

DANIEL ELLSBERG, THEORIST:

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS MODELS AND ELLSBERG'S DECISION TO LEAK THE PENTAGON PAPERS

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Daniel Ellsberg was made famous by his leaking of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. A former strategic analyst at RAND, he subsequently reinvented himself as an insider whose conscience, troubled by the deceit of the White House and the Pentagon, prompted him to speak truth to the American people. This paper challenges Ellsberg's account by arguing that his primary motivation is not to reveal the U.S. government's lies. Ellsberg's bureaucratic decision-making model has little to do with deceit; the problem for him was instead that most strategic analysts were not studying decision-making processes but rather focusing on the strategy and tactics of the Vietnam War. Indeed, his belief that most strategic analysts were looking at the wrong questions -- in other words, the sense that his colleagues were no longer with him -- prompted him to release the Pentagon Papers to the public in search of support from a new source.

Will the real Daniel Ellsberg please stand up? Is he, as his biographer Tom Wells suggests, an egoist with a perpetual writer's block who viewed the Pentagon Papers he leaked a substitute for the groundbreaking book he never wrote? Or, as Kissinger saw it, a hypocrite and traitor, "the most dangerous man in America"? But Ellsberg was trained as a bargaining theorist, and contrary to his post-1971 reinvention of himself as a moral convert, he did not leak the Pentagon Papers out of a new-found conviction that the Vietnam War must be stopped on ethical grounds. Rather, he pronounced the war hopeless, and consultants like him useless, based on his decision-making theory, the Stalemate Machine. Ellsberg remained convinced about the validity of his theories and the applicability of strategic analysis while attacking the government for

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abusing the latter for its deceitful goals. Just as his early decision to advise the administration on how to better fight the war arose out of his theories on the war and the decision-making process, Ellsberg was motivated by the Stalemate Machine to leak the Pentagon Papers.

We love the born-again moralist, and Daniel Ellsberg offers the basic ingredients. A poster-child leftist since the 1970s, Ellsberg during the mid 1960s has been described as a hawk and a “gung-ho marine.” Yet ever since he started working at the White House as a Vietnam specialist in 1964, Ellsberg criticized the administration’s strategy and tactics while accepting the fundamental rationale behind US involvement in Vietnam. As a dedicated Cold Warrior, he never questioned that the US had to intervene in Vietnam, or that “the Communists were bad people and that U.S. security was threatened.” But he believed that the official Vietnam policies were “egregious.” Ellsberg condemned the government’s abduction of strategic analysis for the justification of faulty strategies and tactics; he also admonished his fellow analysts for using the wrong theories.

Ellsberg argued that the government brandished the banner of strategic studies only when it suited its purpose, and the catchwords of this scientific discipline fueled its misguided and perverse reason for trotting down an erroneous path. During his 1967 trip to South Vietnam, Ellsberg discovered that the administration was mired in its own world of charts and statistics – incorrect by commission or omission – fighting, in essence, their own preferred version of the Vietnam War. Body counts were useless military victory indicators because there was usually no Viet Cong body left to be counted. In the battle for the “hearts and minds,” numbers did not fare much better. At an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam, i.e., South Vietnam) division headquarters, he saw a chart depicting the number of night patrols increasing to hundreds per week. A sure sign of progress, but the statistics were made up under pressure from the US advisers and Vietnamese officers; the actual number of patrols was zero. Ellsberg also condemned the artificial measurement of hamlet pacification. “The six-point criteria have been met, but only on paper,” for in fact the hamlet was too insecure to be pacified.

The cult of numbers exacerbated the bureaucracy’s inherent problem: the difficulty to understand itself and learn from its mistakes. In a 1968 University of Chicago debate, Ellsberg observed that the pursuit of statistics had resulted in falsifications, and ignorance of Vietnam persisted. The government imagined the approach of victory, and such reports were supplied: “[t]he charts are very good.” In addition, “failures can be neither recognized nor admitted” due to “peculiarly bureaucratic insensitiveness, blindness[sic] or distorted incentives.” Such “willful ignorance,” compounded by high turnover rates and a lack of specializa-

tion, resulted in an anti-learning machine apt at lying. But Ellsberg did not consider this problem to be hopeless, nor did he see it as discrediting the intentions of the policy-makers. The issue was not that we could not or would not learn, he assured Edwin Reischauer, who seemed to take his anti-learning machine to be an inference to human nature. Rather, "we often need to learn a great deal more and faster." While the analysts should study the "governmental and military learning process... and its limits" so that the government could become "self-aware," speeding it up was definitely possible.

