

50 years since the New York Times stunned the world

Someone reminded me the other day that it's been 50 years – a half-century – since the Pentagon Papers were dumped in America's lap and blew up like a grenade in the world that was America in Age of Aquarius

It was a Sunday, June 13, 1971, to be exact, that The New York Times stunned everyone — war mongers, peaceniks, hippies and yuppies, journalists, historians and regular folks — by publishing a front page story and three full pages inside reporting on a top secret study of the Vietnam mess and how it got that way.

It told us what we did not want to know — and, more importantly, what the government didn't want us to know —about how we had sunk into the quagmire of Southeast Asia, specifically Vietnam, and how we had lost nearly 50,000 young American men and women fighting an ill-defined war in an ill-defined way for ill-defined reasons.

Seven thousand pages, explaining in glaring and gut-wrenching detail 20 years of bungling in the name of keeping the world safe for democracy, in the name of not permitting the dominoes of then-obscure Asian nations from falling prey to the dreaded Commies. It would

Ed Breen's column is sponsored by: First Farmer's Bank & Trust—see their ad., below.



A MOMENT
Ed Breen



be another four years and thousands more lives before the end played itself out in the streets of Saigon on April 30, 1975. Saigon is now called Ho Chi Minh City and that tells you everything you need to know about the last days.

And that Sunday newspaper that June morning introduced us to a whole cast of characters who would become a part of our national conversation for years.

Daniel Ellsberg, first among them. A scholarly sort who was a civilian working in the Pentagon. Indeed, he was an author of what was properly named

“The Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force.” But no one called it that, then or now. It was the Pentagon Papers and still is.

Neil Sheehan, a tough and smart and experienced reporter for The New York Times who was approached and trusted by Daniel Ellsberg. Sheehan had been there, to Vietnam, to the killing fields and the press briefings on body counts and other fantasies.

Those first hours after Ellsberg followed the dictates of his conscience have been recorded and retold, most recently in Steven Spielberg's 2017 movie, “The Post,” in which he tells of the personal courage of Katharine Graham and Ben Bradlee at the Washington Post newspaper, which also had the pile of, yes, stolen documents.

They were agonizing days, those first days after June 13. Most notably in the places of great power, like The New York Times and Washington Post, but in smaller places like the newsroom of the Chronicle-Tribune at Sixth and Adams streets here in Marion. The newspaper, far healthier in those days, bought The New York Times News Service, which gave access to all that was in the

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 1971

75¢ beyond 10-mile zone from New York City, except Long Island. Higher in air delivery cities.

Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing U. S. Involvement

By NEIL SHEEHAN

A massive study of how the United States went to war in Indochina, conducted by the Pentagon three years ago, demonstrates that four administrations progressively developed a sense of commitment to a non-Communist Vietnam, a readiness to fight the North to protect the South, and an ultimate frustration with this effort—to a much greater extent than their public statements acknowledged at the time.

The 3,000-page analysis, to which 4,000 pages of official documents are appended, was commissioned by Secre-

Three pages of documentary material from the Pentagon study begin on Page 35.

Though far from a complete history, even at 2.5 million words, the study forms a great archive of government decision-making on Indochina over three decades. The study led its 30 to 40 authors and researchers to many broad conclusions and specific findings, including the following:

¶That the Kennedy Administration, though ultimately spared from major escalation decisions by the death of its leader, transformed a policy of “limited-risk gamble,” which it inherited, into a “broad commitment” that left President Johnson with a choice between more war and withdrawal.

¶That the Johnson Administration, though the President was reluctant and hesitant to take the final decisions, intensified the covert warfare against North Vietnam and began planning in the spring of 1964 to wage overt war, a full year before it publicly revealed

Times.
I recall watching the teletype clatter on endlessly as it delivered the very same horrific history that the New Yorkers were reading. To publish? Or not to publish? The government was angry and vindictive about this. The Department of Justice was seeking court injunctions to halt the second installment. Certainly, the big fish were at risk, but how about us guppies and tadpoles out here in the hushings? Might the feds come for us, too?
But didn't we have an obligation? Hadn't we all read the Constitution? Wasn't this about as important a story as we would ever see? We had colleagues drafted out of our

news family who were “in ‘Nam.”
The Pentagon Papers suddenly flowed in all directions. Ellsberg? Suddenly a household name, but, as someone once said, “one man's traitor is another man's patriot,” or words to that effect.
So the big dogs from the government and the newspapers all went to the Supreme Court, where Justice Byron White — he was known as “Whizzer” in his college football days — told the administration to be very careful. He told them that if the government wants to stop the presses, it better first get the approval of Congress.
So the Pentagon Papers were published. They may

have hurried the end of the war; maybe not. We'll never really know.
And I went to the basement the other day, to one of those boxes of stuff I call my archive. And there they were, aged and brittle just like me: Those reams of teletype paper, typed in all capital letters, banged out one letter at a time by the machine.
“By Neil Sheehan,” the first line reads. And the second: “A massive study of how the United States went to war in Indochina,” and so on for a couple of hundred thousand words.
I tucked them back in the box. Maybe the grandkids will be curious someday.

1 FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST

WHAT IF

this is the year you literally knock down the walls?

Start your Home Equity Loan at FFBT.COM

Member FDIC
INSTITUTION ID 478756