

# The New York Times

## Thinking Often of the Pentagon Papers

*This weekend, a special section in The Times commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Pentagon Papers. Here, contributors to the project reflect on how the secret study's publication influenced their careers.*



*On July 1, 1971, after the Supreme Court ruled in its favor, The New York Times resumed its series on a secret Defense Department study on the role of the United States in Vietnam.*

By Terence McGinley  
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Fifty years ago today, The Times published the first article in its series on the Pentagon Papers, the Defense Department's secret study of the United States' role in Vietnam. The papers, including private revelations that ran counter to the public optimism of leaders, changed American journalism and a nation's relationship with its government. The Nixon administration's attempt to stop The Times from printing its series, and the Supreme Court decision that allowed the paper to continue, is a landmark First Amendment case. In a special section, rolled out online last week and in newspapers this weekend, Times journalists and contributors wrote about these themes. Here's what they think about when the Pentagon Papers come to mind.

*Adam Liptak*  
*Times Supreme Court correspondent*

Before I was a reporter, I was a press lawyer. Like all press lawyers, I never tire of hearing about the Pentagon Papers case. I'm like a child with a favorite bedtime story.

Over the years, I have heard the story from some of its protagonists. After law school, I worked for Floyd Abrams, who had represented The Times in the Pentagon Papers case and is a towering figure in the fight for press freedom. Then I spent a decade in

the Times Company's legal department, where I got to know James C. Goodale, its former general counsel. Jim had backed the newsroom in internal debates over whether to publish the Pentagon Papers, facing down business executives who were skittish and outside lawyers who were adamantly opposed to publication.

Here is the moral of the story: Citizens are entitled to know what their government is doing, journalists must be fearless in pursuing and presenting the truth, press lawyers should be fiercely devoted to their clients and an independent judiciary ought to be suspicious when the executive branch invokes national security to demand that news be suppressed.

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*Elizabeth Becker*

*Former Times correspondent who covered the American campaign in Cambodia*

The Pentagon Papers prepared me for the official lies I encountered as a 25-year-old war correspondent in Cambodia. In early 1973 I interviewed Cambodian farmers who had lost everything to the "fire in the sky." They imagined Garuda, a birdlike god of their faith, was responsible. But it was bombs from American warplanes that had dug the craters and blackened their rice fields, leaving the families destitute. The United States Embassy in Phnom Penh denied a new air campaign. I went ahead and filed the report — which proved correct.

I recently spoke to members of the West Point class of 1968. (My husband is a member.) They all served in Vietnam. I asked them how they viewed the Pentagon Papers. One man said their publication was a breach of national security. A silence fell. Then another classmate spoke of something closer to the heart. "I signed up for war," he said. "The kids in my platoon didn't sign up for war and suffered for the decisions and lies by senior officials including the President of the United States." Over the years their anger at the leak had become anger at what the papers revealed.

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*Lien-Hang T. Nguyen*

*Professor in the History of the United States and East Asia at Columbia University*

Every history teacher knows the value of a good primary source in the classroom. For my students of America's Vietnam War, there is no primary source more valuable than the Pentagon Papers. The Defense Department's secret study that aimed to be "encyclopedic and objective" allows students to enter the minds of decision makers in Washington 50 years later, and reveals how they interfered early on in Vietnamese political affairs, how they Americanized a military conflict with bombing over North Vietnam and troop deployment to South Vietnam, and how they thwarted attempts at peace negotiations.

My students often ask me in disbelief after reading excerpts from the Pentagon Papers: "How did our leaders get the country involved in Vietnam so early, so deeply and, worst of all, so secretly, without the blessing of the Saigon government or the approval of the

American people?” As they move beyond the shock of Washington’s duplicity in those years, their incredulity only increases when they learn that the war did not end in 1971 with the publication of the secret study. “If the publication of the Pentagon Papers couldn’t turn Americans against the war and bring about its end,” my students ask, “then what would?”

Good questions. Short of building a time machine, I can’t think of a better way of transporting students to the madness and tragedy of the Vietnam War past.

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*Peter Baker*

*Chief White House correspondent for The Times*

For a journalist trying to report from today’s Washington, looking back at the Pentagon Papers case is a reminder of how important our mission really is — and how little has really changed since 1971 when it comes to the government trying to protect itself from public scrutiny.

When you read the study’s findings about Vietnam, there’s an eerie echo of what we saw decades later in Iraq and Afghanistan. And when you read the rationalizations that officials used then to justify their secrecy, it’s hard not to think about what we hear all of the time from administrations of both political parties.

Just in recent days, we’ve learned about attempts to collect the phone records of our colleagues in order to keep information hidden from the public. We’re fortunate to have the protection the Supreme Court upheld back then, but an independent free press is still under assault 50 years later.