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In Pentagon Paper Affair

Despite Court, There Was Damage To U.S. Security

(On page one of The Times Herald Wednesday, NEA columnist Bruce Brossat presented a scholarly review on the significance of the Pentagon papers. Here is a commentary in the same vein, presented by an analyst with a military background.)

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(Gannett News Service Special)

Though the Supreme Court decided otherwise, the recent publication of the so-called Pentagon papers was not a contribution to history. It was, in fact, just the opposite.

Official documents are not history. They are source materials from which historical narrative may be, in part, derived. The source documents must be put into proper perspective shown in the light of prior and subsequent circumstances.

In the public presentation of the Pentagon papers no such respect for the historical process was evident. The documents were presented as if they should be accepted at face value. If this is history, then history is a confused heap of non-facts, to paraphrase Lord Chesterfield.

It is claimed that the Pentagon papers on the conduct of the Vietnam war were published so that the public may at last know the truth. If this is the case, then being bullied is better than being gulled and premeditated distortion is preferable to vagueness.

The glut of documents is not even in itself balanced, well-rounded or complete. The collection was organized from files large-

ly reflecting the viewpoint of former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara at a time when he had come to see all things through a glass darkly, possibly exclusive of his own blunders. Of the related White House, State Department, Joint Chiefs of Staff and Central Intelligence Agency papers, there is enough of a smattering to discount any pretense of a thorough search.

No one who is capable of relating cause and effect or has any knowledge of the voluminous correspondence generated by the decision-making process during war will be deceived by the papers.

That is to say that perhaps one American in a thousand will understand that instead of at last reading the hard truth about the conduct of the war he is, in fact, seeing only a deceptive shadow.

What does come forth supports the contention that main strategic decisions in the Vietnam War were made more by civilian "crisis managers" than by uniformed professionals. But even that conclusion is not to be fully trusted short of a complete search. Nor will it take the heat off the military. The public, out of disenchantment, has already assigned to it the role of whipping boy.

The joint chiefs, according to one paper's story, were promoters of the bombing of North Vietnam. They are cast as the villains. Yet it was not their prerogative to abort national policy. Left unsaid was the fact that they had rejected the harsher alternative of committing four and one-half infantry divisions to combat.

Former President Lyndon B. Johnson is being publicly termed a liar for going along with tentative planning of more extreme military measures against North Vietnam while talking with chalk in his throat during the political campaign.

Is there any other choice for a war President under those circumstances to speak any other way than ambivalently? Franklin D. Roosevelt had to do it in 1940, Woodrow Wilson in 1916.

It is not a question of deliberate deception. A President must prepare contingency plans for any eventuality and exposing his hand to the enemy would be the extreme folly.

Moreover, there is ample evidence, not included in the Pentagon papers, that Johnson had not made up his mind. During that 1964 campaign, Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor was recommending to the President maximum Vietnamization of the war in 1965 and a drastic cutback in the American effort. For budgetary reasons, the Defense secretary was even then proceeding with the dismantling of the 11th Experimental Airmobile Division, raised at the cost of multiple millions to be the cutting edge of any U.S. ground effort in Vietnam. If Johnson had already set his course, his left hand did not commune with his right.

So far, the holy water showered on the publication of the documents is done in the name of the people's right to know. There is no such right unlimited. Neither the United States government nor any other could long function if its official de-