

FILE

SR REVIEWS

Books

Decisions for War

BY JONATHAN MIRSKY

PAPERS ON THE WAR

by Daniel Ellsberg

Simon and Schuster, 309 pp., \$7.95

FIRE IN THE LAKE:

The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam

by Frances FitzGerald

Atlantic-Little, Brown, 491 pp., \$12.50

Most of you know what it means when 100 corpses lie there, or when 500 corpses lie there, or when 1,000 corpses lie there. To have gone through this and—apart from a few exceptions caused by human weakness—to have remained decent, that has made us great.

Heinrich Himmler to SS officers, October 1943.

[Johnson's] principal advisers were, almost uniformly, those considered when they took office to be among the ablest, the best, the most humane and liberal men that could be found for public trust. Townsend Hooper, ex-Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, December 1969.

One evening, millions of bombs ago, Noam Chomsky, Gabriel Kolko, and I were about to go on TV in New York City to debate some hawks. Just before the program began, Chomsky and Kolko encountered Daniel Ellsberg in the street; hearing what they were going to do, he asked to participate. Very impressed, they told me that an ex-Defense Department principal assistant wanted to appear on the air and tell all. Since my experience with such figures in the past, whether from the Kennedy or Johnson regimes, usually consisted of listening to avowals of long-time opposition to the war within

Jonathan Mirsky is director of the East Asia Center at Dartmouth College and a member of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars.

the government, I looked forward to the evening with meager enthusiasm. By the time the program was half over and Ellsberg had done everything but give the combination to the White House safe, one of us leaned over during a break and assured him he'd done enough. We underestimated him.

Shortly before the TV episode Ellsberg had been invited to a congressional conference on "War Crimes and the American Conscience." Still wrestling with *his* conscience and hopeful that Senator Fulbright would hold hearings on the Pentagon Papers, he had not yet released them to the press. But he knew that twelve million tons of explosives had fallen on the people of Indochina. "On the second day of the conference, I looked around a very large seminar table of participants . . . and it came to me that I was the only person present who was a potential defendant in a war crimes trial." In these essays, all written before June 13, 1971, the day he finally gave the Pentagon Papers to the press, Ellsberg opens to us his conscience and his mind.

Although not all potential criminal defendants end up at such a conference, much less in the witness box, Ellsberg's career—Marine Corps, Defense Department, State Department, Vietnam, Rand Corporation, Henry Kissinger—led him inexorably to July 10, 1972, and the Los Angeles Federal Court. The emotional ordeal that he brilliantly and—far more rare—honestly discloses in his opening and closing selection, did not climax with a sudden epiphany. Ellsberg's turnaround on the war took years. "The process of reaching these conclusions was, quite simply, the most frustrating, disappointing, disillusioning period of my life. I had come to Vietnam [1965-67] to learn, but also to help us succeed; and the learning was as bitter as the failure."

In 1968 Ellsberg flew to New York with two Rand colleagues and presented Henry Kissinger with a list of "policy options" for the President-elect. One of the options (then not supported

by Ellsberg) was "a U.S. commitment to total, unilateral withdrawal by a fixed date. . . ." One of Kissinger's military aides "disdained even to comment on this one option and at Kissinger's request it was omitted entirely from the second, edited draft that went to the National Security Council." [Emphasis added.]

January 1969 saw Ellsberg drafting a set of questions for Kissinger, who sent them, as "National Security Study Memorandum No. 1," to every agency concerned with Vietnam; in February Ellsberg read and summarized the answers for now-President Nixon. "No previous President dealing with Vietnam had been exposed to such comprehensive evidence of the contradictory and uncertain positions, and the limit and frailty of knowledge and hopes within his bureaucracy." Ellsberg was still grappling with the old temptation and seduction of bright young *aparatchki*: "helping the President to be better informed . . . seemed, simply, the most effective service one could perform as an applied researcher working for one's country. . . ." And therefore ". . . the question 'How could we have won in Vietnam?' still held an intellectual attraction for me. . . ."

