

The Pentagon Papers exposed a Pandora's box of deceit by the Canadian press and government

By PATRICK MACFADDENE and RAE MURPHY

On the muggy Sunday of June 13, with the humidity index pushing 78 in the city, New Yorkers awoke to find a three-column headline in the Times. It said that United States involvement in Vietnam had been growing over three decades.

They went back to sleep. Not so the Justice Department. Always fast on the draw, it reached for its injunction. The shot was heard around the world. The Pentagon Papers were born.

The Supreme Court found in favor of the Times. The decision was an occasion for satisfaction among editorialists: phrases unheard since musty high school debates reverberated over the land — freedom of the press vindicated, autonomy of the fourth estate inviolable, essence of a free society an informed public. Visibly moved, the Toronto Globe and Mail saw a moral in it all: the United States, it editorialized, "is proved a democracy by the very battle its Government lost in its courts."

It has been observed that certain societies, when faced with insoluble difficulties, do not tackle the problem so much as redefine it. Press treatment of the Pentagon Papers is a case in point. For the squib set off by Daniel Ellsberg illuminates a fabric of deceit that includes not only the Pentagon warlords but reaches into the newsrooms of newspapers all over the country.

The press in Canada was part of that fabric of deceit. So was the government of Canada. That the newspapers should wave high the Pentagon Papers in vindictive expostulation is as understandable as it is preposterous. Populist rhetoric hides a multitude of sins.

"Power without responsibility," once thundered Stanley Baldwin in the British House of Commons, referring to the Beaverbrook press, "the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages."

There is no record of the whore turning herself in voluntarily. "Clean as a whistle, yer Lordship," she will mutter, "squeaky clean."

Let us now, as they say, examine the record.

Plan 34-A

Operation Plan 34A was the name given to the secret war against North Vietnam. It began on February 1, 1964. It included destroyer patrols, code-named De Soto patrols, in the Gulf of Tonkin. It further included the invasion of Laos by T-28 fighter-bombers flown by the pilots of Air America, a company owned by the Central Intelligence Agency.

By August of 1964, Operation Plan 34A had paid off. After months of bombardments of North Vietnamese shore targets by American-assisted South Vietnamese patrol boats, sabotage by guerrillas dropped into the DRV by the U.S. Air Force, the bait was finally swallowed: North Vietnamese PT boats, searching out the South Vietnamese boats that had shelled the Rhon river estuary 24 hours before, fired on the U.S. destroyer Maddox. Within hours, the United States Air Force was winging northward. The joint Congressional resolution, already drawn up by William Bundy as far back as May, was pushed through, only Senators Gruening and Morse dissenting.

Later, when the B-52s had done their work (four North Vietnamese vessels had already been sunk by the destroyers), the major part

of the North Vietnamese Navy had been eliminated, over ten per cent of its oil storage tanks obliterated.

No U.S. vessels had been sunk. No U.S. sailor had been wounded.

One bullet hole had been found in the Maddox.

But one bullet hole is apparently enough for a press whose love for hard facts takes second place to its paranoid streak. For it is not only generals who fight the last war; in this instance the press decided to rework the Korean caper, replete with reds who are yellow and yellows who are red.

The lead was taken by the New York Times — "the beginning of a mad adventure by the North Vietnamese Communists." This Goo Show vocabulary was to be repeated endlessly. Out of 27 editorials polled in the U.S. press, 24 favored the bombings.

Once more, the Globe and Mail saw what was really at stake behind that single bullet hole. Why had the United States attacked? The Globe and Mail put the answer in its headline:

Attacked to Save Asia From Red Conquest: U.S.

Of course, of course, what else? And yet, there were questions to be asked editorially. For example: why is Hanoi so crazy? "Are the Vietnamese so isolated from the facts of the situation that they have no conception of the strength of their opponents?" asked the Globe from the lofty position of one not isolated from the facts of the situation. As for President Johnson, his reaction "has been what it should be, strong and punishing, but controlled. . . The bad kid had to be spanked."

In casting about for a suitable image for President Johnson's behavior, the Globe editorial writer had dredged up that of a firm but kindly housemaster in one of the better boys' schools. ("Trousers down, Jones Minor, trousers down. . . No, no, the buttocks, laddie, the buttocks.") Elsewhere in the paper, other commentators had decided that the enemy was much more than a naughty boy.

J.D. Harbron, for example, saw the sceptre of a mammoth Red Navy. "The size and warlike potential of Communist naval power in Asia is considerable," he wrote in the Globe of August 7. . . The sudden North Vietnam attack by the smallest and least powerful of these navies points up the danger from the unknown and largely unheard-of Communist navies."

