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FEATURE REVIEW

Will the Real Daniel Ellsberg Please Stand Up


According to biographer Tom Wells, Daniel Ellsberg has spent his entire life trying to become famous.1 Although he earned more than his fifteen minutes of fame when he leaked the Pentagon Papers in June 1971, little had been heard of him since the seventies until the publication of two hefty books over the past two years, Wells’s critical biography and now his memoir. (In March 2003, Ellsberg was also the subject of a made-for-tv movie that he critiqued for its inaccuracy, even though it treated him quite favorably.)

I reviewed Wells’s gossipy but very well researched book last year and concluded that, even discounting some of the character assassination as hyperbolic, Ellsberg emerged as an “astoundingly egotistical, congenitally prevaricating, and indiscreet, pornography-collecting satyr with a lifelong writer’s block.”2 He has certainly got over his writer’s block with Secrets, an important insider’s study about how U.S. foreign-affairs machinery operated in the sixties and the seventies.

But what is a reviewer to do with Wells’s seemingly well-founded charges about prevarication? And Wells knows his man well, interviewing him for “many hours” before Ellsberg decided he did not like the way the biography might turn out and stopped talking to his Boswell.3 Indeed, it is probable that Ellsberg completed his long-delayed memoirs only because he wanted to set straight the record that Wells had allegedly distorted. It reminds one of Henry Kissinger delaying publication of the first volume of his memoirs so that he could respond to the charges about Cambodia made by William Shawcross in Sideshow.4 What is curious in Ellsberg’s case is that he makes no reference to

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Wells’s biography in his own work—alas, not even to the incendiary claim that he was obsessed with sex.

Ellsberg’s book, subtitled *A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, is an account of his several professional roles during the period, with only those scattered personal details about his life that he chooses to reveal. In that respect, it is an intelligent and thoughtful study by a soldier-scholar-practitioner of how the United States became extricated in the wars in Southeast Asia, how Ellsberg slowly morphed from gung-ho Marine to, according to Kissinger, “the most dangerous man in America” (p. 434), and how his theft and release of the Pentagon Papers helped to shape world history in ways that he could not have imagined. Moreover, almost Zelig-like, Ellsberg is on the scene near the circles of power at many of the crucial moments in the history of the era of the Vietnam War, as he offers intimate portraits of John McNaughton, Robert McNamara, Edward Lansdale, John Paul Vann, and Kissinger, among others. For example, he arrives at the Defense Department to assume his position as McNaughton’s assistant on 4 August 1964, the day of the alleged second Gulf of Tonkin attack.

Despite its erudition, *Secrets* is not quite a scholarly project. While much of Ellsberg’s account seems authentic, it is woefully underfootnoted, and his bibliography omits key monographs. In addition, many of the often-juicy verbatim conversations that he reports with little documentation took place more than thirty years ago. But it is a compelling story.

A brilliant young man, Ellsberg received a scholarship to Harvard in 1948, where he majored in economics both as an undergraduate and in the Ph.D. program that he cut short after his orals in 1954 to join the Marines. After three years of military service and a year as a junior fellow in the Society of Fellows at Harvard, he took a position at the nation’s most prominent think tank, the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, where he was primarily interested in the avoidance of nuclear war. It was there that he first began to read “secrets,” classified material that might have made Congress, the media, and the public think differently about Cold War issues. He was especially concerned about the way the White House could withhold crucial information from an often-uninquisitive Congress. As a Rand consultant, he traveled to Vietnam in 1961, just weeks before the celebrated Taylor-Rostow mission, to discover that things were not going as well as they seemed, and again, working on a Rand team that year, was privy to documents demonstrating that there was no missile gap.

In the summer of 1964, when Ellsberg went to work for McNaughton, a man whom he greatly admired, he soon discovered that among the most important secrets held in the executive branch was the almost universal pessimism about the Vietnam enterprise. Nonetheless, few around Johnson and McNamara—including McNaughton—ever balked when asked to provide position papers in which they did not believe. Ellsberg also was surprised by the frenetic nature of foreign and defense policy-making during the period, with thousands of pages of dispatches piling up on his desk during virtually a crisis a day, conjuring up images of the dizzying pace of “West Wing.”
Ellsberg titles his chapter on Johnson’s February 1965 bombing decision “Planned Provocation,” and writes about his own small role in the deceitful business of dredging up suspect stories about Viet Cong atrocities to justify escalation. At this point, the reader begins to wonder why, if he was so upset by what he was doing, he did not resign, a question that he himself poses but cannot answer (p. 72). It was during this period that he went to his first antiwar demonstration, the 17 April SDS-organized affair, to please his girlfriend (later his wife), socially conscious Patricia Marx. As the United States prepared to assume the ground-combat role in Vietnam, Ellsberg’s account re-enforces Fredrik Logevall’s contention that Johnson had real choices during this period.\(^5\) The public did not find this out until the publication of the Pentagon Papers; moreover, the public did not discover that when the president announced in July that he was sending 75,000 more troops to Vietnam, he and the Joint Chiefs had already agreed upon more than 125,000 by year’s end, and several advisors had talked about the need to send 500,000 ultimately.

