

The Ellsberg Question

By Peter Schrag

SAN FRANCISCO—After two years of investigations and disclosures, the most troubling questions in the world of Watergate—perhaps more troubling even than those bearing on any culpability of President Nixon—concern the central yet ambiguous significance of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, who copied the Pentagon Papers and took responsibility for leaking them to the press.

It was Dr. Ellsberg, who, according to the testimony of former White House officials, set off the "panic sessions" that led to the organization of the "plumbers" in the summer of 1971 and ultimately to Watergate.

But it was also Dr. Ellsberg who came to be regarded at the White House as an opportunity to embarrass, if not destroy, major figures in the Democratic party, among them Senator Edmund S. Muskie who, at the time of the publication of the Pentagon Papers, appeared to be the most serious threat to the re-election of Mr. Nixon.

Was Dr. Ellsberg, then, a focus for the Administration's paranoia about leaks, conspiracies and foreign agents, or was he (in addition, if not instead) a major political opportunity for the White House?

More important, was there a conscious decision somewhere in the Government to allow him to proceed with the copying and distribution of the documents until more important figures could be implicated in the "conspiracy"?

The most important piece of evidence is that in January, 1970, more than a year before the Pentagon Papers were first published by The New York Times, the Federal Bureau of Investigation had been informed that he was copying the papers. Through the spring of 1970, the F.B.I. conducted an extended investigation, interviewing among others senior officials of the Rand Corporation, where Dr. Ellsberg had been working and where the papers were stored.

During the course of that investigation, the Bureau learned that Dr. Ellsberg had contemplated giving copies of the documents to Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (he had, in fact, already given him copies of some of the volumes) and to Charles E. Goodell, then a New York Senator, whom Dr. Ellsberg had served as a consultant.

Dr. Ellsberg later came to believe that the White House, which detested Mr. Goodell for his vocal opposition to the Vietnam war, was hoping to use the F.B.I. evidence against Mr. Goodell when he ran for re-election in

the fall of 1970, but found it either unnecessary or impossible. In fact, Dr. Ellsberg had never given Mr. Goodell any of the documents; he had, however, given him much hard information about the war.

There is no indication when, or if, that investigation was ever closed. The Rand officials were under the impression that they were to do nothing to alert Dr. Ellsberg "or to take any action which might interfere with the investigation." As late as the end of June, more than two months after the Bureau first informed Rand, and five months after the F.B.I. was first informed about the copying, the investigation was still going on.

Dr. Ellsberg's top-secret clearance was never revoked. On May 13, roughly two weeks after the F.B.I. first contacted Rand about him, Dr. Ellsberg testified on Vietnam before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and on June 5, in the middle of the investigation, President Nixon, perhaps in response to the reaction to the Cambodian invasion, called the White House meeting that led to the creation of the so-called Huston Plan to strengthen domestic intelligence, which included, among other things, provisions for burglary, electronic surveillance and mail covers.

Whether anyone in the White House knew about the F.B.I. investigation in the spring of 1970 is, of course, questionable, though the White House certainly knew of it after the papers were published in 1971.

What is likely is that the Administration's subsequent suspicion of the F.B.I. hinged on the F.B.I.'s failure to come up with evidence for the larger conspiracy that the White House hoped to establish.

What is certain is that in August, 1971, during the height of the "panic" about leaks, David Young of the plumbers sent to John D. Ehrlichman, then President Nixon's chief adviser on domestic affairs, a memo stating, among other things, that "substantial evidence" was being developed against former Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul C. Warnke, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Morton H. Halperin, and against Leslie H. Gelb, who headed the Pentagon Papers task force. Also marked for investigation was Clark Clifford, a former Defense Secretary who was Muskie adviser.

As the trials and inquiries of the coming months progress, the country may yet discover whether Dr. Ellsberg was in fact simply a protagonist, or whether he had once been marked as the victim in a political scheme as perverse as any ever contemplated in Vietnam.

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