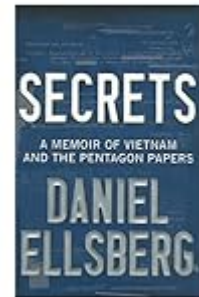




Daniel Ellsberg. *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers.* New York: Viking, 2002. vii + 498 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-03030-9.



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There Comes a Time When Silence Becomes Betrayal

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Written as a memoir, Daniel Ellsberg's *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* is the timely story of a man coming to grips with what he believed to be the truth and deciding that he must reveal to the U.S. public that the highest levels of American government were engaged in deceit over the Vietnam War. In 1971 Ellsberg, a Pentagon staffer, copied, and then gave to Congress and several newspapers, highly-classified documents known as the "Pentagon Papers." The Pentagon Papers were a top-secret study promoted by then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, entitled "The History of the U.S. Decision Making Process in Vietnam, 1945-1968." This study detailed the government's deceptions about U.S. policy in Vietnam dating all the way back to the Truman administration. The study revealed that Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson all knowingly lied to the American public about their intentions and actions regarding escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. There was a strong suspicion at the time, although no documentation in the Pentagon Papers, that Nixon was following the same precedent and

not being forthcoming with the American people about current U.S. policy and intentions in South East Asia.

Ellsberg's access to highly classified documents gave him firsthand evidence that Presidents were escalating the war while deceiving the American public. After years of participating in Vietnam studies and acting as an advisor, he knew that the highest levels of leadership, including Presidents dating back to Harry Truman, had been made aware of the "un-winnable" status of any war in Vietnam or South East Asia. He had witnessed presidents and various other high-level officials lie to the American public about the status of Vietnam and U.S. policy there. In one account, for example, Ellsberg reported to Secretary of Defense McNamara, as they were flying back to Washington, that there had been no progress in the past year in the "pacification" process. As a pacification advisor, Ellsberg had spent time in Vietnam with U.S. infantry units on patrol, scoping out the pacification process in the villages of South Vietnam. Pacification was a combination of U.S. political and military efforts designed to build a popular base for the government in Saigon. McNamara wholeheartedly agreed and then stepped off the plane to

a waiting news conference, where he reported that things were not only improving in Vietnam, but going far better than expected.

Ellsberg next describes his participation in a project of McNamara's regarding historical presidential decision-making as related to Vietnam, focusing on President Kennedy. The publication of this study became part of the Pentagon Papers themselves. In reading earlier volumes of McNamara's study, Ellsberg's eyes are opened. These volumes covered the early years of U.S. interactions and foreign relations with the French and the Vietnamese from 1945 to 1960 and revealed facts he himself was unaware of but that Presidents Truman and Eisenhower had clearly known. Initially, Ellsberg felt an institutional loyalty and a duty to support his immediate bosses, as well as the administration's policy in South East Asia. By this point, however, Ellsberg began his tentative involvement with the non-violent antiwar movement, which did much to awaken his conscience and shake off the institutional legacy of duty and loyalty. A Pentagon staffer helped him to see the stalemate as it existed in his own conscience (curiously reflecting the stalemate condition of Vietnam).

Ellsberg began to feel a personal conviction and responsibility for the lies that he himself had helped to perpetrate through his work and studies done while working for the government. He was struck by one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s quotes, "At some point silence becomes betrayal" (p. 235). That quote, along with his involvement with the non-violent antiwar protestors, awoke in him a determination to stop the escalation in South East Asia by bringing the deceptions of the past into the public realm. He was stirred to deeper action and commitment from a question he asked of himself and others, "If it's true that most of the South Vietnamese wanted the war to be over, whether that was at the cost of either a Communist victory or a Government of Vietnam (GVN) victory, how could we [the U.S. government] be justified in prolonging the war inside their country? Why would we have the right to keep it going even one more day?" (p. 364). These unanswerable questions provided the final prompting he needed in his plan to copy and publicize the Pentagon Papers.

Ultimately, all this governmental activity along with the efforts to cover it up are revealed as a crime in all

its shameful detail. Ellsberg outlines the copying and publication process, the decisions to get sections of the Papers to the newspapers, and his two weeks of hiding from and eventual surrender to the FBI. The epilogue covers his trial and reveals the inner workings of the Nixon White House at that time, and Nixon's direct efforts to discredit Ellsberg and other Democrats by the hired gun and "Plumber," Howard Hunt. Ellsberg concludes by tying the larger story together with Watergate, the downfall of Nixon, and the end of activity in South East Asia. Ellsberg contends that the Nixon administration's criminal efforts to discredit him are what eventually brought down the Nixon administration, which, in turn, started the process which led to the end of the war in South East Asia.

Secrets is a riveting description of the evolution of his moral and personal decision over Vietnam. It is a detailed account of Ellsberg's copying and distribution of the Pentagon Papers, but it is also much more. Along the way, the reader is treated to an insider's view of high-level activity in the Pentagon; the steps that the Nixon White House went through to discredit Ellsberg; the tie-ins to the White House "Plumbers" and the Watergate break-in that brought Richard Nixon to resign the presidency; and a tour with John Paul Vann through the back roads of South Vietnam. John Paul Vann had been a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army and is the subject of *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* by Neil Sheehan. Vann leaked information concerning the progress of the war to the media because his superiors were unwilling to listen to the truth. He returned from the army early because of the pressure placed on him due to his vocal opposition to the way the war in Vietnam was being waged. At the time Ellsberg met him, Vann was working as a civilian with the Agency for International Development (AID) as a civilian pacification officer. Vann was killed in a helicopter crash in Vietnam while working for AID.

Ellsberg's book is of timeless value. The activities and deception that were hidden from Congress and the American public are lessons that all should be aware of and should never be forgotten. Perhaps that is especially true today considering our nation is again involved in a war under circumstances that many consider confusing and questionable.

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