

## Timeline of the Pentagon Papers

1945-1967:

U.S. involvement in Vietnam escalates from military aid to active combat, with increasing American troop presence.

1967:

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara commissions a classified study on U.S. involvement in Vietnam, conducted by the Department of Defense. This study becomes known as the Pentagon Papers.

1969:

Daniel Ellsberg, a military analyst and former Pentagon employee, gains access to the Pentagon Papers. Shocked by their content, he begins copying the documents, believing the public has a right to know the truth.

June 13, 1971:

The New York Times publishes the first installment of the Pentagon Papers, revealing government deception about the Vietnam War.

June 15, 1971:

The Nixon administration obtains a court injunction to halt further publication by The New York Times, citing national security concerns.

June 18, 1971:

The Washington Post, led by editor Ben Bradlee and publisher Katharine Graham, defies government pressure and publishes excerpts from the Pentagon Papers.

June 26, 1971:

The Supreme Court hears the case *New York Times Co. v. United States*, addressing whether the government can prevent newspapers from publishing classified information.

June 30, 1971:

The Supreme Court rules 6-3 in favor of The New York Times and The Washington Post, upholding

the First Amendment's protection of press freedom and limiting prior restraint by the government.

1973:

Daniel Ellsberg is charged with theft, conspiracy, and espionage but the charges are dismissed due to government misconduct.

## **Excerpts from the First Amendment**

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Key Principles:

- Freedom of Speech: Individuals have the right to express their opinions without government interference.
- Freedom of the Press: Journalists have the right to report on matters of public interest without censorship or prior restraint.
- Government Accountability: By protecting the press, the First Amendment ensures that citizens can be informed about government actions and hold leaders accountable.

Discussion Questions:

- Why is freedom of the press essential in a democracy?
- Should there ever be limits on what the press can publish? Why or why not?

# Key Facts About the Vietnam War and U.S. Government Secrecy

The Vietnam War (1955-1975):

- A conflict between communist North Vietnam and non-communist South Vietnam, with the U.S. supporting the South to prevent the spread of communism.
- Over 58,000 American soldiers died, and millions of Vietnamese civilians and soldiers lost their lives.

U.S. Government Secrecy:

- The Pentagon Papers revealed that the U.S. government had misled the public about the extent of its involvement and the likelihood of success in Vietnam.
- Successive administrations (Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon) had escalated U.S. involvement while publicly downplaying the risks and challenges.
- The documents showed that government officials knew the war was unlikely to be won, yet they continued to send troops, leading to widespread public distrust.

Impact of the Pentagon Papers:

- Increased public skepticism toward the government, particularly regarding transparency and truthfulness.
- Strengthened the press's role as a watchdog, holding those in power accountable.
- Influenced future whistleblowers, such as Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, who exposed government actions they believed the public had a right to know.

Discussion Questions:

- How did government secrecy affect public trust during the Vietnam War?
- What lessons can be learned from the publication of the Pentagon Papers regarding government transparency?