

# Lying in Politics

Reflections on the Pentagon Papers

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"The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring a thousand non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."

—Robert S. McNamara

# I

THE PENTAGON PAPERS—as the forty-seven-volume "History of U.S. Decision-Making Process on Vietnam Policy" (commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in June 1967 and completed a year and a half later) has become known ever since the New York *Times* published, in June 1971, this top-secret, richly documented record of the American role in Indochina from World War II to May 1968—tell different stories, teach different lessons to different readers. Some claim they have only now understood that Vietnam was the "logical" outcome of the Cold War or the anti-Communist ideology, others that this is a unique opportunity to learn about decision-making processes in government, but most readers have by now agreed that the basic issue raised by the papers is deception. At any rate, it is quite obvious that this issue was uppermost in the minds of those who compiled *The Pentagon Papers* for the New York *Times*, and it is at least probable that this was also an issue for the team of writers who prepared the forty-seven volumes of the original study.<sup>1</sup> The famous credibility gap, which has been with us

<sup>1</sup> In the words of Leslie H. Gelb, who was in charge of the team: "Uppermost, of course, is the crucial question of governmental credibility." See "Today's Lessons from the Pentagon Papers," in *Life*, September 17, 1971.

for six long years, has suddenly opened up into an abyss. The quicksand of lying statements of all sorts, deceptions as well as self-deceptions, is apt to engulf any reader who wishes to probe this material, which, unhappily, he must recognize as the infrastructure of nearly a decade of United States foreign and domestic policy.

Because of the extravagant lengths to which the commitment to nontruthfulness in politics went on at the highest level of government, and because of the concomitant extent to which lying was permitted to proliferate throughout the ranks of all governmental services, military and civilian—the phony body counts of the “search-and-destroy” missions, the doctored after-damage reports of the air force,<sup>2</sup> the “progress” reports to Washington from the field written by subordinates who knew that their performance would be evaluated by their own reports<sup>3</sup>—one is easily tempted to forget the background of past history, itself not exactly a story of immaculate virtue, against which this newest episode must be seen and judged.

Secrecy—what diplomatically is called “discretion,” as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government—and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings. Whoever reflects on these mat-

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Stavins, Richard J. Barnet, and Marcus G. Raskin, *Washington Plans an Aggressive War*, New York, 1971, pp. 185–187.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Ellsberg, “The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine,” in *Public Policy*, Spring 1971, pp. 262–263. See also Leslie H. Gelb, “Vietnam: The System Worked,” in *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1971, p. 153.

ters can only be surprised by how little attention has been paid, in our tradition of philosophical and political thought, to their significance, on the one hand for the nature of action and, on the other, for the nature of our ability to deny in thought and word whatever happens to be the case. This active, aggressive capability is clearly different from our passive susceptibility to falling prey to error, illusion, the distortions of memory, and to whatever else can be blamed on the failings of our sensual and mental apparatus.

A characteristic of human action is that it always begins something new, and this does not mean that it is ever permitted to start *ab ovo*, to create *ex nihilo*. In order to make room for one's own action, something that was there before must be removed or destroyed, and things as they were before are changed. Such change would be impossible if we could not mentally remove ourselves from where we physically are located and *imagine* that things might as well be different from what they actually are. In other words, the deliberate denial of factual truth—the ability to lie—and the capacity to change facts—the ability to act—are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination. It is by no means a matter of course that we can *say*, “The sun shines,” when it actually is raining (the consequence of certain brain injuries is the loss of this capacity); rather, it indicates that while we are well equipped for the world, sensually as well as mentally, we are not fitted or embedded into it as one of its inalienable parts. We are *free* to change the world and to start something new in it. Without the mental freedom to deny or affirm existence, to say “yes” or “no”—not just to statements or propositions in order to express agreement or disagreement, but to things as they are given, beyond agreement or disagreement, to our organs of perception and

cognition—no action would be possible; and action is of course the very stuff politics are made of.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, when we talk about lying, and especially about lying among acting men, let us remember that the lie did not creep into politics by some accident of human sinfulness. Moral outrage, for this reason alone, is not likely to make it disappear. The deliberate falsehood deals with *contingent* facts; that is, with matters that carry no inherent truth within themselves, no necessity to be as they are. Factual truths are never compellingly true. The historian knows how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life; it is always in danger of being perforated by single lies or torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups, nations, or classes, or denied and distorted, often carefully covered up by reams of falsehoods or simply allowed to fall into oblivion. Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs. From this, it follows that no factual statement can ever be beyond doubt—as secure and shielded against attack as, for instance, the statement that two and two make four.

It is this fragility that makes deception so very easy *up to a point*, and so tempting. It never comes into a conflict with reason, because things could indeed have been as the liar maintains they were. Lies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a careful eye to making it

<sup>4</sup> For more general considerations of the relation between truth and politics see my "Truth and Politics" in *Between Past and Future*, Second Edition, New York, 1968.

credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared.

Under normal circumstances the liar is defeated by reality, for which there is no substitute; no matter how large the tissue of falsehood that an experienced liar has to offer, it will never be large enough, even if he enlists the help of computers, to cover the immensity of factuality. The liar, who may get away with any number of single falsehoods, will find it impossible to get away with lying on principle. This is one of the lessons that could be learned from the totalitarian experiments and the totalitarian rulers' frightening confidence in the power of lying—in their ability, for instance, to rewrite history again and again to adapt the past to the "political line" of the present moment or to eliminate data that did not fit their ideology. Thus, in a socialist economy, they would deny that unemployment existed, the unemployed person simply becoming a non-person.

The results of such experiments when undertaken by those in possession of the means of violence are terrible enough, but lasting deception is not among them. There always comes the point beyond which lying becomes counterproductive. This point is reached when the audience to which the lies are addressed is forced to disregard altogether the distinguishing line between truth and falsehood in order to be able to survive. Truth or falsehood—it does not matter which any more, if your life depends on your acting as though you trusted; truth that can be relied on disappears entirely from public life, and with it the chief stabilizing factor in the ever-changing affairs of men.

To the many genres in the art of lying developed in the past, we must now add two more recent varieties. There is, *first*, the apparently innocuous one of the public-relations

managers in government who learned their trade from the inventiveness of Madison Avenue. Public relations is but a variety of advertising; hence it has its origin in the consumer society, with its inordinate appetite for goods to be distributed through a market economy. The trouble with the mentality of the public-relations man is that he deals only in opinions and "good will," the readiness to buy, that is, in intangibles whose concrete reality is at a minimum. This means that for his inventions it may indeed look as though the sky is the limit, for he lacks the politician's power to act, to "create" facts, and, thus, that simple everyday reality that sets limits to power and brings the forces of imagination down to earth.