Meanwhile, Ellsberg stressed the importance of estimating this learning speed when giving advice. In a 1968 review of Herman Kahn's *Can We Win in Vietnam?*, Ellsberg remarked that the analysts could not be content with proposing plausible strategies that would never be "fairly tried." Amid his complaints that the bureaucracy failed to – refused to – learn about the war, Vietnam, and itself from the authority was a sense that these consultants had themselves to blame for not being taken seriously enough. Or if they were taken seriously, for the failure of getting their recommendations properly implemented: "[for the consultants] to give advice in the hope that all of one's own preferred tactics or instruments can and will in fact be adopted is often terribly unrealistic; and it can be dangerous and even irresponsible if we knew that this is not the way it is going to be."

Ellsberg's critique, however, was directed against the practitioners, rather than the discipline, of strategic analysis. Since the late 1960s, some strategic analysis luminaries began to question the applicability of their field in Vietnam. The systems analyst Alain Enthoven confessed that he "fell off the boat" in face of "what Rand hath wrought." Bernard Brodie alleged that the domination of the military problem in US thinking towards Vietnam, which was in fact primarily a political problem, resulted from the construct of strategic studies itself: military problems were simply easier to model than political ones. Ellsberg demonstrated that Brodie was wrong. His RAND working paper *Revolutionary Judo* portrays an ingenious political gaming model in a revolutionary conflict between three players: Rebels, Authority, and the Public. Contrary to the beliefs of Lawrence Freeman and Brodie that "at the level of 'theoretical understanding' [the analysts'] error was total," Ellsberg believed that an appropriate theoretical framework for Vietnam was possible. Nor did Ellsberg see Vietnam as a test of one particular strategic doctrine; the problem with Vietnam analysis was only that many strategists clung to classical, inapplicable theories. For instance, Ellsberg was "taken aback" by Thomas Schelling's suggestion of adding a "threat tactic," a signature Schelling design, to one of his RAND papers on Vietnam. Evidently, Ellsberg expected his mentor of bargaining theory to know better than

to roundly transplant nuclear deterrence theories into the context of the Vietnam War – something which was not nuclear and had little to do with deterrence.

Thus in the summer of 1967, Ellsberg viewed the McNamara study, which would have led to NSSM-1 (National Security Study Memorandum-1) in 1969, a long overdue historical study of US decision-making towards Indochina. Through this study of the bureaucratic system, Ellsberg expected to “help the president, and the rest of the government [to] make better, less dangerous or misguided” decisions. But Ellsberg discovered that successive Presidents from Truman to Johnson were not misled by rosy reports of progress, and that the tendency to assign blame to the advisers, field commanders, and operational failures was simply to reduce the burden due each President. “[N]one of the lying to the Presidents had mattered,” he was forced to conclude, the Presidents were accurately informed, and more realism would not change their decisions.

The epiphany that systematic problems did not cause US stalemate in Vietnam certainly came as a shock to the theorist of the anti-learning machine. But Ellsberg went further and claimed in his memoirs that this realization was the fundamental motivation behind his decision to leak NSSM-1, later known as the Pentagon Papers. Ellsberg asserted that when he began to photocopy the documents in 1969, he began to doubt that America had a right to win in addition to believing that it had lost the chance to win. US participation in the war was “naked of any shred of legitimacy from the beginning,” he wrote, and the US was itself “the wrong side” of the war, an “evil,” a mass murderer. Moreover, Ellsberg learned from NSSM-1 that ever since 1946, “telling truth to presidents,” or trying to discover better ways to inform the executive branch, as he himself had done, appeared “entirely unpromising” as a way to end this crime. The insiders had failed, and it was therefore time to bring in outside pressure on Nixon by informing the public of what insiders like Ellsberg had known. Hopefully, the public would derive the same conclusion—that immediate withdrawal was necessary—and be outraged that the President lied about what he had been advised to do. This explanation is brilliantly simple: the truth must be told, and the people had a right to know. Even those who do not see Ellsberg as a moralist agree that Ellsberg simply shifted his trust in the presidency to the public.

Only there is nothing in NSSM-1 to support America’s war criminal nature. In fact, Ellsberg did not leak the documents because he believed this—America as murderer was an afterthought that first appeared in March 1971. On the contrary, he acted, in proper theorist style, according to the Stalemate Machine, which he first proposed in 1970 in opposition to Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s view that Vietnam decision-making was a policy of “one more step,” and that America stumbled blindly into a

quagmire. The Stalemate Machine states that five successive presidents from Truman to Nixon, with realistic information in hand, all made rational decisions regarding their short-term goal of not letting Vietnam go Communist during their tenure. They always chose to employ minimal force out of fear of public backlash, even though such were internally predicted to be inadequate. And each of these decisions succeeded in "buying time rather than winning or losing." Eventually, due to the prolonged war, the minimum became the maximum public opinion would allow, and a stalemate was thus minted.

