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Daniel Ellsberg: The Other News Leaks

The Pentagon Papers weren't the first secret documents that the celebrated leaker, Daniel Ellsberg, slipped to the New York Times.

Three years earlier, he not only leaked other sensitive documents to the Times but was pinpointed as the source. Yet a flunky misunderstanding stopped an FBI investigation of Ellsberg, who never even lost his top-secret security clearance.

This made possible his later historic leak of the Pentagon Papers, the incident that began Richard Nixon's downfall. The former President, reacting wildly to the leak, ordered the notorious White House plumbers to go after Ellsberg and, thereby, to teach the leakers a lesson they would never forget.

As a former member of President Nixon's inner circle, William Safire, has put it; "The Pentagon Papers case led (Nixon) into an overreaction that led to his most fundamental mistakes."

The engrossing story of how Ellsberg was spared to leak papers another day is part of the unpublished memoirs of W. Donald Stewart, a burly ex-FBI agent, who directed Pentagon investigations for seven years before his retirement last June.

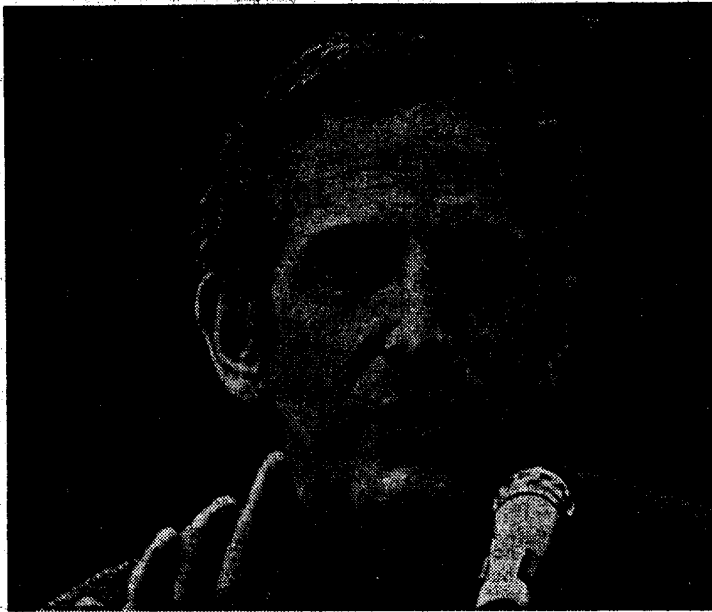
His account has been confirmed by Ellsberg, who acknowledged to us that he was responsible for the earlier New York leak. Some Pentagon insiders believe this leak prevented an investigation of North Vietnam.

The story goes back to the February 1968 Tet offensive, which badly jolted U.S. forces in Vietnam. Gen. William Westmoreland, then the U.S. commander, was eager to cut off North Vietnamese infiltration routes.

The only way he could accomplish this, he concluded, was to seize the Ho Chi Minh network of trails. This would mean invading and occupying parts of North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Gen. Earl Wheeler, then the Joint Chiefs' chairman, reportedly agreed with Westmoreland's strategy. It was in this context that Wheeler submitted a top-secret report to the White House on Feb. 23, 1968, calling for 206,000 more troops.

As Ellsberg now tells the story for the first time, he was one of the few



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who received a copy of the Wheeler report. He knew it would be impossible to recruit 206,000 more men without mobilizing the reserves.

He feared the President would continue increasing U.S. forces in Vietnam piecemeal until he had enough troops to invade North Vietnam and attack the Ho Chi Minh trail complex.

Never before, Ellsberg told us, had he even "dreamed" of leaking Pentagon secrets. But he was so upset that he decided to take the secret Wheeler report to the late Sen. Robert Kennedy (D-N.Y.), who had been critical of the Pentagon's war policies. Not long afterward, on March 10, 1968, the secret request for 206,000 more men was reported in the New York Times. The story caused an uproar in Congress.

Ellsberg doesn't know whether Kennedy leaked the figure to the Times. "But I thought, wow, that's the greatest leak there ever was," he told us. Suddenly, he felt ashamed that he had permitted Congress to

be manipulated for five years without divulging the facts that had been covered up.

"I decided that what was needed was a leak a day for awhile to show LBJ that the day of lying was over," Ellsberg said. So he gathered up some documents, which proved the Pentagon had underestimated Communist strength in Vietnam.

He sought out the authors of the March 10 story, Neil Sheehan and Hedrick Smith, who took him to see their bureau chief, Tom Wicker. There were several visits, Ellsberg recalls, as he helped them authenticate the facts.

This resulted in three explosive stories by Sheehan on March 19, 20 and 21. The stories set off alarms inside the Pentagon and, across the Potomac, in the White House. Lyndon Johnson was apoplectic.

Stewart was assigned to find out who had leaked the secrets to the Times, FBI agents were alerted to join in the search.

Stewart efficiently narrowed down the possible suspects to Ellsberg, then

on loan from the Rand Corporation. On March 29, by secret memo to the late FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, Stewart identified Ellsberg.

Stewart also wanted to prosecute Sheehan under the Espionage Act, but Defense Secretary Clark Clifford was eager to court the press. As Stewart recalls it, a top Clifford aide told him bluntly: "The Secretary and the press are getting along fine, and this would upset relations."

This attitude was relayed to the CIA, whose secrets had been compromised. But somehow, a CIA official got the mistaken impression that the Pentagon wanted to kill the investigation of both cases, not just the probe of Sheehan. The CIA, thereafter, informed the Justice Department that it had no interest in pursuing the investigation.

So the Justice Department advised the FBI to drop the investigation of both Sheehan and Ellsberg. Thus the dovish Ellsberg was left, without so much as a question raised in his record, free to spring his Great Leak three years later.

One month before the Pentagon Papers exploded into the news, ironically, Stewart came upon Ellsberg's name in a State Department file as the suspect in another leak.

But meanwhile, Ellsberg had gone back to Sheehan with the fateful Pentagon Papers. President Nixon was beside himself with rage over the leak. He issued the orders that unleashed the plumbers and led to the burglarizing of the offices of Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

Stewart wrote one more secret memo about Ellsberg, this one addressed to then-Assistant Attorney General Robert Mardian. Stewart reminded Mardian that it was still possible to bring Ellsberg to trial for the 1969 leak. But Mardian ignored the suggestion.

Footnote: Clifford told us that he had not ordered the investigation of Sheehan dropped. "I have no recollection of it," he said. Sheehan had no comment. Wicker was travelling overseas and couldn't be reached.