The only limitation to what the public-relations man does comes when he discovers that the same people who perhaps can be "manipulated" to buy a certain kind of soap cannot be manipulated—though, of course, they can be forced by terror—to "buy" opinions and political views. Therefore the psychological premise of human manipulability has become one of the chief wares that are sold on the market of common and learned opinion. But such doctrines do not change the way people form opinions or prevent them from acting according to their own lights. The only method short of terror to have real influence on their conduct is still the old carrot-and-stick approach. It is not surprising that the recent generation of intellectuals, who grew up in the insane atmosphere of rampant advertising and were taught that half of politics is "image-making" and the other half the art of making people believe in the imagery, should almost automatically fall back on the older adages of carrot and stick whenever the situation becomes too serious for "theory." To them, the greatest disappointment in the Vietnam adventure should have been the discovery that there are people with whom carrot-and-stick methods do not work either.

(Oddly enough, the only person likely to be an ideal victim of complete manipulation is the President of the United States. Because of the immensity of his job, he must surround himself with advisers, the "National Security Managers," as they have recently been called by Richard J. Barnet, who "exercise their power chiefly by filtering the information that reaches the President and by interpreting the outside world for him."<sup>5</sup> The President, one is tempted to argue, allegedly the most powerful man of the most powerful country, is the only person in this country whose range of choices can be predetermined. This, of course, can happen only if the executive branch has cut itself off from contact with the legislative powers of Congress; it is the logical outcome in our system of government when the Senate is being deprived of, or is reluctant to exercise, its powers to participate and advise in the conduct of foreign affairs. One of the Senate's functions, as we now know, is to shield the decision-making process against the transient moods and trends of society at large—in this case, the antics of our consumer society and the public-relations managers who cater to it.)

The *second* new variety of the art of lying, though less frequently met with in everyday life, plays a more important role in the Pentagon papers. It also appeals to much better men, to those, for example, who are likely to be found in the higher ranks of the civilian services. They are, in Neil Sheehan's felicitous phrase, professional "problem-solvers,"<sup>6</sup> and they were drawn into government from the universities and the various think tanks, some of them

<sup>5</sup> In Stavins, Barnet, Raskin, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>6</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, as published by The New York Times, New York, 1971, p. xiv. My essay was prepared before the appearance of the editions published by the Government Printing Office and Beacon Press, and therefore is based only on the Bantam edition.

equipped with game theories and systems analyses, thus prepared, as they thought, to solve all the "problems" of foreign policy. A significant number of the authors of the McNamara study belong to this group, which consisted of eighteen military officers and eighteen civilians from think tanks, universities, and government services. They certainly "were not a flock of doves"—a mere "handful were critical of the U.S. commitment" in Vietnam<sup>7</sup>—and yet it is to them that we owe this truthful, though of course not complete, story of what happened inside the machinery of government.

The problem-solvers have been characterized as men of great self-confidence, who "seem rarely to doubt their ability to prevail," and they worked together with the members of the military of whom "the history remarks that they were 'men accustomed to winning.'"<sup>8</sup> We should not forget that we owe it to the problem-solvers' effort at impartial self-examination, rare among such people, that the actors' attempts at hiding their role behind a screen of self-protective secrecy (at least until they have completed their memoirs—in our century the most deceitful genre of literature) were frustrated. The basic integrity of those who wrote the report is beyond doubt; they could indeed be trusted by Secretary McNamara to produce an "encyclopedic and objective" report and "to let the chips fall where they may."<sup>9</sup>

But these moral qualities, which deserve admiration, clearly did not prevent them from participating for many years in the game of deceptions and falsehoods. Con-

fident "of place, of education and accomplishment,"<sup>10</sup> they lied perhaps out of a mistaken patriotism. But the point is that they lied not so much for their country—certainly not for their country's survival, which was never at stake—as for its "image." In spite of their undoubted intelligence—it is manifest in many memos from their pens—they also believed that politics is but a variety of public relations, and they were taken in by all the bizarre psychological premises underlying this belief.

Still, they obviously were different from the ordinary image-makers. Their distinction lies in that they were problem-solvers as well. Hence they were not just intelligent, but prided themselves on being "rational," and they were indeed to a rather frightening degree above "sentimentality" and in love with "theory," the world of sheer mental effort. They were eager to find formulas, preferably expressed in a pseudo-mathematical language, that would unify the most disparate phenomena with which reality presented them; that is, they were eager to discover *laws* by which to explain and predict political and historical facts as though they were as necessary, and thus as reliable, as the physicists once believed natural phenomena to be.

However, unlike the natural scientist, who deals with matters that, whatever their origin, are not man-made or man-enacted, and that therefore can be observed, understood, and eventually even changed only through the most meticulous loyalty to factual, given reality, the historian, as well as the politician, deals with human affairs that owe their existence to man's capacity for action, and that means to man's relative freedom from things as they are. Men who act, to the extent that they feel themselves to be the masters of their own futures, will forever be tempted

<sup>7</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, *op. cit.* in *Life*.

<sup>8</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. xiv.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, in *Life*.

<sup>10</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. xiv.

to make themselves masters of the past, too. Insofar as they have the appetite for action and are also in love with theories, they will hardly have the natural scientist's patience to wait until theories and hypothetical explanations are verified or denied by facts. Instead, they will be tempted to fit their reality—which, after all, was man-made to begin with and thus could have been otherwise—into their theory, thereby mentally getting rid of its disconcerting contingency.

Reason's aversion to contingency is very strong; it was Hegel, the father of grandiose history schemes, who held that "philosophical contemplation has no other intention than to eliminate the accidental."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, much of the modern arsenal of political theory—the game theories and systems analyses, the scenarios written for imagined "audiences," and the careful enumeration of, usually, three "options"—A, B, C—whereby A and C represent the opposite extremes and B the "logical" middle-of-the-road "solution" of the problem—has its source in this deep-seated aversion. The fallacy of such thinking begins with forcing the choices into mutually exclusive dilemmas; reality never presents us with anything so neat as premises for logical conclusions. The kind of thinking that presents both A and C as undesirable, therefore settles on B, hardly serves any other purpose than to divert the mind and blunt the judgment for the multitude of real possibilities. What these problem-solvers have in common with down-to-earth liars is the attempt to get rid of facts and the confidence that this should be possible because of the inherent contingency of facts.

<sup>11</sup> *Die Philosophische Weltgeschichte. Entwurf von 1830: "Die philosophische Betrachtung hat keine andere Absicht als das Zufällige zu entfernen."*

The truth of the matter is that this can never be done by either theory or opinion manipulation—as though a fact is safely removed from the world if only enough people believe in its nonexistence. It can be done only through radical destruction—as in the case of the murderer who *says* that Mrs. Smith has died and then goes and kills her. In the political domain, such destruction would have to be wholesale. Needless to say, there never existed on any level of government such a will to wholesale destruction, in spite of the fearful number of war crimes committed in the course of the Vietnam war. But even where this will is present, as it was in the case of both Hitler and Stalin, the power to achieve it would have to amount to omnipotence. In order to eliminate Trotsky's role from the history of the Russian Revolution, it is not enough to kill him and eliminate his name from all Russian records so long as one cannot kill all his contemporaries and wield power over the libraries and archives of all countries of the earth.

