

## Passing Over the Abyss

### PAPERS ON THE WAR

By Daniel Ellsberg

Simon and Schuster, 309 pp.

\$7.95. Paperback \$2.95

By GODFREY HODGSON

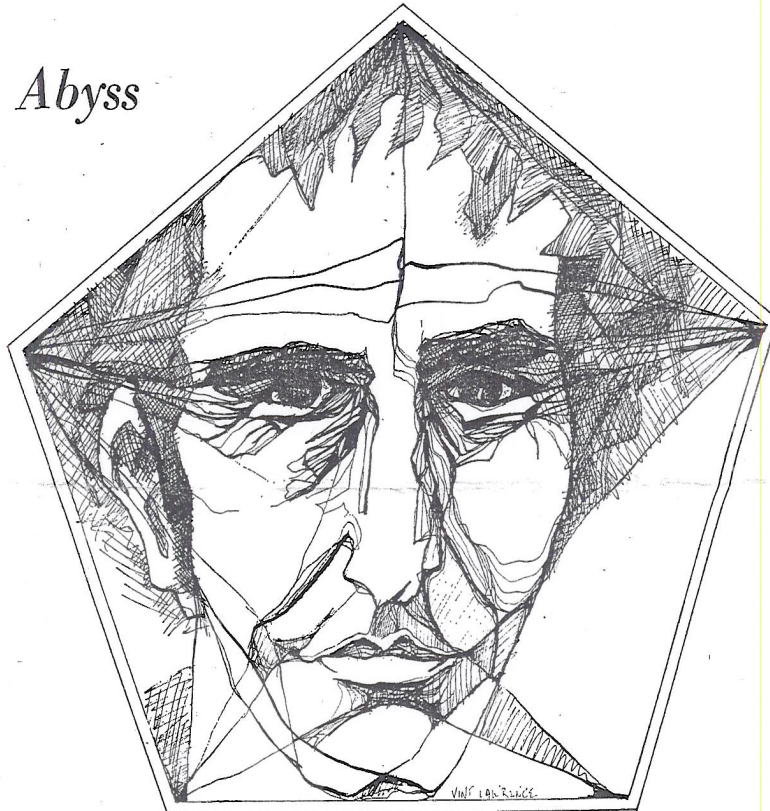
A NUMBER OF WRITERS have now pointed to the close parallels between America's war in Vietnam and Britain's Boer War of 1899-1902. Cyrus L. Sulzberger of The New York Times, for example, has reminded us that the earlier war, like this present one, ruined the intervening power's reputation for international morality, lost it for a time the respect of its friends, and stirred up a hornet's nest of opposition at home. And George Armstrong Kelly of Brandeis University, echoing the title of a famous book about Britain in the early years of this century, has even seen in the Vietnam war the omens of a strange death for liberal America.

But no one, so far as I know, has pointed out one precise and pregnant similarity between the two cases: the effect of the two wars on the elites who took the decision to fight them.

No part of British society was more divided than the elite by the early defeats and frustrations of what had been supposed to be irresistible force. It was in Oxford common rooms and in the great country houses of the political hostesses, not in the pubs or on the omnibus, that pro-Boers and anti-Boers cut each other dead.

Never again in Britain, after the trauma of Ladysmith, the Boers' Tet offensive, did the proposition that force might justly be used to defend national interests go unchallenged at the highest intellectual levels. The men who took the pacifist and anti-imperial side in the

GODFREY HODGSON, a former editor at the London Sunday Times and now a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, is a long-time observer of the American political and social scene.



great debate which has divided the nation ever since came of the same social class and shared the same intellectual background as the imperialists: George Orwell, destined for the colonial police, E. M. Forster, Bertrand Russell.

It has been the same in America these last ten years. To an astonishing extent—especially astonishing if one remembers how Eastern internationalists are still sometimes contrasted with the isolationists of the heartland—the intellectual battle over the morality and wisdom of the war has been fought out inside the new American elite. The managers of the war, and the champions of the peace movement, come from the same universities, know one another, read the same books, and inject into their quarrel something of the bitterness of sectaries who differ over the interpretation of the Scripture of American ideals.

For those who would like to predict men's opinions from their background,

there is no comfort in the way the American elite has divided on this issue. Thus Henry Kissinger, immigrant, Harvard social scientist, and hawk, matches John Kenneth Galbraith, immigrant, Harvard social scientist, and dove. Marcus Raskin came to Washington as the assistant of McGeorge Bundy. MIT supplied Walt Rostow to the cave of Abdullah in Austin, Tex., and Noam Chomsky to the New York Review of Books.

