan 34A, as well as De Soto patrol assaults which led to the Tonkin Gulf incident. The study ascribes these attacks to the fact that the United States "found itself unable to cope with the Viet Cong insurgency. . . ."

When the limited, secret attacks on the North brought no results, Washington initiated open, massive, and continuing air attacks in February of 1965. A single bomb dropped by one nation on another with which it is not at war would be condemned as criminal aggression. In this case, an average of forty planes bombed the North daily for well over three years, initially to terrorize it into political accommodation to illegitimate U.S. goals in the South.

American invasion

As the Pentagon study put it, Washington concluded that the V.C. could not be defeated and the Saigon regime preserved in a struggle confined to South Vietnam, and so it bombed the North to compensate for failure in its counterinsurgency efforts. After a few months, when continuous bombing plainly had no effect on the North, the rationale for it was changed to interdiction of infiltration of men and supplies, even though the intelligence agencies still estimated that the V.C. did not depend on large-

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scale supplies or manpower from the North. The Pentagon study analyst concluded that the bombing was undertaken through lack of alternative proposals for dealing with disintegration of the Saigon regime.

With the predicted failure of expanded bombing, north and south, to stem Saigon's military and political disintegration, President Johnson decided to deploy thirty-four battalions of combat troops and by the end of 1965 there were almost 200,000 U.S. military personnel in the South. In *The Pentagon Papers*, the fiction that the United States was assisting Saigon at its request had long since been discarded. The war was an American affair, with the Saigon regime viewed, in the Pentagon study's language, "in terms of its suitability as a base" for U.S. action.

All that could be hoped for was that the Saigon regime would "give the appearance of a valid government". All pretense of a supporting role was dropped. The documents speak of "our" capture or loss of so much territory or population. Their estimates of relative strength of the contending forces often do not even mention the existence of a South Vietnamese army. Both militarily and politically, Saigon was discounted as a material force. In relation to Hanoi, the entire escalating initiative was ours: The documents refer repeatedly to the expectation that our escalation will be matched by Hanoi, not the other way around.

In brief, the war was in actuality an American invasion of South Vietnam. The massive mythology concerning defense of an "independent" South Vietnam against aggression "from its northern neighbor" was an essential legal cover.

Examining the reasons for this continuously escalating invasion, the Pentagon study concludes that the United States perceived itself to be the world's most powerful country and, as such, it considered that the outcome of the war would demonstrate its will and ability "to have its way in world affairs". It is difficult to conceive of goals and conduct more in conflict with

the fundamental purposes and stated principles of the United Nations.

Even within the framework of its cover story, Washington flouted U.N. procedural principles. The Charter requires that, when a nation acts militarily in defense against aggression, it must immediately notify the Security Council. From 1961 to mid-1964 the United States expanded its forces in Vietnam, sent troops into combat and launched secret attacks against the North with no notification to the Security Council.

Its first notification to the Council occurred when it openly bombed northern installations immediately following the Tonkin Gulf events. On that occasion, Washington falsely told the Council that it knew nothing of, and had no responsibility for, raids by PT boats on North Vietnamese coastal and island territory, or strafing by planes of North Vietnamese villages. It denied, too, that the U.S. vessels involved in the incidents had any connection with any raids.

In fact, as the Pentagon study confirms, the secret programs under which the raids on the North were conducted at the time were commanded by U.S. officers, and the Maddox was on an intelligence-gathering mission under one of these programs when attacked in the Gulf. [Editor's note: It later came to light that there was never any clear evidence of attacks on the intruding U.S. ships in the Tonkin Gulf. But the Johnson administration, which had been looking for an excuse to start bombing northern Vietnam, chose to interpret some cryptic sonar signals—which may have been reflected from the Maddox's own propeller—as the evidence for which it had long been prepared.]

It was clear that the puppet regime would collapse upon U.S. military withdrawal.

The U.N. Charter also mandates that efforts must be made to settle disputes by negotiations. Washington tried to block the Geneva negotiations and continued to oppose negotiations, in substance, throughout its escalation of the war. Thus, early in 1964 bombing was delayed for fear of international pressures for "premature negotiations", and in 1965 it was initiated in part due to fear of growing southern sentiment for a negotiated peace.

Concern for appearances

At several points, the Pentagon study reveals worry about a neutralist takeover in Saigon which would seek negotiations and "invite the U.S. to leave". This fear of negotiations, the study makes clear, stemmed from the knowledge that any American-imposed regime would collapse with U.S. military withdrawal. On July 31, 1971, South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu, rejecting any form of legal political activity for the V.C., hence any possibility of a negotiated settlement, explained that, "We cannot afford to give any concessions to the communists because we are weak".

The study also confirms that President Johnson's gestures toward negotiations in the spring of 1965, were intended as camouflage. And it reveals that his offer on March 31, 1968, to limit bombing of the North in exchange for negotiations was accompanied by a State Department cablegram instructing U.S. ambassadors in Asia to "make clear that Hanoi is most likely to denounce the project and thus free our hand after a short period". In this case Hanoi "double-crossed" Washington policy-makers; it accepted the negotiations offer.