## II

THAT CONCEALMENT, falsehood, and the role of the deliberate lie became the chief issues of the Pentagon papers, rather than illusion, error, miscalculation, and the like, is mainly due to the strange fact that the mistaken decisions and lying statements consistently violated the astoundingly accurate factual reports of the intelligence community, at least as recorded in the Bantam edition. The crucial point here is not merely that the policy of lying was hardly ever aimed at the enemy (this is one of the reasons why the papers do not reveal any military secrets that could fall under the Espionage Act), but was destined chiefly, if not exclusively, for domestic consumption, for propaganda at home, and especially for the purpose of deceiving Congress. The Tonkin incident, where the enemy knew all the facts and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee none, is a case in point.

Of even greater interest is that nearly all decisions in this disastrous enterprise were made in full cognizance of the fact that they probably could not be carried out: hence goals had constantly to be shifted. There are, first, the publicly proclaimed objectives—"seeing that the people of South Vietnam are permitted to determine their future" or "assisting the country to win their contest against the . . . Communist conspiracy" or the containment of China

and the avoidance of the domino effect or the protection of America's reputation "as a counter-subversive guarantor."<sup>12</sup> To these Dean Rusk has recently added the aim of preventing World War III, though it seems not to be in the Pentagon papers or to have played a role in the factual record as we know it. The same flexibility marks tactical considerations: North Vietnam is being bombed in order to prevent "a collapse of national morale"<sup>13</sup> in the South and, particularly, the breakdown of the Saigon government. But when the first raids were scheduled to start, the government had broken down, "pandemonium reigned in Saigon," the raids had to be postponed and a new goal found.<sup>14</sup> Now the objective was to compel "Hanoi to stop the Vietcong and the Pathet Lao," an aim that even the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not hope to attain. As they said, "it would be idle to conclude that these efforts will have a decisive effect."<sup>15</sup>

From 1965 on, the notion of a clear-cut victory receded into the background and the objective became "to convince the enemy that *he* could not win" (*italics added*). Since the enemy remained unconvinced, the next goal appeared: "to avoid a humiliating defeat"—as though the hallmark of a defeat in war were mere humiliation. What the Pentagon papers report is the haunting fear of the impact of defeat, not on the welfare of the nation, but "on the *reputation* of the United States and its President" (*italics added*). Thus, shortly before, during the many debates about the advisability of using ground troops against North Vietnam, the dominant argument was not fear of defeat itself and con-

<sup>12</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 190.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 312.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 392.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 240.



cern with the welfare of the troops in the case of withdrawal, but: "Once U.S. troops are in, it will be difficult to withdraw them . . . without *admitting* defeat" (*italics added*).<sup>16</sup> There was, finally, the "political" aim "to show the world the lengths to which the United States will go for a friend" and "to fulfill commitments."<sup>17</sup>

All these goals existed together, in an almost helter-skelter fashion; none was permitted to cancel its predecessors. Each addressed itself to a different "audience," and for each a different "scenario" had to be produced. John T. McNaughton's much-quoted enumeration of U.S. aims in 1965, "70%—To avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor). 20%—To keep SVN [South Vietnam] (and the adjacent) territory from Chinese hands. 10%—To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life,"<sup>18</sup> is refreshing in its honesty, but was probably drawn up to bring some order and clarity into the debates on the forever troublesome question of why we were conducting a war in Vietnam, of all places. In a previous draft memorandum (1964), McNaughton had shown, perhaps unwittingly, how little he himself, even at that early stage of the bloody game, believed in the attainability of any substantial objectives: "Should South Vietnam disintegrate completely beneath us, we should try to hold it together long enough to permit us to try to evacuate our forces and *to convince the world* to accept the uniqueness (and congenital impossibility) of the South Vietnamese case" (*italics added*).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 437.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 434, 436.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 432.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 368.

"To convince the world"; to "demonstrate that U.S. was a 'good doctor' willing to keep promises, be tough, take risks, get bloodied and hurt the enemy badly";<sup>20</sup> to use a "tiny backward nation" devoid of any strategic importance "as a *test case* of U.S. capacity to help a nation meet a Communist 'war of liberation'" (*italics added*);<sup>21</sup> to keep intact an image of omnipotence, "our worldwide position of leadership";<sup>22</sup> to demonstrate "the will and the ability of the United States to have its way in world affairs";<sup>23</sup> to show "the credibility of our pledges to friends and allies";<sup>24</sup> in short, to "*behave like*" (*italics added*) the "greatest power in the world" for no other reason than to convince the world of this "simple fact" (in Walt Rostow's words)<sup>25</sup>—this was the only permanent goal that, with the beginning of the Johnson administration, pushed into the background all other goals and theories, the domino theory and anti-Communist strategy of the initial stages of the Cold War period as well as the counterinsurgency strategy so dear to the Kennedy administration.

The ultimate aim was neither power nor profit. Nor was it even influence in the world in order to serve particular, tangible interests for the sake of which prestige, an image of the "greatest power in the world," was needed and purposefully used. The goal was now the image itself, as is manifest in the very language of the problem-solvers, with their "scenarios" and "audiences," borrowed from the

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 255.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 278.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 600.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 255.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 600.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 256.

theater. For this ultimate aim, all policies became short-term interchangeable means, until finally, when all signs pointed to defeat in the war of attrition, the goal was no longer one of avoiding humiliating defeat but of finding ways and means to avoid admitting it and "save face."

Image-making as global policy—not world conquest, but victory in the battle "to win the people's minds"—is indeed something new in the huge arsenal of human follies recorded in history. This was not undertaken by a third-rate nation always apt to boast in order to compensate for the real thing, or by one of the old colonial powers that lost their position as a result of World War II and might have been tempted, as De Gaulle was, to bluff their way back to pre-eminence, but by "the dominant power" at the war's end. It may be natural for elected officeholders—who owe so much, or *believe* they owe so much, to their campaign managers—to think that manipulation is the ruler of the people's minds and hence the true ruler of the world. (The rumor, recently reported in the "Notes and Comment" section of *The New Yorker*, that "the Nixon-Agnew Administration was planning a campaign, organized and directed by Herb Klein, its director of communications, to destroy the 'credibility' of the press before the 1972 Presidential election" is quite in line with this public-relations mentality.)<sup>26</sup>

What is surprising is the eagerness of those scores of "intellectuals" who offered their enthusiastic help in this imaginary enterprise, perhaps because they were fascinated by the sheer size of the mental exercises it seemed to demand. Again, it may be only natural for problem-solvers, trained in translating all factual contents into the language of numbers and percentages, where they can be calculated,

to remain unaware of the untold misery that their "solutions"—pacification and relocation programs, defoliation, napalm, and antipersonnel bullets—held in store for a "friend" who needed to be "saved" and for an "enemy" who had neither the will nor the power to be one before we attacked him. But since they dealt with the people's minds, it remains astonishing that apparently none of them sensed that the "world" might get rather frightened of American friendship and commitment when the "lengths to which the U.S. will go to fulfill" them were "shown" and contemplated.<sup>27</sup> No reality and no common sense could penetrate the minds of the problem-solvers<sup>28</sup> who indefatigably prepared their scenarios for "relevant audiences" in order to change their states of mind—"the Communists (who must feel strong pressures), the South Vietnamese (whose morale must be buoyed), our allies (who must trust us as 'underwriters') and the U.S. public (which must support the risk-taking with U.S. lives and prestige)."<sup>29</sup>

We know today to what extent all these audiences were misjudged; according to Richard J. Barnet, in his excellent contribution to the book *Washington Plans an Aggressive War*, the "war became a disaster because the National Security Managers misjudged each audience."<sup>30</sup> But the greatest, indeed basic, misjudgment was to address audiences with the means of war, to decide military matters from a "political and public-relations perspective"

<sup>27</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 436.

