

Washington releases Pentagon Papers 40 years after publication

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The US National Archive's official release of the Pentagon Papers Monday, 40 years after they were leaked and published, underscores the profound shift to the right by the media and the entire political establishment in the intervening decades.

On June 13, 1971, the publication by the *New York Times* of the first installment of the top-secret documents played a significant role in galvanizing mass opposition to the Vietnam War.

The documents served as an indictment not only of the Republican administration of Richard Nixon, but also of the Democratic administrations that had preceded it, particularly that of Lyndon B. Johnson.

Commissioned by then-US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1967, the 7,000-page study, officially known as the "Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force," represented an exhaustive internal study of the policies that led to the US War in Vietnam and its progressive escalation.

The report's principal impact was its exposure of the systematic lying by successive administrations over the reasons for and the conduct of the US intervention in Southeast Asia.

The papers exposed as a fraud the so-called Gulf of Tonkin incident, an alleged attack by Vietnamese PT boats on a US destroyer that was the pretext given by Johnson for obtaining a congressional resolution granting a virtual blank check to wage war in the region. They further established that Johnson, while campaigning for election in 1964 on the claim that he would not "seek a wider war" in Vietnam, had already drawn up plans to send in more troops and bomb North Vietnam.

The report also revealed previously unreported secret bombings of Cambodia and Laos, as well as coastal raids against North Vietnam. And they exposed the plotting by John F. Kennedy's administration to overthrow South Vietnamese ruler Ngo Dinh Diem in the run-up to his

assassination in a 1963 military coup.

The impact of these revelations was magnified many times over by the response of the Nixon administration, which took the quasi-dictatorial action of obtaining a court injunction to halt the publication of further installments of the document by the *New York Times*. This marked the first time in US history that the federal government had intervened to restrain the publication of a newspaper. Within barely two weeks, the injunction was overturned by the US Supreme Court.

Daniel Ellsberg, the former Pentagon official who leaked the report to the *Times*, was singled out for persecution. The so-called plumbers unit, whose Watergate break-in led to Nixon's downfall three years later, was ordered to break into the offices of Ellsberg's psychiatrist, with the hope of finding incriminating information. It later emerged that the administration had organized a gang of Cuban CIA "assets" for the purpose of "incapacitating" or assassinating Ellsberg. These acts of gross government misconduct prompted the courts to throw out the federal charges against the leaker.

Ellsberg, now 80, dismissed with contempt the National Archive's release of the Pentagon Papers. Virtually all of the material, he pointed out, has been publicly available for nearly 40 years, and the fact that it has been kept classified until now is testimony to the illegitimate motives underlying government secrecy.

"What we need released this month are the Pentagon Papers of Iraq and Afghanistan (and Pakistan, Yemen and Libya)," Ellsberg wrote.

In an interview with CNN, Ellsberg noted that the crimes committed by the Nixon administration against him 40 years ago could now be carried out under the cover of law by the Obama White House.

"That includes burglarizing my former psychoanalyst's office... warrantless wiretapping, using the CIA against an American citizen in the US, and authorizing a White

House hit squad to ‘incapacitate me totally’ (on the steps of the Capitol on May 3, 1971),” he said. “But under George W. Bush and Barack Obama, with the PATRIOT Act, the FISA Amendment Act, and (for the hit squad) President Obama’s executive orders. [T]hey have all become legal.”

Indeed, Army Private Bradley Manning, who is alleged to have carried out acts similar to those of Ellsberg—providing WikiLeaks with hundreds of thousands of documents exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as worldwide US diplomatic conspiracies—has been detained without trial for over a year. For much of that time he has been subjected to solitary confinement and conditions tantamount to mental torture.

The Obama administration continues wars in Afghanistan and Iraq launched by the Bush administration based upon lies and has launched new illegal wars of aggression in Libya and Yemen.

The *New York Times*, in a 1971 editorial on its Supreme Court victory in the Pentagon Papers case, commented, “We believe that its more profound significance lies in the implicit but inescapable conclusion that the American people have a presumptive right to be informed of the political decisions of their government.”

The owners and editors of the *Times* have over the past decade thoroughly repudiated this “presumptive right.” During the build-up to the US invasion of Iraq, the newspaper became a critical conduit for the lies about “weapons of mass destruction” used to justify the war.

Bowing to the demands of the Bush White House, the newspaper’s editors suppressed for over a year an article exposing the illegal domestic spying operation mounted by the National Security Agency. This self-censorship prevented the revelations from emerging before the 2004 presidential election, thereby contributing to Bush’s reelection.

In response to the WikiLeaks release of classified documents, the *Times* has bragged of its role as a “gatekeeper,” working together with the White House and other US agencies in determining what information should remain concealed from the American people. As outgoing *Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller put it, the right “not to publish” is just as important for the newspaper as the right to publish.

Within the American ruling elite and the corporate media, there remains no constituency for a committed defense of the principles involved in the Pentagon Papers case 40 years ago. The conditions of unprecedented social

inequality in the United States and the domination of economic and political life by a financial and corporate aristocracy are incompatible with a free press and, for that matter, other basic democratic rights.

Alongside this putrefaction of democratic processes there is another phenomenon worth noting on the 40th anniversary of the Pentagon Papers: the disappearance of the antiwar movement, which was a significant factor in political life not only during the Vietnam era, but in the years that followed.

In the United States, the political scope of this movement was always limited by the orientation of the middle-class protest groups in its leadership to the Democratic Party. From the 1990s on, this orientation has led to an ever deeper integration into this party and an ever more explicit adaptation to imperialism.

Under the Clinton administration, this found expression in the support of a substantial section of this sociopolitical layer for the US interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, based on an embrace of the imperialist slogan of “human rights” and a willful indifference to the role played by imperialism in provoking the breakup of Yugoslavia along ethnic lines.

Having largely supported the election of Obama, the middle-class ex-left milieu turned its back on protest, seeing its role as influencing the “candidate of change” and, in the process, securing a more comfortable existence for itself. This process has reached its apotheosis in relation to Libya, where a naked colonial-style war to conquer an oil-rich country is once again promoted on the cynical grounds of “human rights.”

Forty years after the original release of the Pentagon Papers, the defense of democratic rights and the struggle against war can be waged only through the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

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