Charlie's navy

That these navies were unknown and largely unheard-of was not to deter the redoubtable Harbron from dilating, for three full-length columns, on how dangerous they were. Since these navies were largely nonexistent, Harbron's thesis was predictably wan. However, he saved it from total extinction by inserting in the middle of his copy a photograph of a Soviet submarine.

Over on King Street, the Toronto Daily Star was not to be outdone. On Aug. 5, it handed over its op-ed page to one J.B. Lamb. Lamb's target turned out to be the "peacenicks." "The peacenik," observed Lamb, "for all his moral pretensions. . . is accepted by the sort of beat bum, and, generally speaking, nobody takes him very seriously." After all, he continued in the same spirit, "Force established Western civilization and force alone sustains it in the face of absolute dictatorship."

Such candor is refreshing. It prepared Star readers for the editorial of the following day: "Not even by the very loose rules of the Cold War is there any excuse for the hit-and-run attacks on the U.S. warships off the coast of Vietnam. One attack might have been explained as an accident or miscalculation. Two attacks mean bellicose intent. . . Mr. Johnson has done what he had to do in the face of an attack on his country's ships in international waters."

But it was left to the Toronto Telegram to put the matter with proper magisterial authority. For Mr. Bassett's editorialists, the main enemy was not North Vietnam:

"Essentially the southeast Asian war is an aggressive war, mounted by the Communist

Chinese, aimed at the subjugation of the peoples who inhabit the lands south and west of its borders."

On Aug. 6, the Citizen finally pronounced: "Whether they give active or merely moral support in the immediate crisis, it is now for Washington's friends to rally to the United States — as indeed a majority in Canada's Parliament is doing. . . North Vietnam, which now has thousands of troops in South Vietnam, so clearly the aggressor. . ."

The minority in Parliament refusing to be stampeded comprised T.C. Douglas and some of his fellow New Democrats. The implication in the Citizen editorial was that their skepticism showed them to be not Washington's friends, in the Citizen lexicon a shocking state of affairs.

Down with Ho

Op-ed in the Citizen, John Roderick of the Associated Press was set loose on Ho Chi Minh. Under the heading: Ruthless Marxist now U.S. adversary, Mr. Roderick gave us Ho: "Straggly-bearded Ho Chi Minh, one-time cabin boy, cook and Soviet follower." Mellowing to his task, Roderick dips into the collective consciousness of the Caucasian, finally surfacing with an assist from the vocabulary of the 13-year-old boys' stories, of the evil Dr. Fu Manchu, prowling the Limehouse docks: "Behind his benign exterior hides one of the most single-minded, skilful and ruthless Communists. . ."

Clearly, Aug. 6 was not Ho's day in Ottawa. And yet and yet, tucked in the corner of the same page was a Canadian Press story. It was headed: Answers to Vietnam puzzle difficult.

Why did the press in Canada believe that a few minuscule gunboats would seek out and attack the destroyers of the United States, thereby inviting massive retaliation? Why did the press justify the actions of the United States government?

The most charitable answer would seem to be that there was, after all, some kind of attack. There was that bullet hole, was there not? Perhaps Communists are crazy, the wily Pathan finally flipped his lid? In any event the U.S. bombings were "retaliatory."

What, then, would the response of the press in Canada have been if Lyndon Johnson decided to bomb without having been attacked?

That would have been a different story, wouldn't it? No, it would not.

Let us examine the record further.

The bombings resume

In February of 1965, the bombings of the North resumed. After the first attack, there was a three-week lull. Peace moves to North Vietnam made by U Thant, Premier Kosygin and General de Gaulle elicited an enthusiastic and positive response. The United States sat pat. Peace pleas were made to Washington by Prime Minister Shastri of India and by Pope Paul. On March 2, 1965, systematic bombing was resumed; shortly afterwards, the U.S. Marines landed in Viet Nam.

The scenario had been written long in advance.

For Martin Goodman, now Managing Editor of the Toronto Daily Star and in 1965 the paper's correspondent in Washington, March 1 was no different from any other day. True, his paper that day had carried warnings in an AP-UPI dispatch from "reliable sources" that "destructive air and sea attacks will be carried out on key installations in North Vietnam."

But for Mr. Goodman, such an unpleasant eventuality was not to be countenanced. A friend of the arts, he had discovered in Washington another devotee of Higher Things — none other than the President. Under the head: Culture booms in the Great Society, the Star's man reported: "If Lyndon Johnson has his way, life in the Great Society will be blessed with art and culture as well as affluence."

