MIT rejected 'Papers'

By Lee Giagure

The MIT Press Editorial Board declined last July to publish a nearly-complete version of the Pentagon Papers. Publication was rejected mainly on legal grounds, according to the chairman of the Board, Dean Robert Bishop, at a meeting of four members of the Board on July 26.

Bishop stated that while the Supreme Court had ruled that newspapers were free from "prior restraint" on publication, several of the Justices had explicitly noted it would be appropriate for the government to prosecute illegal papers were published. Besides the possibility of legal action against MIT, Bishop claimed that printing the papers would be an act of civil disobedience and that the Board was "reluctant" to involve MIT officially in such an act. More simply, he declared that the Board didn't want to do something "that would be widely regarded as illegal."

The papers were brought to Howard Webber, Director of the MIT Press, by Dr. Leonard S. Rodberg, a fellow of the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington. Rodberg had been contacted by Senator Mike Gravel after the Senator read the complete version of the papers. He had assisted the Senator in an attempt to get a Congressional immunity from the project was of editorial interest, but had urged caution regarding the legal implications of publishing the papers.

According to Webber, the three absent Board members hadn't reviewed the documents but was concerned over the legal issues involved.

Webber contacted seven of the eight members of the Editorial Board of the Press (a ninth position was vacant at the time).

Standard procedure is for the Editorial Board, a standing committee of the faculty, to review all material before it is published. The Press' professional staff, Webber explained, examines material and submits to the Board what it considers editorially interesting.

Under pressure from Gravel for an early decision, four members of the Board, including Bishop, Professors Gardiner Swain (V), Zannon Zannetos (XV) and Ernest Rubinowicz (II) (three others were traveling and could not attend the meeting) met with Webber on July 24th. Also present were Provost Walter Rosenblith, the highest-ranking member of the administration available at the time, and an Institute lawyer to discuss the legal aspects of publication. According to Webber, the three absent Board members had said that the project was of editorial interest, but had urged caution regarding the legal implications of publishing the papers.

Bishop stated that he had invited Rosenblith to attend the meeting "since the entire board wouldn't be present" and because of the issues involved. Questioned about the 8.46 report which implied the MIT administration had a hand in the decision, Bishop claimed there was "no sign of his (Rosenblith's) trying to dictate a decision," and that Rosenblith had only posed questions about the issues involved.

Bishop explained that a number of Board members hadn't rejected publication "out of hand," but after a two hour discussion, he said a "fairly clear consensus" had emerged that MIT should not become involved in such a venture. There was no discussion at the meeting of the possible penalties MIT might incur.

Contacted after the Board's final decision, the three absent members, as well as MIT President Jerome Wiesner, concurred with the decision.

Webber stated that he was "disappointed" that the Press did not publish the Papers, and Bishop said that his "personal sympathies may have favored publication." The Board, he said, felt "initial sympathy with the results" (publication of the documents) but was concerned over the legal issues involved.

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