<sup>28</sup> In the words of Leslie H. Gelb: "The foreign-policy community had become a 'house without windows,'" *Life*, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 438.

<sup>30</sup> In Stavins, Barnet, Raskin, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>26</sup> *The New Yorker*, July 10, 1971.

(whereby "political" meant the perspective of the next Presidential election and "public relations" the U.S. world image), and to think not about the real risks but of "techniques to minimize the impact of bad outcomes." Among proposals for the latter, the creation of "diversionary 'offensives' elsewhere in the world" was recommended, together with the launching of "an 'anti-poverty' program for underdeveloped areas."<sup>31</sup> Not for a moment did it occur to McNaughton, the author of this memorandum, who doubtless was an unusually intelligent man, that his diversions, unlike the diversions of the theater, would have had grave and totally unpredictable consequences; they would have changed the very world in which the U.S. moved and conducted its war.

It is this remoteness from reality that will haunt the reader of the Pentagon papers who has the patience to stay with them to the end. Barnet, in the essay mentioned above, has this to say on the matter: "The bureaucratic model had completely displaced reality: the hard and stubborn facts, which so many intelligence analysts were paid so much to collect, were ignored."<sup>32</sup> I am not sure that the evils of bureaucracy suffice as an explanation, though they certainly facilitated this defactualization. At any rate, the relation, or, rather, nonrelation, between facts and decision, between the intelligence community and the civilian and military services, is perhaps the most momentous, and certainly the best-guarded, secret that the Pentagon papers revealed.

It would be of great interest to know what enabled the intelligence services to remain so close to reality in this "Alice-in-Wonderland atmosphere," which the papers ascribe to the strange operations of the Saigon government

<sup>31</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 438.

<sup>32</sup> In Stavins, Barnet, Raskin, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

but which seems in retrospect to more aptly describe the defactualized world where political goals were set and military decisions were made. For the beginnings of the role of the services in Southeast Asia were far from promising. Early in *The Pentagon Papers* we find recorded the decision to embark upon "covert warfare" in the early years of the Eisenhower administration, when the executive still believed it needed congressional authority to start a war. Eisenhower was still old-fashioned enough to believe in the Constitution. He met with congressional leaders and decided against open intervention because he was informed that Congress would not support such a decision.<sup>33</sup> When later, beginning with the Kennedy administration, "overt warfare," that is, the dispatching of "combat troops," was discussed, "the question of Congressional authority for open acts of war against a sovereign nation was never seriously raised."<sup>34</sup> Even when, under Johnson, foreign governments were thoroughly briefed on our plans for bombing North Vietnam, similar briefing of and consultation with congressional leaders seem never to have taken place.<sup>35</sup>

During Eisenhower's administration the Saigon Military Mission was formed, under the command of Colonel Edward Lansdale, and told "to undertake paramilitary operations . . . and to wage political-psychological warfare."<sup>36</sup> This meant in practice to print leaflets that would spread lies falsely attributed to the other side, to pour "contaminant in the engines" of the bus company of Hanoi before the French left the North, to conduct an "English-language class . . . for mistresses of important personages," and to

<sup>33</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, pp. 5 and 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 268.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 334-335.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

hire a team of Vietnamese astrologers.<sup>37</sup> This ludicrous phase continued into the early sixties, until the military took over. After the Kennedy administration, the counter-insurgency doctrine receded into the background—perhaps because, during the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem, it turned out that the C.I.A.-financed Vietnamese Special Forces “had in effect become the private army of Mr. Nhu,” Diem’s brother and political adviser.<sup>38</sup>

The fact-finding branches of the intelligence services were separated from whatever covert operations were still going on in the field, which meant that they at least were responsible only for gathering information, rather than for creating the news themselves. They had no need to show positive results and were under no pressure from Washington to produce good news to feed into the public-relations machine, or to concoct fairy tales about “continuing progress, virtually miraculous improvement, year in and year out.”<sup>39</sup> They were relatively independent, and the result was that they told the truth, year in and year out. It seems that in these intelligence services people did not tell “their superiors what they thought they wanted to hear,” that “assessments were [not] made by the implementers,” and that no commanding officer told his agents what “an American division commander told one of his district advisers, who insisted on reporting the persistent presence of unpacified Vietcong hamlets in his area: ‘Son, you’re writing our own report card in this country. Why are you failing us?’”<sup>40</sup> It also seems that those who were responsible

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15 ff.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 166.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> Gelb, in *Foreign Policy*, *op. cit.*; Ellsberg, *op. cit.*

for intelligence estimates were miles away from the problem-solvers, their disdain for facts, and the accidental character of all facts. The price they paid for these objective advantages was that their reports remained without any influence on the decisions and propositions of the National Security Council.

After 1963, the only discernible trace of the covert-war period is the infamous “provocation strategy,” that is, a whole program of “deliberate attempts to provoke the D.R.V. [Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam] into taking actions which could then be answered by a systematic U.S. air campaign.”<sup>41</sup> These tactics do not belong among the ruses of war. They have been typical of the secret police and became notorious as well as counter-productive in the declining days of czarist Russia, when the agents of the Okhrana, by organizing spectacular assassinations, “served despite themselves the ideas of those whom they denounced.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 313.

<sup>42</sup> Maurice Laporte, *L’histoire de l’Okhrana*, Paris, 1935, p. 25.

## III

THE DIVERGENCE between facts—established by the intelligence services, sometimes by the decision-makers themselves (as notably in the case of McNamara), and often available to the informed public—and the premises, theories, and hypotheses according to which decisions were finally made is total. And the extent of our failures and disasters throughout these years can be grasped only if one has the totality of this divergence firmly in mind. I shall therefore remind the reader of a few outstanding examples.

As regards the domino theory, first enunciated in 1950<sup>43</sup> and permitted to survive, as has been said, the “most momentous events”: To the question of President Johnson in 1964, “Would the rest of Southeast Asia necessarily fall if Laos and South Vietnam came under North Vietnamese control?” the C.I.A.’s answer was, “With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to Communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam.”<sup>44</sup> When five years later the Nixon administration raised the same question, it “was advised by the Central Intelligence Agency . . . that [the

<sup>43</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 253–254.

United States] could immediately withdraw from South Vietnam and ‘all of Southeast Asia would remain just as it is for at least another generation.’ ”<sup>45</sup> According to the Pentagon papers, “only the Joint Chiefs, Mr. [Walt W.] Rostow and General [Maxwell] Taylor appear to have accepted the domino theory in its literal sense,”<sup>46</sup> and the point here is that those who did not accept it still used it, not merely for public statements, but as part of their own premises as well.