The Nixon administration's Indochina policies were immoral, but the morality problem stems from the technical. Significantly, Ellsberg did not repudiate in the Stalemate Machine his 1969 assessment that the US should and could have won in 1947. Bureaucratic deception existed, but somehow it did not matter as much. The immorality of the government lies not in its actual tactics on the ground, e.g., napalm bombing and free-fire zones, nor an "arrogance of power" in deciding for the Vietnamese what was best for them. Unlike in the anti-learning machine, Nixon, as the four residents before him, followed another path by choice and not by mistake. In the absence of an excuse of ignorance, he should be held accountable.

Unlike Leslie Gelb who formulated a similar theory, Ellsberg did not question the necessity of US intervention in Vietnam except for a critique of the ghost of McCarthyism. He turned against the administration only because he did not approve of its exclusive focus on short-term goals. Ellsberg was likely hurt by the realization that politicians did not think like analysts. The former exhibit a "strong focus on the short run, a hopeful attitude toward the future, a tendency to put off painful decisions in the hope...that something will turn up to make the decision either unnecessary, or easier." His 1970 conversation with Kissinger, who did not see the merit of a historical study, compounded this disappointment. That the government acted rationally is not a critique of the rationalist faith, but rather a demonstration that its policies were destined to be disastrous in the long run precisely because they were rational in a different way, and Ellsberg's previous efforts to help the government become more rational were futile.

Still, Ellsberg abandoned neither strategic analysis nor the authority of the analysts. The schematic summary of the Stalemate Machine suspiciously resembles bargaining theory gaming models. With science on his side, Ellsberg considered the stalemate machine to be "analytical" whereas other theories were not. People can always find models and supporting evidence if they are determined to see Vietnam as a "tragedy without villains," he said, but he alone perceived the hidden patterns, the "stable tendencies" in presidential decisions. Contrary to his statement

in a 2001 New York Times article, his decision to leak the Pentagon Papers was not caused by a perception that “the government had long lied to the country.” As much as Ellsberg would like to proclaim faith in the American people, he constantly invoked his Harvard, RAND, and White House credentials when addressing the public, even though he was already loosing faith in the analyst profession. In 1969, when Ellsberg and five other RAND analysts sent an open letter to the New York Times urging a unilateral US withdrawal, his RAND colleagues denounced him as a traitor to the institution. Worse still, he believed that most of his accusers concurred with him on the need for withdrawal. Ellsberg reasoned that the consultants believed that they should not upset the government, their biggest client and patron, and that anything good for their personal salaries was good for the country. Yet despite misgivings about the analysts’ institutional dependence, Ellsberg deemed the fact that rational and intelligent people were advocating for a swift withdrawal significant - that this was not some radical leftist heresy and “withdrawal is now respectable.”

Ellsberg continued to denounce the government’s abduction of theories. Strategic analysis rhetoric remained a validation for its policies during phases of optimism between decisions. But this manipulation of catchwords became less deliberate and more unconscious. “Human wishfulness” pushed the decision-makers to find indications to support their hope that the realistic, pessimistic perceptions would prove wrong, “and that what [they] had been telling the public would turn out, for the good of all, to have been correct.” Unfortunately for Ellsberg, wishful thinking was not an excuse; it was even worse than to ignore the theorists altogether. That his noble discipline contributed to the administration’s self-deception constituted a great irony for the analyst who called for more study in decision-making. The banner of strategic analysis became much more a symbol of the government’s betrayal of the analysts than of the public or Congress.

More accurately, it was a betrayal of Ellsberg the analyst, for he defended his own theories, not strategic analysis theories in general, and definitely not all the theorists. And his “war criminal” confession was not, as Tom Wells suggests, sheer self-aggrandizement. Ellsberg pled guilty with the reason that he failed to do all he could, including leaking secret information, to stop US atrocities in Vietnam. Those who knew Ellsberg prior to 1969, when he started photocopying the Pentagon Papers, were justifiably astounded. Yet this claim is actually true, if taken to mean that Ellsberg found himself at fault since he did not actively seek out (secret) documents which would, he believed, help him to arrive at the Stalemate Machine earlier, since only then would he have acquired the motivation to act. This explanation is also in keeping with Ellsberg’s effort to seek

