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Recollections Of Ellsberg

Post 7-24-71

"SAINTS," said George Orwell, "must be presumed guilty until proved innocent." His point was that out of every 100 purported messiahs, at least 99 will turn out to be either kooks or hustlers.

Of course, the minute one says this he is accused of cynicism, of refusing to make a commitment, or of simply failing to understand the higher forms of idealism. Perhaps there is some truth in this accusation; perhaps some of us are just not favored with revelations from on high.

All this may seem like pretty abstract stuff, but the fact is that the United States at the moment is suffering from a surfeit of self-canonized saints. The latest entry is Daniel Ellsberg, whose dedication to some higher law led him to leak (or flood) the Pentagon papers. His essential claim is that the United States must be saved from itself and he has nominated himself for the job. (By definition, messiahs are not elected.) Let me make it clear that I am not questioning his sincerity, but frankly I have grave doubts about his qualifications.

My first encounter with Ellsberg was in Saigon in the spring of 1966. There had been a big fight within the administration on whether the United States should encourage the development of representative government in Vietnam. Some argued that establishing constitutional government would be de-stabilizing in the middle of a war; others felt it would be a move towards stability. President Johnson decided in February that it was essential and I was sent to Saigon (as a "consultant on public administration") to provide an independent reading of the situation.

Shortly after I arrived, I was invited by General Edward Lansdale to visit with his "team" at 194 Congly. Ellsberg was among those present. Without getting into the details, they had a theory of counter-insurgency that involved training 57-man Vietnamese teams to go out into the countryside. These Political Action Teams (PAT) were supposed to provide the South Vietnamese peasants with the same sort of political dedication that the Communists provided in the North. This assembly line approach to litical warfare struck me as absurd, but what impressed me most was the revivalistic mood of the gathering. When I asked politely what precisely the PAT were supposed to believe in, what would be their ideological motivation, a curious hush fell over the room. It was rather as though a cardinal had questioned the existence of God. And I was written off as simply incapable of comprehending the higher verities.

I FORGOT about Ellsberg until he turned up at the White House in late February or early March, 1968. He was peddling a memo all over town to the effect that the Tet offensive proved the war was lost, and brought a copy for one of my colleagues. The latter gave it to me to read and then invited me in with Ellsberg to discuss it. I thought Ellsberg was dead wrong in his analysis (which, I'm told, misled John Kenneth Galbraith into predicting at the time that the Siagon government would collapse in two weeks), but again what struck me most vividly was his fervor. And his total refusal to argue the question on the merits—his fervor. Ad his total refusal to argue the question on the merits—again I was exiled from the company of the faithful. Only now the faith had changed!

The Tet offensive, in my judgment, had been a brilliantly executed political warfare operation, rather than an effort to take over the South militarily. It was designed in short, to influence Omerican opinion; in General Giap's view, 40 to 50,000 dead was a small price to pay for undermining the American commitment. (Note that he sent his South Vietnamese — the Main Force VC — out on this suicide mission and kept his Hanoi divisions in reserve.) Ellsberg's reaction was precisely what Giap had in mind.

This is nt to question Ellsberg's loyalty to the United States, but to suggest that his judgment was bad, and, more important, that whatever bad judgment he had was invariably disguised as a message from God.

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