By August the foundation of faith and bureaucratic loyalty had crumbled away beneath Ellsberg's feet. He read every word of the Pentagon Papers (Kissinger refused to do even a cursory job), Noam Chomsky's *American Power and the New Mandarins*, and some standard works on the war (" . . . there has never been an official of Deputy Assistant Secretary rank or higher—including myself—who could have passed in office a mid-term freshman exam in modern Vietnamese history"). Finally Ellsberg met some individuals, ". . . Americans who were on their way to prison for refusing to collaborate in an unjust war" and these personal acts of 'witness' gave me what reading could not." (This works both ways. I read *Papers on the War* while I was in prison for disrupting the draft, and it gave *me* strength.)

So Ellsberg, in finding out about himself, found out something about his masters:

There was a whole set of what amounted to institutional "anti-learning" mechanisms working to preserve and guarantee unadaptive and unsuccessful behavior: the fast turnover in personnel; the lack of institutional memory at any level; the failure to study history, to analyze or even record operational experience or mistakes; the effective pressures for optimistically false reporting at every level, for describing "progress" rather than problems or failure, thus concealing the very need for change in approach or for learning.

When one has read the complete Pentagon Papers, as Ellsberg did, the illusion that what is needed is better information vanishes. Since the end of World War II the "intelligence community," various individuals, even the Defense Department, have furnished quantities of accurate, pessimistic information predicting disaster if our Vietnam involvement deepened. "To read the continuous record of intelligence assessments and forecasts for Vietnam from 1946 on was finally to lose the delusion that informing the President better is the key to ending the war—or to fulfilling one's responsibilities as a citizen."

Ellsberg found himself facing a terrible question: How was it that five Presidents, from Truman through Nixon, could ignore gloomy prognoses and estimates and, furthermore, unerringly select courses of action that, their advisers cautioned them, would lead to deeper and more unpleasant consequences?

"What the Pentagon Papers do demonstrate unequivocally is that Presidential decisions were not a simple result of accepting predictions and advice." The Presidents, their administrations, and their parties, asserts Ellsberg, have been guided since at least 1950 by two rules and a number of "powerful inhibitions." The rules are: 1) "Do not lose the rest of Vietnam to Communist control before the next election," and 2) "Do not commit U.S. ground troops to a land war in Asia, either."

Among the "inhibitions" Ellsberg lists: 1) not "proposing 'coalition' with Communists . . .," 2) not "regarding Communist adversaries as anything but terrorists and aggressors . . .," 3) "appearing to do nothing in face of any possible 'loss to Communism' . . . or failing to favor any 'cheap' action—with significant domestic support—that 'might' succeed."

Ellsberg mercilessly guides us back to 1949, when "such senators as William Knowland, Styles Bridges, Kenneth Wherry, and Pat McCarran, three



Daniel and Patricia Ellsberg in front of the Federal Building in Los Angeles the morning of the start of Ellsberg's trial.

'Asia-first' Republicans and a right-wing Democrat . . . denounced the China White Paper issued by the State Department—as 'a 1,054 page white-wash . . . which has succeeded only in placing Asia in danger of Soviet conquest.'" That was the year John F. Kennedy told his fellow congressmen: "Over this weekend we have learned the extent of the disaster that has befallen China and the United States. The responsibility for the failure of our foreign policy in the Far East rests squarely with the White House and the Department of State."

Such statements, lumped together as McCarthyism, have panicked and goaded successive administrations ever since. Moreover, heeding Rule One—not to lose Asia to Communism—meant the inevitable breaking of Rule Two—dispatching ground troops to the East. This catches the President in the Indochina bind. He must now announce "very limited measures—as if they were believed adequate to achieve ambitious publicly announced goals." He must, in the bargain, "avoid public pressures that could result from frankness of prospects, pressures either to take much riskier measures to win and get the problem over with or to get out of Vietnam . . . [leading to] eventual disaster for the administration even if the initial public reaction were relief." Ellsberg's punch line to this build-up is devastating: "In short, the Presidents conclude, *the public must be lied to*: about what the President's decision is, what advice he rejects, what he was told to expect, what he foresees and intends for the future." [Emphasis added.] Avoiding the truth, while at-

