

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?