Washington is, in truth, a many-faceted city; and Martin Goodman was not alone in

discovering that there is more to Life than napalm. Bruce Philips, the Southam's man in the U.S. capital, was also able to see behind the headlines and grasp the realities of the larger picture. Not normally given to what might be called the personal mode, Mr. Philips nevertheless chose March 3, the day after 160 U.S. fighter-bombers had pulverized the North, to pen a curiously affectionate portrait, for the Southam readership, of the page boys on Capitol Hill. In one particular passage, which rose to almost Vidalesque heights, he wrote:

"Unlike the piping-voiced, apple-cheeked youngsters on Parliament Hill, the page boys who run errands for Congress are all in various stages of young manhood, with all the agonies, frustrations and temptations of the age."

Thus amid the whine of the bombs, even in the cannon's mouth, the combined readers of Philips and Goodman learned of Adolescence and Art — the acne, as it were, and the ecstasy.

In the absence of any clearly defined focus that would supply a rationale for the new wave of explosives, the press found itself falling back on a combination of the domino theory and the red-yellow horde theory that had worked so well in Korea. The Globe and Mail felt the new bombings quite justified; to do less "would be to invite Communist imperialism throughout the South East Asian peninsula, in Malaysia, the Philippines and perhaps India and Japan."

Impressive as this Communist shopping list was, the Toronto Telegram was nevertheless able to improve on it. For Lubor J. Zink the alternative to bombing was "the communitization of Thailand, Burma, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and eventually perhaps also of Japan and Australia." And Mr. Zink concluded with one of his more tiresome historical analogies: "United States withdrawal from Viet Nam," he reported, "would have the combined effect of an Asian Munich and Yalta."

What is noteworthy about all of these certainties is that in the United States itself, such hobby horses had long since ceased to be ridden. Indeed, in the spring of 1964, the annual journalism awards had without exception gone to journalists who had become increasingly critical of the entire Vietnam enterprise: the Pulitzer to David Halberstam of the New York Times and Malcolm Browne of Associated Press, the Louis M. Lyons award to Neil Sheehan of United Press, Overseas Press Club awards to Peter Kalischer of CBS, photographer Horst Faas of AP, etc.

But the agonizing reappraisal had not yet reached the periphery. One had the uncomfortable experience of trying to explain to American visitors who knew perfectly well that their Government was lying why it was that the press in Canada continued to print the most outrageous fantasies.

In the narrow space of two years, the press had become plus royaliste que le roi.

Part of the explanation has to do with the culture lag suffered by peripheries of empire. (Thus in Sydney, Australia, a less than enthusiastic attitude to Her Britannic Majesty may still be greeted by a punch in the mouth.)

Yet Toronto is not Sydney, Ottawa not quite Alice Springs. The answer must be sought elsewhere.

It must be sought in the Canadian Government of that period.

Canadian foreign policy?

Even with the most adept padding, books written on Canadian foreign policy in the Sixties remain woefully slim. This is understandable. There was none.

It is said of Lenin, after the Bolshevik Revolution, that when asked what he was going to do about Foreign Relations his face fell. "Do we," he asked wistfully, "have to have foreign relations?"

Similarly with the series of governments headed by Lester Pearson. An administration burdened down with the antics of Hal Banks and Lucien Rivard, with the fumbblings of the well-meaning Favreau, with the Cosa Nostra

hogging the government phone lines; while, like a wraith from old Weimar, Frau Munsinger's high heels splattered mud all over the floor of the Commons — such an administration, far from making any history, was intent only on surviving it.

In place of foreign policy, there was a scheme. And a scheme, as the poet wrote, is not a vision.

The scheme was a simple one: to accept and actively to propagate imperial theories concerning the nature of peasant wars in the century.

When the U.S. State Department 1965 White Paper said that "infiltrators from the North" formed the "hard core" and "the backbone of the entire Viet Cong operation," Paul Martin would repeat the formula unblinkingly:

"In South Vietnam there is now a full scale civil war supplied, directed and inspired from the Communist North Vietnam. . . the United States for their part have responded to the requests of successive South Vietnamese governments for help in the form of training and equipment against this externally organized and supported insurgency."

Typically, there was the case of Blair Seaborn, Washington's front runner in the I.C.C.

As for Seaborn, "a chore boy for Moloch," in James Eayrs's phrase, he was the subject of an affectionate portrait in Maclean's Magazine of November 15, 1965.

"Seaborn's name," said MacLean's, "is repeatedly linked with secret American attempts to start up some sort of dialogue with the Communists."