tempting to obliterate the problem—namely, great numbers of Indochinese—requires that officials at the high levels Ellsberg once inhabited use a *special language of avoidance amongst themselves*. "Water drip . . . kill the hostage . . . fast-full squeeze . . . 'hot-cold' treatment . . . ratchet . . . one more turn of the screw . . ." Mrs. Ellsberg, seeing these phrases in the Pentagon Papers, exclaimed that they comprised "the language of torturers."

Ellsberg's contribution cannot be overpraised for its honesty, clarity, and penetration. His view from the inside, however, although tempered by direct experience in Vietnam, leads him, despite a disclaimer, to a somewhat disproportional weighting of the evidence. The monographs he recommends by Lacouture, Devillers, and others do not furnish him with the clues to economic and class factors that contribute to America's preoccupation with Indochina. Such clues need no longer be inferred. Jeffrey Race, for four years an army captain in Vietnam and author of the recent *War Comes to Long An*, sums up the American stake in "his" province:

The population was quite aware of those government policies critical to their life situation: the policy of maintaining the existing landholding system; the policy of military service far from one's home; the policy of persecuting former Vietminh; the policy of denying local organs sufficient authority to punish offending soldiers and officials; the policy of building strategic hamlets; and the policy of maintaining a government recruitment pattern which denied advancement to those from majority elements of the rural population.

Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake*, the result of both her year as a journalist in Vietnam and considerable reading, offers a convenient compendium for readers who will now take Ellsberg's advice and read the record of American involvement in Vietnam. FitzGerald does not shrink, in this big book, from broad judgment, evaluation, and cultural comparison. She is helpful in concentrating on the "moral" aspects of the struggle, which she, like Ellsberg, recognizes are little understood by American officials and which underlie so much Vietnamese behavior. The United States in 1954, she says, ". . . was entering into a moral and ideological struggle over the form of the state and the goals of the society." In a passage amazingly reminiscent of Ellsberg, she concludes:

No more was it possible to say, as so many Americans and French had, that Vietnam was "the quagmire" . . . that had enmired and corrupted the United States. It was the other way around. The U.S. officials had enmired Vietnam. They had corrupted

the Vietnamese and, by extension, the American soldiers who had to fight amongst the Vietnamese in their service. By involving the United States in a fruitless and immoral war, they had also corrupted themselves.

FitzGerald's book contains little new information. For the American who has tried to keep up, her sources form the familiar bibliography for Ellsberg's hypothetical freshman mid-term. The studies by Buttinger (whose documentation really *is* voluminous), McAllister, Mus, Shaplen, Kahin, and Lewis are accessible in paperback to anyone. FitzGerald relies for her judgment of Vietnamese temperament on a few well-known works, especially those of Paul Mus. Somewhat irritatingly, moreover, she employs bitty references to the *I-Ching*, Confucius, China, Indonesia, the *New York Times* edition of the Pentagon Papers, and the fashionable but quirky China psychoculturalist, Richard Solomon. Self-confident pronouncements on national habit and character should be reserved for veteran scholars or long-time residents who know the language.

The real value, however, of FitzGerald's cultural and political survey, lies in the lesson it teaches about the Ellsberg case: Ellsberg's "disclosures" disclosed virtually *nothing* about the war itself that was not already well known. But, despite his judgment that the Pentagon Papers reveal little about motive, they do illuminate the attitudes and values of high-policy planners, those responsible for "a criminal war," among whom Ellsberg now numbers himself.

The extreme necessity that the American public not discover the truth about its leaders, five administrations of them, explains the fury with which these men now pursue the informer in their midst. Ellsberg's "crime" clearly is not treason. "Keeping silent in public about what I had read and heard made me an accomplice. . . ." Now his colleagues want to get the squealer.