Explicit indications of concern for U.N. or international opinion are rare in the Pentagon Papers. One such expression occurred in March, 1964, when the military was pressing for overt bombing of the North and overt combat forces in the South. McNamara opposed this on the grounds that it would disturb "key allies and other nations, etc." Since clandestine attacks on the North were already planned and "support" troops were in fact engaged in combat, this was a typical case of concern for appearances, not substance.

The concern for appearances was soon brushed aside. When continuous bombing of the North was launched in early 1965, a State Department wire informed Ambassador Taylor in Saigon that the United States planned to seize the initiative at the U.N. Security Council by claiming it was responding to Hanoi's aggression. The purpose was to "avoid being faced with really damaging initiatives by the U.S.S.R. or perhaps by such powers as India, France or even the U.N."

The wire also said that Washington expected Hanoi to refuse a U.N. invitation to the debate, thereby strengthening the U.S. position, and that it anticipated long, drawn-out discussion, with any decision about eventual agreement postponed. The United States thus proposed to take the bombing issue to the U.N. itself in order to forestall "damaging" action by other nations or any talk of settlement. It had done this effectively at the time of the Tonkin Gulf raids.

Morality not an issue

The Pentagon study ends with the Johnson Administration's last days. It is clear that President Nixon has revised Washington's tactics but not the goals established unilaterally by the United States at Geneva. Much of the opposition to the war has been based not on its immorality or the violence it has done to international law, but on the disproportionate cost in relation to the "national interest". By lowering current costs, in terms of U.S. lives and money, Nixon seems to have dampened active opposition. At this writing, the goal of exterminating Vietnamese foes of Saigon through an expanding air war in place of ground troops, and of imposing Saigon regimes which cannot rule without U.S. military action, continues, as does the maneuvering to evade actual negotiations.

The study thus demonstrates a striking consistency in U.S. policy toward Indochina over two decades. Liberals who supported this policy until the cost became too great argue that it was initially justified as a response to monolithic communism's efforts at world conquest, or so it appeared at the time.

With the overt disintegration of the monolith, the argument runs, the justification for the war as a response to its threat was undermined. On this ground, the liberals justify their previous support of U.S. policy, with its myths regarding the Geneva Accords and Hanoi aggression. This has inhibited them from attacking these myths, and it continues to inhibit them from attacking the fundamentals of U.S. policy out of which the war grew.

The record suggests, however, that U.S. policy was not initiated as a response to a perceived

threat from monolithic world communism, but that the threat was perceived to justify a policy of intervention. As early as January, 1950, Secretary of State Acheson informed Ambassador Bruce in Paris that China and the U.S.S.R. had clashed sharply in Moscow over economic and territorial issues.

In December of 1950, British Prime Minister Atlee tried to persuade Truman and Acheson that U.S. policy, based on the concept of the monolith, was itself creating it by throwing China into the arms of the U.S.S.R., thereby preventing their natural rivalry in Asia from asserting itself. The Yugoslavs were also telling this to the Americans in 1950. A French lawyer, practicing in Saigon and Hanoi, wrote in the *U.N. World* of April, 1950, that Ho Chi Minh would find himself caught between the rival pressures of China and the U.S.S.R. and would emerge as the Tito of Asia. (He also predicted that 500,000 U.S. troops would be needed to defeat Ho Chi Minh, who was backed by 80 percent of the Vietnamese.)

The concept of a monolithic world communist conspiracy was a myth, but the U.S. needed the myth in order to rationalize its interventions, undertaken to maintain its dominance on a world scale.

The point is that Washington had ample opportunity to know that the concept of monolithic world communist conspiracy was a myth and that it alone chose to believe it. It did so because it needed the myth to rationalize its interventions, undertaken to maintain its position of dominance on a world scale generally, and in the Far East specifically.

In Vietnam, one form of this myth was exploitation of Khrushchev's January, 1961, speech emphasizing communist support for wars of liberation. Support for wars of national liberation has been a communist article of faith since formation of the Communist International in 1919. Khrushchev's emphasis on it at the time was an effort to meet Peking's chief criticism of Moscow, leveled at a world meeting of communist parties in mid-December, 1960. The Chinese communists had charged Moscow

with betraying these struggles by its "détente" policies toward the West, and Khrushchev was trying to counter the accusation. But the Kennedy Administration seized on the speech for public justification of its decision, made not long after its delivery, to expand Washington's military intervention in Vietnam and it has been used repeatedly ever since. The expansion, as the Pentagon study indicates, was made on quite other grounds, and Vietnam's resistance to it was wholly indigenous.

For Americans, the image of the world today is undoubtedly shaped by cold war myth. Publication of the Pentagon study has dramatically called attention to this, and may thus help to dispel the image. This is important not only for popular efforts to get the United States out of Indochina, but for the development of popular movements for redirection of U.S. policy away from unilateral interventions in a spurious "national interest" and toward conformity with international law in the true national interest.

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