Ellsberg admits that at least on one occasion when he was alone in McNaughton’s office during this period, he sneaked a peek at scores of classified files to which he did not have formal access, an action he likened to “opening the door on Ali Baba’s treasure” (p. 81). Although he does not make much of an attempt to defend his violation of the boundaries established by his esteemed boss, he implies that these high-level memos concerning Vietnam strategies were so important that they should not have been kept secret.

In 1966, Ellsberg returned to Vietnam with Lansdale’s interagency group to work on South Vietnamese political affairs. He spent most of his time in country with the legendary John Paul Vann, often traveling at break-neck speed on dangerous roads to remote, enemy-controlled areas to evaluate the war effort. The fact that things were worse than he expected and that political and military officials in the combat theater were not reporting the truth back to Washington further convinced him of the futility of the U.S. efforts. He was distressed by the “impact on policy failures of internal practices of lying to superiors, tacitly encouraged by those superiors, but resulting in a cognitive failure at the presidential level to recognize realities” (p. 185).

Back in the United States with Rand in 1967, Ellsberg was requisitioned again by the Defense Department to work on the Pentagon Papers, concentrating on Kennedy-era decision-making. This activity re-enforced his view of the lying and self-deception in the bureaucracy. After returning to Rand for several months, he was called back to Washington in February 1968 to work on Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford’s team that was re-evaluating Vietnam policy in the wake of the Tet Offensive. During this period, for the first time, he showed a classified document to an outsider, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who would soon become a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomina-\(^5\) Logevall, *Choosing War: The Last Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).
tion. Several weeks later, he gave more classified information, some of which appeared in the newspaper, to Neil Sheehan of the New York Times. Ellsberg pridefully concludes that this leak contributed to the pressure on President Johnson not to escalate.

During 1968, Ellsberg began hanging out with peace people and was particularly impressed with Janaki, an Indian follower of Ghandian principles. He also began his fateful four-per-week psychoanalytical sessions in Los Angeles. While he spends a good deal of time on his spiritual journey towards antiwar activism, he does not tell the reader why he decided to go into psychoanalysis and why he ultimately stopped his treatment. The psychiatrist himself, Dr. Lewis Fielding, became a central figure in the story of the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. Ellsberg's antiwar position soon roiled the waters at Rand, where his leadership in publishing an open letter in the New York Times in 1969 irritated most of his colleagues, who depended upon the government for their succor. They would even be more irritated with the Pentagon Papers affair, which ultimately cost Rand director Harry Rowen, Ellsberg's protector and close friend, his job.

More than half the book is devoted to why and how Ellsberg decided to copy the Defense Department study, the incredible “drudgery” (p. 329) involved in having to surreptitiously sneak the documents in and out of Rand to reproduce them at night on clunky old machines in peculiar places (such as the office of the girlfriend of his co-conspirator, Anthony Russo), and how he even brought his fourteen-year old son into the labor-intensive, apparently illegal activity. His defense for his actions was that “much of the information had been wrongfully withheld from Congress” (p. 326), one of the main reasons why he first tried to interest senators William Fulbright, George McGovern, and Gaylord Nelson in releasing them. After they were unwilling to take that political risk, he turned to Neil Sheehan, who doublecrossed him a bit by getting the papers published in June 1971, a year and a half after Ellsberg’s conspiracy began, without informing him that it was going to happen.

Much of the breathless last part of the book reads like a crime thriller, with Ellsberg and his wife on the run, living in safe houses, as the clumsy FBI searched for him. He had hoped that the publication of the papers and their secrets about presidential lying and deception would lead the American public to rise up and demand that President Nixon end the war, in much the same way that his leaks and others’ had helped to stop Johnson from escalating three years earlier. By June 1971, however, most Americans already realized that the war was a mistake, and many of them believed that the president was doing the best he could to extricate the country from the conflict with honor.

Ellsberg’s copying of the papers and their publication, which his lawyers thought was legal because of the absence of any specific laws prohibiting his actions, led to an assault on him personally by the Nixon administration, including the break-in at his psychiatrist’s office in 1971 to find blackmail-worthy material. Some of the “plumbers” on that job, about which Nixon probably
knew, were the same “plumbers” who broke into the Watergate complex less than a year later. Ellsberg is correct in suggesting that one reason for Nixon’s cover-up of the second break-in—about which he had no advance knowledge—was that he feared to bring to light more dangerous information about his role in the earlier break-in. Thus, at the least, the Ellsberg case contributed to Watergate, which emasculated the president and made it impossible for him to punish the North Vietnamese for violating the January 1973 peace treaty or to continue the air war in Cambodia. In the debate between Jeffrey Kimball and Larry Berman about Nixon’s true intentions in January 1973, Ellsberg offers a bit of evidence to support Kimball when he reports that Kissinger, his old professor, used the “decent interval” concept for the end game in Vietnam as early as the fall of 1968 (p. 229).

Self-serving though it may be, Secrets is a valuable addition to our understanding of policy-making during the Cold War. Moreover, Ellsberg’s slow intellectual and spiritual passage from an administration supporter to one of the most famous antiwar activists in history is enthralling. However, to learn more about Ellsberg and what may have driven him, one must supplement his memoir with Wells’s better-documented and unflattering Wild Man.

6. If Jeb Stuart Magruder’s July 2003 sensational belated revelation that Nixon did know about the Watergate break-in is to be believed, then the earlier break-in becomes a less important milestone in the series of events that led to the president’s resignation in August 1974.