As to the claim that the insurgents in South Vietnam were “externally directed and supported” by a “Communist conspiracy”: The assessment of the intelligence community in 1961 was “that 80-90 per cent of the estimated 17,000 VC had been locally recruited, and that there was little evidence that the VC relied on external supplies.”<sup>47</sup> Three years later the situation was unchanged: According to an intelligence analysis of 1964, “the primary sources of Communist strength in South Vietnam are indigenous.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, the elementary fact of civil war in South Vietnam was not unknown in the circles of the decision-makers. Had not Senator Mike Mansfield warned Kennedy as early as 1962 that sending more military reinforcements to South Vietnam would mean that “the Americans would be dominating the combat in a civil war . . . [which] would hurt American prestige in Asia and would not help the South Vietnamese to stand on their own two feet, either”?<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> The Chicago *Sun-Times*, quoted by the New York *Times*, “The Week in Review,” June 27, 1971.

<sup>46</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 254.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 242.

<sup>49</sup> Ellsberg, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

The bombing of North Vietnam nevertheless was begun partly because theory said that "a revolution could be dried up by cutting off external sources of support and supply." The bombings were supposed to "break the will" of North Vietnam to support the rebels in the South, although the decision-makers themselves (in this case McNaughton) knew enough of the indigenous nature of the revolt to doubt that the Viet Cong would "obey a caving" North Vietnam,<sup>50</sup> while the Joint Chiefs did not believe "that these efforts will have a decisive effect" on Hanoi's will to begin with.<sup>51</sup> In 1965, according to a report by McNamara, members of the National Security Council had agreed that North Vietnam "was not likely to quit . . . and in any case, they were more likely to give up because of VC failure in the South than because of bomb-induced 'pain' in the North."<sup>52</sup>

Finally there were, secondary only to the domino theory, the grand stratagems based on the premise of a monolithic Communist world conspiracy and the existence of a Sino-Soviet bloc, in addition to the hypothesis of Chinese expansionism. The notion that China must be "contained" has now, in 1971, been refuted by President Nixon; but more than four years ago McNamara wrote: "To the extent that our original intervention and our existing actions in Vietnam were motivated by the perceived need to draw the line against Chinese expansionism in Asia, our objective has already been attained,"<sup>53</sup> although, only two years earlier, he had agreed that the United States's aim in South

<sup>50</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 433.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 240.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 407.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 583.

Vietnam was "not to 'help friend' but to contain China."<sup>54</sup>

The war critics have denounced all these theories because of their obvious clash with known facts—such as the nonexistence of a Sino-Soviet bloc, known to everybody familiar with the history of the Chinese revolution and Stalin's resolute opposition to it, or the fragmented character of the Communist movement since the end of World War II. A number of these critics went further and developed a theory of their own: America, having emerged as the greatest power after World War II, has embarked upon a consistent imperialist policy that aims ultimately at world rule. The advantage of this theory was that it could explain the absence of national interest in the whole enterprise—the sign of imperialist aims having always been that they were neither guided nor limited by national interest and territorial boundaries—though it could hardly account for the fact that this country was madly insisting on "pouring its resources down the drain in the wrong place" (as George Ball, Under Secretary of State in the Johnson administration and the only adviser who dared to break the taboo and recommend immediate withdrawal, had the courage to tell the President in 1965).<sup>55</sup>

Clearly this was no case of "limited means to achieve excessive ends."<sup>56</sup> Was it excessive for a "superpower" to add one more small country to its string of client states or to win a victory over a "tiny backward nation"? It was, rather, an unbelievable example of using excessive means to achieve minor aims in a region of marginal interest. It was precisely this unavoidable impression of wrongheaded

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 342.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 414.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 584.



floundering that finally brought the country to the conviction "widely and strongly held that 'the Establishment' is out of its mind. The feeling is that we are trying to impose some U.S. image on distant peoples we cannot understand . . . and we are carrying the thing to absurd lengths," as McNaughton wrote in 1967.<sup>57</sup>

At any rate, the Bantam edition of the Pentagon papers contains nothing to support the theory of grandiose imperialist stratagems. Only twice is the importance of land, sea, and air bases, so decisively important for imperialist strategy, mentioned—once by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who point out that "our ability in limited war" would be "markedly" reduced if a "loss of the Southeast Asian Mainland" resulted in the loss of "air, land and sea bases,"<sup>58</sup> and once in the McNamara report of 1964, which says explicitly: "We do *not* require that it [South Vietnam] serve as a Western base or as a member of a Western Alliance" (italics added).<sup>59</sup> The only public statements of the American government during this period that indeed told almost gospel truth were the often-repeated claims, ever so much less plausible than other public-relations notions, that we were seeking no territorial gains or any other tangible profit.

This is not to say that a genuine American global policy with imperialist overtones would have been impossible after the collapse of the old colonial powers. The Pentagon papers, generally so devoid of spectacular news, reveal one incident, never more than a rumor, so far as I know, that seems to indicate how considerable were the chances for a global policy that was then gambled away in the cause of

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 534–535.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 153.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 278.

image-making and winning people's minds. According to a cable from an American diplomat in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh wrote several letters in 1945 and 1946 to President Truman requesting the United States "to support the idea of Annamese independence according to the *Philippines example*, to examine the case of the Annamese, and to take steps necessary to maintenance of world peace which is being endangered by French efforts to reconquer Indochina" (italics added).<sup>60</sup> It is true; similar letters were addressed to other countries, China, Russia, and Great Britain, none of which, however, at that particular moment would have been able to give the protection that was requested and that would have established Indochina in the same semiautonomous position as other client states of this country. A second and equally striking incident, apparently mentioned at the time by the *Washington Post*, was recorded in the "Special China Series," documents issued by the State Department in August, 1969, but came to the notice of the public only when reported by Terence Smith in the *New York Times*. Mao and Chou En-lai, it turns out, approached President Roosevelt in January, 1945, "trying to establish relations with the United States in order to avoid total dependence on the Soviet Union" (italics added). It seems that Ho Chi Minh never received an answer, and information of the Chinese approach was suppressed because, as Professor Allen Whiting has commented, it contradicted "the image of monolithic Communism directed from Moscow."<sup>61</sup>

Although the decision-makers certainly knew about the

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 4, 26.

<sup>61</sup> The *New York Times*, June 29, 1971. Mr. Smith cites Professor Whiting's testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the document, which appears in *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers 1945*, Vol. VII: *The Far East, China*, Washington, D.C., 1969, p. 209.

intelligence reports, whose factual statements they had, as it were, to eliminate from their minds day in and day out, I think it entirely possible that they were not aware of these earlier documents, which would have given the lie to all their premises before they could grow into full-blown theory and ruin the country. Certain bizarre circumstances attending the recent irregular and unexpected declassification of top-secret documents point in this direction. It is astounding that the Pentagon papers could have been prepared over years while people in the White House, in the Department of State, and in the Defense Department apparently ignored the study; but it is even more astounding that after its completion, with sets dispatched in all directions within the government bureaucracy, the White House and the State Department were unable even to locate the forty-seven volumes, clearly indicating that those who should have been most concerned with what the study had to tell never set eyes on it.