analogy with the Nazi architect Albert Speer: both chose not to know and had thereby no reason to protest for change. Ellsberg's liability did not reside in him being responsible for the "misguided and failed policy of the past and present," since according to the Stalemate Machine, the analysts' recommendations were summarily ignored. Rather, his "crime" arose out of a failure to exploit his credential as a theorist by appealing to an external force, the public, in order to pressure the "insiders" to act according to his counsel. John von Neumann would have correctly identified the situation: Ellsberg "profess[es] guilt to claim credit for the sin" he did not commit. The sin of the analyst is that the correct theory came too late; the tragedy is that it was too alone.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Tom Wells, *Wild Man: the Life and Times of Daniel Ellsberg* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 343.
- 2 Quoted in Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking, 2002), 434.
- 3 Wells, *Wild Man*, 204; Melvin Small, "Will the Real Daniel Ellsberg Please Stand Up," *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 5 (2003): 758.
Wells, *Wild Man*, 257.
- 4 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 4; Daniel Ellsberg, *Infeasible Goals and Violent Stalemate* (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation Working Notes on Vietnam No. 9, 1969), 23.
- 5 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 153.
- 6 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 171.
- 7 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 172.
- 8 Daniel Ellsberg, *The Day Loc Tien was Pacified* (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation P-3793, 1968), 3, 17.
- 9 The full record of the debate can be found in Richard M. Pfeffer, ed. *No More Vietnams: the War and the Future of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Published for the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs by Harper & Row, 1968).
- 10 Daniel Ellsberg, *Some Lessons from Failure in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation P-4036, 1969), 8-9.
- 11 Ellsberg, *Some Lessons from Failure in Vietnam*, 8, 10.
- 12 Ellsberg, *Some Lessons from Failure in Vietnam*, 8-9; Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 45-7.
- 13 Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972),

- 14 Ellsberg, *Some Lessons from Failure in Vietnam*, 11.
- 15 Ellsberg, *Some Lessons from Failure in Vietnam*, 11.
- 16 Ellsberg, *Some Lessons from Failure in Vietnam*, 14; Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 19.
- 17 For instance, see Ellsberg, *Some Lessons from Failure in Vietnam*, 12.
- 18 Daniel Ellsberg, *Kahn on Winning in Vietnam: A Review* (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation P-3965, 1968), 4.
- 19 Ellsberg, *Kahn on Winning in Vietnam*, 4.
- 20 Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention: An Inside Account of How the Johnson Policy of Escalation in Vietnam was Reversed* (New York: David McKay, 1969), 146; Colin S. Gray, "What Rand Hath Wrought," *Foreign Policy* 4 (1971): 111-129.
- 21 Bernard Brodie, "Why Were We So (Strategically) Wrong?" *Foreign Policy* 5 (1971-1972): 157-8, 161.
- 22 Daniel Ellsberg, *Revolutionary Judo* (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation Working Notes on Vietnam No. 10, 1970).
- 23 Brodie, "Why Were We So (Strategically) Wrong?" 158; Lawrence Freedman, "Vietnam and the Disillusioned Strategist," *International Affairs* 72, no. 1 (1996): 143.
- 24 As Theodore Draper and many others would have it, the doctrine of limited war "must be held partially responsible for pulling us in[to Vietnam]." Ellsberg, *Some Lessons from Failure in Vietnam*, 1.
- 25 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 234-5.
- 26 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 185.
- 27 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 188-9.
- 28 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 22, 51-2; Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 192-3.
- 29 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 247, 249.
- 30 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 256-7.
- 31 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 275.
- 32 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 275-6.
- 33 For instance, see Nicholas Lemann, "Paper Tiger; Daniel Ellsberg's War," *New Yorker*, November 4, 2002.
- 34 Murder in Laos appeared in the *New York Review of Books* on March 11, 1971, long after Ellsberg's contacts with Senators Fulbright and Gravel. See Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 305 and Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 364.
- 35 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 133.
- 36 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 107, 122.
- 37 Ellsberg, *Infeasible Goals and Violent Stalemate*, 1.

- 38 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 254.
- 39 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 49, 72, 74.
- 40 Leslie H. Gelb, "Vietnam: the System Worked," *Foreign Policy* 3 (1971): 141-147. Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 94-5, 98.
- 41 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 78.
- 42 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 347.
- 43 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 132-5.
- 44 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 129.
- 45 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 123, 128-9.
- 46 Daniel Ellsberg, "Lying About Vietnam," *New York Times*, June 29, 2001.
- 47 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 312-321; Wells, *Wild Man*, 346-7. *New York Times* did not carry the letter in full, *Washington Post* did.
- 48 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 317.
- 49 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 316-9.
- 50 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 280, 315.
- 51 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 51.
- 52 Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, 118-9.
- 53 Wells, *Wild Man*, 365-411.
- 54 Wells, *Wild Man*, 378.
- 55 Wells, *Wild Man*, 387-8.
- 56 Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 283. Also, by treating the five Presidents from Truman to Nixon as a continuous whole, Ellsberg rejected the thesis that the rise of the civilian defense intellectual during the Kennedy administration somehow should bear responsibility. Contrary to what Halberstam's argues in *The Best and the Brightest*, the whiz kids did not turn out to be bad managers who messed Vietnam up.
- 57 Quoted in Stanislaw M. Ulam, *Adventures of A Mathematician* (New York: Scribner, 1976), 224. This observation is certainly more applicable to Ellsberg than it is to the intended subject Oppenheimer.

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