Sharp seeks advice

When Seaborn's cover was finally blown by the Pentagon Papers, Stanley Knowles asked that the details of the messages he carried be appended to Hansard. Mitchell Sharp demurred. Since the documents involved the U.S. Government, Mr. Sharp opined, "it would have to be consulted. . . In any event, the external Affairs Secretary opaquely told the House, "the gist of the messages had been that 'the Americans were not thinking of pulling out of Vietnam and were prepared to increase their commitment there if this were considered necessary'."

Thus the bombing of the North was simply "an increased commitment," a perfect example of what Norman Mailer once called totalitarian prose. And the press, once more, felt no need to comment. Peter C. Newman's thumbnail sketch would be allowed to stand: "Mitchell Sharp," Newman had written in 1965, "his face beaming like a beacon of absolute rationality in a dark irrational world of the most effective parliamentaryian of his party."

Effectiveness was very big in the Sixties.

John Aitken, the Telegram's man in Washington from 1967 to 1970, was more candid in his reaction to the Pentagon Papers. "A free nation," he writes, "must have a free press, to ferret out the realities rather than simply repeating the political rhetoric. . . The press failed to do this, he adds, "when President Johnson contrived the Gulf of Tonkin incident."

Perhaps it was all a matter of censorship. Here Mr. Aitken makes some startling disclosures. He ran into "various forms of implied or de facto censorship. White House regulars, for example, would be frozen out by Lyndon Johnson's press secretary, George Christian, if their articles ran too critical, and they would be excluded from the informal press chats in the Oval Room until they had written a pro-administration story and handed the carbons over to the White House staff as proof."

Is the war over?

Conventional wisdom now has it that the war in Vietnam is winding down. The Canadian media doggedly persist in this fallacious notion. And herein lie the real dangers of the Pentagon Papers. They obscure the fact that the press has lied in the past; they further obscure the fact the press

is lying now. (It is noteworthy, incidentally, that the horror of My Lai had to be unearthed by Seymour Hersh, and not by the commercial press.)

For the Papers conveniently allow the media to regard Vietnam as an unhappy but nevertheless now closed chapter in the history of the new imperialism. This is a profound error.

The war in South East Asia has expanded overtly into Laos and Cambodia. Official American figures show that 5,795,160 tons of bombs were dropped on Vietnam between January 1965 and March 1971. Of this total, 2,593,743 tons have been dropped since Mr. Nixon assumed office.

These figures do not include the bombs dropped by the Saigon air force, an organization that now has more combat helicopters than any of the European NATO countries and will soon have more combat aircraft than either France or Britain. Senator Edward Kennedy has estimated that between 25,000 and 35,000 civilians have been killed last year in Vietnam — a 50 percent reduction as a result of the diversion of American bombing raids into Cambodia and Laos.

According to the U.S. correspondent Alvin Shuster, almost 75 per cent of the air war is outside of South Vietnam: in Laos two million tons of bombs have been dropped since 1968; in North Vietnam, reports Agence France Presse, extensive defoliation missions are being carried out.

No more blood

Vietnamization has been accepted gratefully by the press. White hands will no longer be seen with blood on them. The savages can be set upon one another, while the blond pilots watch the action from the sky, releasing their bully-bombs if the score needs

evening up. It is the ultimate fantasy of the Master Race that the tribal news sheets of his largest colony should applaud his tactics as being those of a benign and all-seeing pandjandrum.

"As for removing ground troops from Vietnam," Cambodia's Prince Norodom Sihanouk comments in an interview in Newsday, "Nixon is just playing domestic politics. Your soldiers have no more will to fight anyway — why should they? What really matters is your air force! That's what prevents the patriotic forces from capturing the main cities and keeps the crooks you call allies in power. . . But I've heard nothing about withdrawing air support."

Yet "winding down" has become a cult word in the domestic press. "The dwindling American battle casualties," writes the Telegram, "are a sign of the times in South Vietnam." We are not told what times the signs are a sign of. On several occasions, the Toronto Star has unilaterally declared the war over.

It is as if the press releases from the White House as well as the editorials in the Canadian press were being written by John and Yoko.

The strategic aims of the United States remain the same. For the Vietnamese, the goal is also the same, articulated as it was by Ho Chi Minh before he was unceremoniously drubbed out (complete with rented morning suit) of the Versailles Conference in 1919.

What is less obviously clear-cut is the role to be carved out for itself by the press in Canada in the future. It requires no great insight to forecast that the end of this unhappy century will be pockmarked by wars fought by peoples who wish to put an end to the imperial hegemony in their own countries. It will be interesting to note how this story will be told to the Canadian people by our press.

The lessons of the past are not encouraging.



I've got planes up tonight.



"Let me explain how this troop withdrawal works. . ."