This sheds some light on one of the gravest dangers of overclassification: not only are the people and their elected representatives denied access to what they must know to form an opinion and make decisions, but also the actors themselves, who receive top clearance to learn all the relevant facts, remain blissfully unaware of them. And this is so not because some invisible hand deliberately leads them astray, but because they work under circumstances, and with habits of mind, that allow them neither time nor inclination to go hunting for pertinent facts in mountains of documents, 99½ per cent of which should not be classified and most of which are irrelevant for all practical purposes. Even now that the press has brought a certain portion of this classified material into the public domain and members of Congress have been given the whole study, it does not look as though those most in need

of this information have read it or ever will. At any event, the fact of the matter is that aside from the compilers themselves, "the people who read these documents in the *Times* were the first to study them,"<sup>62</sup> which makes one wonder about the cherished notion that government needs the *arcana imperii* to be able to function properly.

If the mysteries of government have so befogged the minds of the actors themselves that they no longer know or remember the truth behind their concealments and their lies, the whole operation of deception, no matter how well organized its "marathon information campaigns," in Dean Rusk's words, and how sophisticated its Madison Avenue gimmickry, will run aground or become counterproductive, that is, confuse people without convincing them. For the trouble with lying and deceiving is that their efficiency depends entirely upon a clear notion of the truth that the liar and deceiver wishes to hide. In this sense, truth, even if it does not prevail in public, possesses an ineradicable primacy over all falsehoods.

In the case of the Vietnam war we are confronted with, in addition to falsehoods and confusion, a truly amazing and entirely honest ignorance of the historically pertinent background: not only did the decision-makers seem ignorant of all the well-known facts of the Chinese revolution and the decade-old rift between Moscow and Peking that preceded it, but "no one at the top knew or considered it important that the Vietnamese had been fighting foreign invaders for almost 2,000 years,"<sup>63</sup> or that the notion of Vietnam as a "tiny backward nation" without interest to "civilized" nations, which is, unhappily, often shared by the war critics, stands in flagrant contradiction to the very old

<sup>62</sup> Tom Wicker in *The New York Times*, July 8, 1971.

<sup>63</sup> Barnet in Stavins, Barnet, Raskin, *op. cit.*, p. 246.



and highly developed culture of the region. What Vietnam lacks is not "culture," but strategic importance (Indochina is "devoid of decisive military objectives," as a Joint Chiefs of Staff memo said in 1954),<sup>64</sup> a suitable terrain for modern mechanized armies, and rewarding targets for the air force. What caused the disastrous defeat of American policies and armed intervention was indeed no quagmire ("the policy of 'one more step'—each new step always promising the success which the previous *last step* had also *promised* but had unaccountably failed to deliver," in the words of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., as quoted by Daniel Ellsberg, who rightly denounces the notion as a "myth"),<sup>65</sup> but the willful, deliberate disregard of all facts, historical, political, geographical, for more than twenty-five years.

<sup>64</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Ellsberg, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

## IV

IF THE quagmire model is a myth and if no grand imperialist stratagems or will to world conquest can be discovered, let alone interest in territorial gains, desire for profit, or, least of all, concern about national security; if, moreover, the reader is disinclined to be satisfied with such general notions as "Greek tragedy" (proposed by Max Frankel and Leslie H. Gelb) or stab-in-the-back legends, always dear to warmongers in defeat, then the question recently raised by Ellsberg, "*How could they?*"<sup>66</sup>—rather than deception and lying *per se*—will become the basic issue of this dismal story. For the truth, after all, is that the United States was the richest country and the dominant power after the end of World War II, and that today, a mere quarter of a century later, Mr. Nixon's metaphor of the "pitiful, helpless giant" is an uncomfortably apt description of "the mightiest country on earth."

Unable to defeat, with a "1000-to-1 superiority in fire power,"<sup>67</sup> a small nation in six years of overt warfare, unable to take care of its domestic problems and halt the swift decline of its large cities, having wasted its resources

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 235.

<sup>67</sup> Barnet in Stavins, Barnet, Raskin, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

to the point where inflation and currency devaluation threaten its international trade as well as its standard of life at home, the country is in danger of losing much more than its claim to world leadership. And even if one anticipates the judgment of future historians who might see this development in the context of twentieth-century history, when the defeated nations in two world wars managed to come out on top in competition with the victors (chiefly because they were compelled by the victors to rid themselves for a relatively long period of the incredible wastefulness of armaments and military expenses), it remains hard to reconcile oneself to so much effort wasted on demonstrating the impotence of bigness—though one may welcome this unexpected, grand-scale revival of David's triumph over Goliath.

The first explanation that comes to mind to answer the question "How could they?" is likely to point to the interconnectedness of deception and self-deception. In the contest between public statements, always overoptimistic, and the truthful reports of the intelligence community, persistently bleak and ominous, the public statements were liable to win simply because they were public. The great advantage of publicly established and accepted propositions over whatever an individual might secretly know or believe to be the truth is neatly illustrated by a medieval anecdote according to which a sentry, on duty to watch and warn the townspeople of the enemy's approach, jokingly sounded a false alarm—and then was the last to rush to the walls to defend the town against his invented enemies. From this, one may conclude that the more successful a liar is, the more people he has convinced, the more likely it is that he will end by believing his own lies.

In the Pentagon papers we are confronted with people who did their utmost to win the minds of the people, that

is, to manipulate them; but since they labored in a free country, where all kinds of information were available, they never really succeeded. Because of their relatively high station and their position in government, they were better shielded—in spite of their privileged knowledge of "top secrets"—against this public information, which also more or less told the factual truth, than were those whom they tried to convince and of whom they were likely to think in terms of mere audiences, "silent majorities," who were supposed to watch the scenarists' productions. The fact that the Pentagon papers revealed hardly any spectacular news testifies to the liars' failure to create a convinced audience that they could then join themselves.

Still, the presence of what Ellsberg has called the process of "internal self-deception"<sup>68</sup> is beyond doubt, but it is as though the normal process of self-deceiving were reversed; it was not as though deception ended with self-deception. The deceivers started with self-deception. Probably because of their high station and their astounding self-assurance, they were so convinced of overwhelming success, not on the battlefield, but in the public-relations arena, and so certain of the soundness of their psychological premises about the unlimited possibilities in manipulating people, that they *anticipated* general belief and victory in the battle for people's minds. And since they lived in a defactualized world anyway, they did not find it difficult to pay no more attention to the fact that their audience refused to be convinced than to other facts.

The internal world of government, with its bureaucracy on one hand, its social life on the other, made self-deception relatively easy. No ivory tower of the scholars has ever better prepared the mind for ignoring the facts of life than

<sup>68</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 263.



did the various think tanks for the problem-solvers and the reputation of the White House for the President's advisers. It was in this atmosphere, where defeat was less feared than admitting defeat, that the misleading statements about the disasters of the Tet offensive and the Cambodian invasion were concocted. But what is even more important is that the truth about such decisive matters could be successfully covered up in these internal circles—but nowhere else—by worries about how to avoid becoming “the first American President to lose a war” and by the always present preoccupations with the next election.