In a speech, included in *Papers on the War*, delivered shortly before he released the Pentagon Papers to the press, Ellsberg suddenly grasped the significance for himself of Albert Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*: ". . . not to have tried to see through the whole apparatus of mystification was already criminal. . . . For being in a position to know and, nevertheless, shunning knowledge creates direct responsibility for the consequences—from the very beginning. . . ." "I was like a man following a trail of bloodstained footprints through the snow without realizing someone had been injured." Now he knows who the victims were and

who the executioner. "I was there, too, however minor and 'innocuous' my role." □

ELEANOR: THE YEARS ALONE

by Joseph P. Lash
Norton, 368 pp., \$9.95

Reviewed by Benjamin DeMott

The heroine's husband is gone, and her light shines utterly free. She serves as a delegate to the U.N. Assembly's first meeting in London, working on organizational structure with Dulles, Vandenberg, Byrnes, and leaders of other national delegations, and, in a passage of high drama, defeating Vishinsky on the issue of forced repatriation of refugees. By acclaim she's elected chairman of the Human Rights Commission and emerges with a declaration that passes the Assembly without a single nay vote—"the first intergovernmental bill of rights and fundamental freedoms."

She commits herself to the search for a means of dealing with the problem of a Jewish homeland and, remaining ceaselessly conscious—despite distractions of extravagance on every side—of where the greatest debts are owed, sees Israel through a dozen challenges to a seat in the parliament of nations. She writes, lectures, broadcasts. She is the key person in the founding of Americans for Democratic Action. Twice she powers the Stevenson campaigns with her immense drive and clarity, winning no elections but keeping alive a breath of moral idealism that will be nourishment for the McCarthys, Kennedys, McGovern to come.

And in time she receives her due—part of it, anyway. Repeatedly the voices praising her speak as though in astonishment: We didn't *know*, we never dreamed there was so much to "Eleanor"! "I feel I must tell you that when you were appointed I thought it terrible and now I think your work here has been fine"—John Foster Dulles. "One of the most solid members of the delegation"—Arthur H. Vandenberg via Ben Cohen. "We consider you our finest ambassador abroad"—Dean Rusk. "Burmese regard Mrs. Roosevelt as most popular living American"—Dean Acheson. "If the President himself had come [to Argentina], he couldn't have done more to boost pro-United States feeling"—*Christian Science Monitor*. "Will the delegates please take their seats. Several million people

Benjamin DeMott is the author of two novels and four essay collections, the latest of which is *Surviving the Seventies*.



Eleanor Roosevelt in Bali

are waiting to hear the First Lady of the World"—the chairman of the 1952 Democratic Convention.

More important, this leader *is* what she's praised for being, possessing to the very end—in her seventies—qualities of imagination, psychological acuity, and political wit that are worth celebrating. Witness this casual patch from a 1956 *Meet the Press*:

Question: Mrs. Roosevelt, do you really think the present administration, and particularly President Eisenhower himself, wants prosperity only for big business and that he doesn't care about the little guy?

Mrs. R.: Oh no! The President is a good man and he would want always to do the right thing as he saw it, but he has a great admiration for the achievement of the successful business man because he has never been a successful business man and you always admire what you really don't understand.

As hardly needs saying, chronicles of triumph—virtue repaid, honor honored, talent prized—rouse skepticism nowadays: They imply that the world makes sense. The contemporary taste is for images of disorder, evidence of heartbreak—material of the kind brilliantly assembled, not in the work at hand, but in *Eleanor and Franklin*, the vastly successful first volume, published just a year ago, of Joseph P. Lash's biography. The entire movement of that book testified to the pervasiveness of chaos, catastrophe, injustice. A child is born of extraordinary percipience, openness to feeling, beauty of soul; therefore, her mother finds her ugly, calls her "Granny," treats her with kind indifference. The same child is deeply adoring of her father; therefore, he teases her, hurts her, abandons her. Here is a human being quick almost beyond belief to the suffering of others; therefore, her husband is set on the rack