



Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers

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NO ONE connected with Vietnam brings to bear on the problem more formidable equipment than the apparent purveyor of the Pentagon papers, Dan Ellsberg. With intimate knowledge of the war on the ground, he combines experience in the Washington bureaucracy, intelligence of the highest order, and a well-nigh startling capacity for articulation of difficult themes.

Unlike most Americans, moreover, he truly cares about what happens to individual Vietnamese.

But if I came to admire Ellsberg abundantly over a period of five years of intermittent meetings on Vietnam, I also came to doubt his judgments profoundly.

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OUR FIRST meeting took place in the Pentagon when Ellsberg was working for the late John McNaughton who was then Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. I had recently seen something of the Vietnamese communists. At that time not much was known of them and I went to the Defense Department to tell McNaughton and Ellsberg my impressions.

At the end I was asked what way I saw of ending the conflict. I replied that the key was fostering in Saigon a regime that would negotiate with the communists. That idea McNaughton and Ellsberg flatly rejected. There was no possible way for negotiation in their view. Vietnam was a test of the American will to resist communist aggression.

A second meeting took place in Saigon

when Ellsberg was working for Brigadier General Edwin Lansdale. The Lansdale idea, of which Ellsberg had become a violent partisan, was that a Saigon regime friendly to the United States could filch the communist appeal to the countryside by a combination of social reform and vigorous police action. That notion seemed to me a pernicious fallacy.

I next ran into Ellsberg in the spring of 1968 at a lunch in the home of Senator Edward Kennedy in McLean, Va. By that time Ellsberg had changed his views and to the considerable embarrassment of everybody at lunch he talked at great length of how wrong he had been.

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A LAST meeting took place several months ago at my house in Washington. By this time Ellsberg had long since become convinced that the war was profoundly immoral. He talked obsessively of America's guilt and the need to cleanse the national soul.

He kept casting about for things that might be done to expose the government officials responsible for Vietnam. It must have been about that time that the Pentagon papers were turned over to the New York Times.

But the central fact about the Vietnam problem is that it is a shabby affair in an insignificant country distant from the big issues of world history. It matters immensely to most Vietnamese but cannot for long matter much to most Americans. Thus there has been no way of meeting the problem by the force of positive achievement—either national or personal.