So far as problem-solving, in contrast to public-relations managing, is concerned, self-deception, even “internal self-deception,” is no satisfactory answer to the question “How could they?” Self-deception still presupposes a distinction between truth and falsehood, between fact and fantasy, and therefore a conflict between the real world and the self-deceived deceiver that disappears in an entirely defactualized world; Washington and its sprawling governmental bureaucracy, as well as the various think tanks in the country, provide the problem-solvers with a natural habitat for mind and body. In the realm of politics, where secrecy and deliberate deception have always played a significant role, self-deception is the danger par excellence; the self-deceived deceiver loses all contact with not only his audience, but also the real world, which still will catch up with him, because he can remove his mind from it but not his body. The problem-solvers who knew all the facts regularly presented to them in the reports of the intelligence community had only to rely on their shared techniques, that is, on the various ways of translating qualities and contents into quantities and numbers with which to calculate outcomes—which then, unaccountably, never came true—in order to eliminate, day in and day out, what they knew to be real. The reason this could work for so many years is

precisely that “the goals pursued by the United States government were almost exclusively psychological,”<sup>69</sup> that is, matters of the mind.

Reading the memos, the options, the scenarios, the way percentages are ascribed to the potential risks and returns—“too many risks with too little return”<sup>70</sup>—of contemplated actions, one sometimes has the impression that a computer, rather than “decision-makers,” had been let loose in South-east Asia. The problem-solvers did not *judge*; they calculated. Their self-confidence did not even need self-deception to be sustained in the midst of so many misjudgments, for it relied on the evidence of mathematical, purely rational truth. Except, of course, that this “truth” was entirely irrelevant to the “problem” at hand. If, for instance, it can be calculated that the outcome of a certain action is “less likely to be a general war than more likely,”<sup>71</sup> it does not follow that we can choose it even if the proportion were eighty to twenty, because of the enormity and *incalculable quality* of the risk; and the same is true when the odds of reform in the Saigon government versus the “chance that we would wind up like the French in 1954” are 70 per cent to 30 per cent.<sup>72</sup> That is a nice outlook for a gambler, not for a statesman,<sup>73</sup> and even the gambler would be better advised to take into account what gain or loss would actually mean for him in daily life. Loss may

<sup>69</sup> Barnet in Stavins, Barnet, Raskin, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>70</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 576.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 575.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

<sup>73</sup> Leslie H. Gelb suggests in all earnestness that the mentality of “our leaders” was formed by “their own careers having been a series of successful gambles, they hoped they somehow could do it again in Vietnam.” *Life*, *op. cit.*



mean utter ruin and gain no more than some welcome but nonessential improvement of his financial affairs. Only if nothing real is at stake for the gambler—a bit more or less money is not likely to make any difference in his standard of life—can he safely rely on the percentage game. The trouble with our conduct of the war in South Vietnam was that no such control, given by reality itself, ever existed in the minds of either the decision-makers or the problem-solvers.

It is indeed true that American policy pursued no real aims, good or bad, that could limit and control sheer fantasy: "Neither territory nor economic advantage has been pursued in Vietnam. The entire purpose of the enormous and costly effect has been to create a specific state of mind."<sup>74</sup> And the reason such excessively costly means, costly in human lives and material resources, were permitted to be used for such politically irrelevant ends must be sought not merely in the unfortunate superabundance in this country, but in its inability to understand that even great power is *limited* power. Behind the constantly repeated cliché of the "mightiest power on earth," there lurked the dangerous myth of omnipotence.

Just as Eisenhower was the last President who knew he would have to request "Congressional authority to commit American troops in Indochina," so his administration was the last to be aware that "the allocation of more than token U.S. armed forces in that area would be a serious diversion of *limited* U.S. capabilities" (*italics added*).<sup>75</sup> In spite of all the later calculations of "costs, returns and risks" of certain acts, the calculators remained totally unaware of any absolute, nonpsychological limitation. The limits they perceived were the people's minds, how much they would

<sup>74</sup> Barnet in Stavins, Barnet, Raskin, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>75</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, pp. 5, 13.

stand in the loss of American lives, which should not be much larger than, for instance, the loss in traffic accidents. But it apparently never occurred to them that there are limits to the resources that even this country can waste without going bankrupt.

This deadly combination of the "arrogance of power"—the pursuit of a mere image of omnipotence, as distinguished from an aim of world conquest, to be attained by nonexistent unlimited resources—with the arrogance of mind, an utterly irrational confidence in the calculability of reality, becomes the leitmotif of the decision-making processes from the beginning of escalation in 1964. This, however, is not to say that the problem-solvers' rigorous methods of defactualization are at the root of this relentless march into self-destruction.

The problem-solvers, who lost their minds because they trusted the calculating powers of their brains at the expense of the mind's capacity for experience and its ability to learn from it, were preceded by the ideologists of the Cold War period. Anti-Communism—not the old, often prejudiced hostility of America against socialism and communism, so strong in the twenties and still a mainstay of the Republican party during the Roosevelt administration, but the postwar comprehensive ideology—was originally the brain child of former Communists who needed a new ideology by which to explain and reliably foretell the course of history. This ideology was at the root of all "theories" in Washington since the end of World War II. I have mentioned the extent to which sheer ignorance of all pertinent facts and deliberate neglect of postwar developments became the hallmark of established doctrine within the establishment. They needed no facts, no information; they had a "theory," and all data that did not fit were denied or ignored.

The methods of this older generation—the methods of



Mr. Rusk as distinguished from those of Mr. McNamara—were less complicated, less brainy, as it were, than those of the problem-solvers, but not less efficacious in shielding men from the impact of reality and in ruining the mind's capacity for judgment and for learning. These men prided themselves on having learned from the past—from Stalin's rule over all Communist parties, hence the notion of "monolithic Communism," and from Hitler's starting a world war after Munich, from which they concluded that every gesture of reconciliation was a "second Munich." They were unable to confront reality on its own terms because they had always some parallels in mind that "helped" them to understand those terms. When Johnson, still in his capacity as Kennedy's Vice-President, came home from an inspection tour in South Vietnam and happily reported that Diem was the "Churchill of Asia," one would have thought that the parallelism game would die from sheer absurdity, but this was not the case. Nor can one say that the left-wing war critics thought in different terms. The extreme fringe had the unhappy inclination of denouncing as "fascist" or "nazi" whatever, often quite rightly, displeased them, and of calling every massacre a genocide, which obviously it was not; this could only help to produce a mentality that was quite willing to condone massacre and other war crimes so long as they were not genocide.

The problem-solvers were remarkably free from the sins of the ideologists; they believed in methods but not in "world views," which, incidentally, is the reason they could be trusted "to pull together the Pentagon's documentary record of the American involvement"<sup>76</sup> in a way that would be both "encyclopedic and objective."<sup>77</sup> But though they

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xx.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xviii.

did not believe in such generally accepted rationales for policies as the domino theory, these rationales, with their different methods of defactualization, provided the atmosphere and the background against which the problem-solvers then went to work; they had, after all, to convince the cold warriors, whose minds then turned out to be singularly well prepared for the abstract games they had to offer.

