

Ellsberg: Hero? Traitor?

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A generation of Americans further removed from the Vietnam tragedy than we, will render the ultimate verdict in the case of Daniel Ellsberg and the "Pentagon Papers" — whether he was a hero for revealing the story of how the country got into that war, or whether he flirted with treason; whether the end justified the means he used, or whether his disclosure of classified documents was a betrayal of his trust as a government employe.

One thing we can say is that this is where it all began: the White House "Plumbers," the break-in at the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist and of Democratic party headquarters, the bugging and surveillance of reporters and administration underlings, the Ervin Committee, John Dean, Archibald Cox, the "Saturday Night Massacre," the White House tapes, the subpoenas, the transcripts — in short, the whole "Watergate" drama.

It all began with the outrage of a President over the Pentagon Papers, and it may end with the downfall of a President.

"I considered the problem of such disclosures as critical to the national security of the United States," wrote President Nixon the other day in a letter to U.S. District Judge Gerhard Gesell, "and it was my intent, which I believe I conveyed, that the fullest authority of the President under the Constitution and the law, should be used if necessary to bring a halt to these disclosures."

Judge Gesell was conducting hearings on pretrial motions by lawyers for the defendants in the Ellsberg break-in. This blanket Presidential authorization is their main defense against charges of burglary and violation of civil rights.

Two perplexing questions remain: 1) Did the President knowingly or unknowingly, before or after the act, encourage or countenance his aides to operate outside the Constitution and the law, not only in tracing and plugging national security leaks but engaging in political espionage? And 2), why was there such Presidential concern over the

Pentagon Papers in the first place? The first question is one of the matters now before the House Judiciary Committee considering the President's impeachment. The second we can only continue to wonder about.

The Nixon Administration played no part in the high-level thinking and decision-making which initially involved the United States in Vietnam. If the Pentagon Papers embarrassed or discredited anyone, it was the previous two administrations.

As for the baneful effects of the Papers on the security of the United States, it has been three years since their publication. It was not evident then, nor is it evident now, just how their disclosure harmed this country.

This is wholly apart from the question of to what extent the government must be able to operate in secrecy or confidentiality, and at what point the right of the people to be informed about grave decisions being made in their name, becomes overriding.

As it turned out, the President's obsession with plugging leaks, real or fancied, and the use of illegal means under the cloak of "national security" resulted in the dismissal

of the charges against Ellsberg. Had his trial proceeded, the nation might possibly have learned some useful answers to the questions immediately above.

It may also have cost Richard Nixon his office and the outstanding place he was on the way to attaining in the Pantheon of American Presidents.

It seems a foolish gamble that he took a tremendous sacrifice for something of such questionable and transitory import in the long pull of history.