

Set in 1971, *The Post* depicts the true story of attempts by journalists at The Washington Post to publish the infamous Pentagon Papers, a set of classified documents regarding the 20-year involvement of the United States government in the Vietnam War and earlier in French Indochina back to the 1940s.

New York Times v. United States

Beginning on June 13, 1971, the *Times* published a series of front-page articles based on the information contained in the Pentagon Papers. After the third article, the U.S. Department of Justice got a temporary restraining order against further publication of the material, arguing that it was detrimental to U.S. national security.

In the now-famous case of *New York Times Co. v. United States*, the *Times* and the *Washington Post* joined forces to fight for the right to publish, and on June 30 the U.S. [Supreme Court](#) ruled 6-3 that the government had failed to prove harm to national security, and that publication of the papers was justified under the First Amendment's protection of freedom of the press.

In addition to publication in the *Times*, *Post*, *Boston Globe* and other newspapers, portions of the Pentagon Papers entered the public record when Senator Mike Gravel of [Alaska](#), an outspoken critic of the [Vietnam War](#), read them aloud in a Senate subcommittee hearing.

These published portions revealed that the presidential administrations of Harry S. Truman, [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), John F. Kennedy and [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) had all misled the public about the degree of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, from Truman's decision to give military aid to France during its struggle against the communist-led Viet Minh to Johnson's development of plans to escalate the war in Vietnam as early as 1964, even as he claimed the opposite during that year's presidential election.

Impact of the Pentagon Papers

Published at a time when support for U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was rapidly eroding, the Pentagon Papers confirmed many people's suspicions about the active role the U.S. government had taken in building up the conflict. Though the study did not

cover the policies of President Richard M. Nixon, the revelations included within it were embarrassing, particularly as Nixon was up for reelection in 1972.

In supporting the freedom of the press guaranteed in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart wrote: “In the absence of the governmental checks and balances present in other areas of our national life, the only effective restraint upon executive policy and power in the areas of national defense and international affairs may lie in an enlightened citizenry—in an informed and critical public opinion which alone can here protect the values of democratic government.”

After the Supreme Court’s verdict on June 30, the Nixon administration had Ellsberg and an alleged accomplice, Anthony Russo, indicted on criminal charges including conspiracy, espionage and stealing government property. The trial began in 1973, but ended in a dismissal of the charges after prosecutors discovered that a secret White House team (dubbed “the plumbers”) had burglarized Ellsberg’s psychiatrist’s office in September 1971 in order to find information that would discredit him.

The so-called plumbers, E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, were later involved in the break-in at the Watergate in 1972 that would lead to Nixon’s resignation in 1974.

History.com Editors. (2011, August 2). *Pentagon Papers*. History.com. Retrieved February 18, 2022, from <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/pentagon-papers>