How the cold warriors proceeded when left to themselves is well illustrated by one of the "theories" of Walt Rostow, the Johnson administration's "dominant intellectual." It was Rostow's "theory" that became one of the chief rationales for the decision to bomb North Vietnam against the advice of "McNamara's then prestigious systems analysts in the Defense Department." His theory seemed to have relied on the view of Bernard Fall, one of the most acute observers and best-informed war critics, who had suggested that "Ho Chi Minh *might* disavow the war in the South if some of his new industrial plants were made a target"<sup>78</sup> (*italics added*). This was a hypothesis, a real possibility, which had to be either confirmed or refuted. But the remark had the ill luck to fit well with Rostow's theories about guerrilla warfare, and was now transformed into a "fact": President Ho Chi Minh "has an industrial complex to protect; he is no longer a guerrilla fighter with nothing to lose."<sup>79</sup> This looks in retrospect, in the eyes of the analyst, like a "colossal misjudgment."<sup>80</sup> But the point is that the "misjudgment" could become "colossal" only because no one wished to correct it in time. It turned out very quickly that the country was not industrialized

<sup>78</sup> Barnet in Stavins, Barnet, Raskin, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>79</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 241.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 469.

enough to suffer from air attacks in a *limited* war whose objective, changing over the years, was never the destruction of the enemy, but, characteristically, "to break his will"; and the government's will in Hanoi, whether or not the North Vietnamese possessed what in Rostow's view was a necessary quality of the guerrilla fighter, refused to be "broken."

To be sure, this failure to distinguish between a plausible hypothesis and the fact that must confirm it, that is, this dealing with hypotheses and mere "theories" as though they were established facts, which became endemic in the psychological and social sciences during the period in question, lacks all the rigor of the methods used by the game theorists and systems analysts. But the source of both—namely, the inability or unwillingness to consult experience and to learn from reality—is the same.

This brings us to the root of the matter that, at least partially, might contain the answer to the question, How could they not only start these policies but carry them through to their bitter and absurd end? Defactualization and problem-solving were welcomed because disregard of reality was inherent in the policies and goals themselves. What did they have to know about Indochina as it really was, when it was no more than a "test case" or a domino, or a means to "contain China" or prove that we *are* the mightiest of the superpowers? Or take the case of bombing North Vietnam for the ulterior purpose of building morale in South Vietnam,<sup>81</sup> without much intention of winning a clear-cut victory and ending the war. How could they be interested in anything as real as victory when they kept the war going not for territorial gain or economic advantage, least of all to help a friend or keep a commitment, and not

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 312.

even for the reality, as distinguished from the image, of power?

When this stage of the game was reached, the initial premise that we should never mind the region or the country itself—inherent in the domino theory—changed into "never mind the enemy." And this in the midst of a war! The result was that the enemy, poor, abused, and suffering, grew stronger while "the mightiest country" grew weaker with each passing year. There are historians today who maintain that Truman dropped the bomb on Hiroshima in order to scare the Russians out of Eastern Europe (with the result we know). If this is true, as it might well be, then we may trace back the earliest beginnings of the disregard for the actual consequences of action in favor of some ulterior calculated aim to the fateful war crime that ended the last world war. The Truman Doctrine, at any rate, "depicted a world full of dominoes," as Leslie H. Gelb has pointed out.



# V

AT THE BEGINNING of this analysis I tried to suggest that the aspects of the Pentagon papers that I have chosen, the aspects of deception, self-deception, image-making, ideologizing, and defactualization, are by no means the only features of the papers that deserve to be studied and learned from. There is, for instance, the fact that this massive and systematic effort at self-examination was commissioned by one of the chief actors, that thirty-six men could be found to compile the documents and write their analysis, quite a few of whom "had helped to develop or to carry out the policies they were asked to evaluate,"<sup>82</sup> that one of the authors, when it had become apparent that no one in government was willing to use or even to read the results, went to the public and leaked it to the press, and that, finally, the most respectable newspapers in the country dared to bring material that was stamped "top secret" to the widest possible attention. It has rightly been said by Neil Sheehan that Robert McNamara's decision to find out what went wrong, and why, "may turn out to be one of the most important decisions in his seven years at the Pentagon."<sup>83</sup> It certainly restored, at least for a fleeting moment,

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xviii.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, p. ix.

this country's reputation in the world. What had happened could indeed hardly have happened anywhere else. It is as though all these people, involved in an unjust war and rightly compromised by it, had suddenly remembered what they owed to their forefathers' "decent respect for the opinions of mankind."

What calls for further close and detailed study is the fact, much commented on, that the Pentagon papers revealed little significant news that was not available to the average reader of dailies and weeklies; nor are there any arguments, pro or con, in the "History of U.S. Decision-Making Process on Vietnam Policy" that have not been debated publicly for years in magazines, television shows, and radio broadcasts. (Personal positions and changes in them aside, the different views of the intelligence community on basic issues were the only matter generally unknown.) That the public had access for years to material that the government vainly tried to keep from it testifies to the integrity and to the power of the press even more forcefully than the way the *Times* broke the story. What has often been suggested has now been established: so long as the press is free and not corrupt, it has an enormously important function to fulfill and can rightly be called the fourth branch of government. Whether the First Amendment will suffice to protect this most essential political freedom, the right to unmanipulated factual information without which all freedom of opinion becomes a cruel hoax, is another question.

There is, finally, a lesson to be learned by those who, like myself, believed that this country had embarked on an imperialist policy, had utterly forgotten its old anticolonial sentiments, and was perhaps succeeding in establishing that Pax Americana that President Kennedy had denounced. Whatever the merits of these suspicions, and they could be justified by our policies in Latin America, if un-

declared small wars—aggressive brush-fire operations in foreign lands—are among the necessary means to attain imperialist ends, the United States will be less able to employ them successfully than almost any other great power. For while the demoralization of American troops has by now reached unprecedented proportions—according to *Der Spiegel*, during the past year 89,088 deserters, 100,000 conscientious objectors, and tens of thousands of drug addicts<sup>84</sup>—the disintegration process of the army started much earlier and was preceded by similar developments during the Korean War.<sup>85</sup> One has only to talk to a few of the veterans of this war—or to read Daniel Lang's sober and telling report in *The New Yorker*<sup>86</sup> about the development of a fairly typical case—to realize that in order for this country to carry adventurous and aggressive policies to success there would have to be a decisive change in the American people's "national character." The same could of course be concluded from the extraordinarily strong, highly qualified, and well-organized opposition that has from time to time arisen at home. The North Vietnamese who watched these developments carefully over the years had their hopes always set on them, and it seems that they were right in their assessment.

No doubt all this can change. But one thing has become clear in recent months: the halfhearted attempts of the government to circumvent Constitutional guarantees and to intimidate those who have made up their minds not to be intimidated, who would rather go to jail than see their liberties nibbled away, are not enough and probably

<sup>84</sup> *Der Spiegel*, Number 35, 1971.

<sup>85</sup> Eugene Kinkead, "Reporter at Large," *The New Yorker*, October 26, 1957.

<sup>86</sup> *The New Yorker*, September 4, 1971.

will not be enough to destroy the Republic. There is reason to hope, with Mr. Lang's veteran—one of the nation's two and a half million—"that the country might regain its better side as a result of the war. 'I know it's nothing to bet on,' he said, 'but neither is anything else I can think of.'"<sup>87</sup>

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.