And Daniel Ellsberg . . . shared the education of Daniel Ellsberg. By age, education and professional experience, he stood in the absolute center of the new elite which formed and managed American foreign policy. Like that other famous convert who went up to Damascus breathing fire and brimstone, and came down again preaching the gospel of peace, Ellsberg was "brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner

of the law of the fathers, and was zealous."

Zealously, Ellsberg joined the Marines. According to the perfect manner, he wrote his Harvard thesis on decision-making: "Risk, Ambiguity and Decision." He volunteered to leave the sedentary excitements of the Pentagon, go out to Vietnam, and, sitting at the feet of John Paul Vann, find out for himself how it felt to stalk VC through the Delta paddy with an M16.

But there the Pauline analogy breaks down. For Ellsberg's conversion, from the very model of the modern national security intellectual into renegade or martyr, according to one's point of view, was no abrupt, road-to-Damascus illumination. "For seven years," he writes,

I have been preoccupied with our involvement in Vietnam. In that time I have (Continued on page 15)

# Papers on the War

(Continued from page 1)

seen it first as a problem; then as a stalemate; then as a crime.

Each of these perspectives called for a different mode of personal commitment: a problem, to help solve it; a stalemate, to help extricate ourselves with grace; a crime, to expose and resist it, to try to stop it immediately, to seek moral and political change.

The fascination of this book lies in its gradual revelation of the writer's evolution through these three stages: that is, from pragmatic skepticism, through intellectual doubt, to emotional and moral crisis. It is not in all respects a satisfactory book. It is stitched together from papers, letters, memoranda, and lectures composed or improvised by Ellsberg over five years, commented upon recently with benefit of hindsight.

The first and longest of these rather disjointed fragments is a brilliant essay, entitled "The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine." In it, Ellsberg argued—to me convincingly—that it is a self-serving myth to imagine that the United States floundered into Vietnam unknowingly, like a man who walked into a bog by accident. On the contrary—to summarize an elegant historical argument in a few words—five successive American presidents have deliberately escalated American involvement in Vietnam because they were guided, more or less consciously, by the same set of rules. The first and most decisive of these rules, Ellsberg argues, with a wealth of textual support from the Pentagon papers and elsewhere, was very simple and always clearly perceived: "Do not lose Vietnam to Communist control before the next election." It fits the sad facts as well as any other rationale.

The bulk of the book is then taken up with a miscellany: troubled descriptive writing from Ellsberg's time in the field as an assistant to General Lansdale; then a steadily growing outraged reaction to the escalation of the war, culminating in a somewhat shrill diatribe on the invasion of Laos: "As though driven by Che's curse, Richard Nixon seems compelled to create 'two, three . . . many Vietnams' in Southeast Asia."

The last piece in the book is both the most interesting and the most moving. Just before the leak of the Pentagon papers was due to become public knowledge, Ellsberg spoke at a church in Boston, and took as his text Nazi Germany, and in particular the memoirs of Albert Speer.

Writing during a 20-year prison term to which he was sentenced for war crimes, Speer—perhaps the least guilty of Hitler's ministers—recalled how he had been haunted by one particular photograph he was shown after the war. It showed a Jewish family being led to the gas chamber. "I couldn't rid my mind of that photograph," Speer wrote. "I would see it in my cell at night. I see it still. It has made a desert of my life."

Ellsberg describes how, when he came to read that passage aloud in the Boston church, he could hardly finish it. It made him feel that, however "minor" and "innocuous" his role had been, he must hold himself, and all the other American officials associated with the war, guilty of "willful, irresponsible ignorance and neglect of human consequences."

The American elite will, I suspect, like the British imperial elite, remain divided on the moral issues of the war. For some, certainly, Ellsberg's position will seem morbid, maudlin even hysterical. For others, it will seem the necessary precondition of any road home from a catastrophic course of policy.

And there are others who will find it difficult to sit at Ellsberg's feet. Those who never shared the confident enthusiasm he once felt for the doctrines which led to the war will see little reason to be lectured by him now about moral guilt. Others may feel that his present opposition to the war is tinged with the same moral arrogance with which he and his friends once defended it.

But I think that such reactions will be mistaken as well as ungenerous. For not only does Daniel Ellsberg emerge from these pages as a man of courage, and intelligence, but—rarer than either—of intellectual courage. He has also given us a document which will help us understand, through one man's perilous passage from one side to the other, an abyss which will