



Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers

Daniel Ellsberg

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In 1971 former Cold War hard-liner Daniel Ellsberg made history by releasing the Pentagon Papers - a 7,000-page top-secret study of U.S. decision-making in Vietnam - to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The document set in motion a chain of events that ended not only the Nixon presidency but the Vietnam War. In this remarkable memoir, Ellsberg describes in dramatic detail the two years he spent in Vietnam as a U.S. State Department observer, and how he came to risk his career and freedom to expose the deceptions and delusions that shaped three decades of American foreign policy. The story of one man's exploration of conscience, *Secrets* is also a portrait of America at a perilous crossroad.

"[Ellsberg's] well-told memoir sticks in the mind and will be a powerful testament for future students of a war that the United States should never have fought." -*The Washington Post*

"Ellsberg's deft critique of secrecy in government is an invaluable contribution to understanding one of our nation's darkest hours." -Theodore Roszak, *San Francisco Chronicle*

Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers Details

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From Reader Review Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers for online ebook

Tracy Ellis says

Interesting but a tendency to be a bit turgid
stick with it, it's okay. The story is important though and I'm pleased it's been told

Keith MacKinnon says

Words of James Madison, drafter of the First Amendment:

"A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps, both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives."

Words of H. R. Haldeman spoken to President Nixon, Oval Office tapes, June 14, 1971, on the impact of the Pentagon Papers:

"To the ordinary guy, all this is a bunch of gobbledygook. But out of the gobbledygook comes a very clear thing: you can't trust the government; you can't believe what they say; and you can't rely on their judgement. And the implicit infallibility of presidents, which has been an accepted thing in America, is badly hurt by this, because it shows that people do things the president wants to do even though it's wrong, and the president can be wrong."

Ellsberg's story of his deed is well told. Here is a man who risked his life for his country and then threw away his career and potentially his freedom to end a fruitless and murderous war. Score a point for the good guys.

Rachel says

I saw Daniel Ellsberg at a 2008 Great Conversations event at the University of Minnesota. He impressed me with his astonishing grasp of past and present events (he's either 76 or 78, depending on which source I'm relying on is correct), and his clear philosophy of right v. wrong. (Sounds simple I know, but I find it's rare in today's politics.) If you're interested, the audio is online: www.cce.umn.edu/conversations/audio.html

Back to the book...

Secrets at its best is a look into how the American government makes decisions. Daniel Ellsberg worked in Robert McNamara's Defense Department, and saw firsthand how staff members suppressed their own personal feelings or ideas about Vietnam so that they could "better" serve their superiors (essentially leading up to Johnson), whom they felt supported escalation. Rather than offer contrary opinions or highlight inconvenient facts, they toed the party line.

Ellsberg also talks about his decision to release the top-secret Pentagon Papers, in an effort to dispel the secrecy surrounding the government's decision. The essential impression I came away with is that the secrecy classification system in use in our government is hurtful to the country as a whole. Average citizens believe that the government (in Ellsberg's mind, mainly the President) must be making the right decision, because the government has access to information that citizens don't have. Ellsberg released the Pentagon Papers so that citizens could see that, despite having all this top secret information, the government in fact made the wrong decisions--time and time again.

Moments in this book read like a political thriller; at other times it bogged down in details. Overall though it was an interesting and eye-opening read. For myself I thought it added a new perspective to my knowledge of the Vietnam War and government decision-making in general.

Randall Wallace says

I love in this book when Daniel in Vietnam comes across Japanese pillboxes and mounds of old stones of a Chinese fort and realized through interpreters that the Vietnamese believe they removed the Chinese after 1,000 years and the Japanese left much faster, so what hope does the US have to be successful? Arthur Schlesinger discusses the Vietnam policy of “one more step” – each step would be framed as one more step to victory while the outcome was that every step deepened US involvement in a quagmire. 1961 documents show that no one believed in short run success. JFK knew if he sent ground troops to Vietnam he would be trapped like the French were. The French had learned colonies where dying out because of increasingly effective native resistance, a lesson not appreciated by American policy makers anymore than realizing that while trying to take over South Vietnam meant fighting only part of the populace, fighting North Vietnam, would mean fighting the entire populace. Wow. We dropped an overwhelming tonnage of bombs in Indochina (1.7 million tons in three years), even though American policy makers including Clark Clifford on down “believed it served no national purpose whatsoever”. Not true. The carnage contributed to GNP! ? Why is there no more American diplomacy? Because top policy makers enjoy immunity to the golden rule even with comments like this one of Kissinger’s: “How can you conduct diplomacy without a threat of escalation? Without that there is no basis for negotiations.” Yum. But if, as Richard Barnett says, America’s 1st purpose is “to win” then there goes the golden rule and any moral standing of which we can be proud. The burning unanswered question at the time was: If 80 to 90% of South Vietnam wants the war over no matter who wins then what right do we still have to be in their country let alone continue this war one more minute? In 1945, Vietnam becomes independent, two years later the French try to “change that”. In that period, Truman ignores Ho Chi Minh’s pleas (contradicting the American tradition of anti-colonialism) for help for Vietnam so it won’t have to go communist. In ten years, millions of people will begin pay dearly for Truman’s short- sighted expensive mistake of turning away Ho. The British learned you couldn’t stop guerilla warfare in our revolutionary war with them and again in Burma. However, once the U.S brought in their PR move - the “falling domino theory” to help fight commies, reason took a back seat for US planners to the brilliance shutting the door (allowing no communist states) after the only animal of any value (China) in the barn escapes. Whatever tries to get through the door after China’s exit must be made an example of (to save face after losing China) and the first thing was - the state Truman personally turned away from democracy and capitalism, Vietnam.

In this book Ellsberg brilliantly shows how from 1946 on, each president lied to the American people about what they were doing in Vietnam and what the prospects of “success” were. To Ellsberg, in his high role of advisor, it became clear that the failure in Vietnam was the failure of each president – they all knew why Vietnam was a totally unrealistic policy and yet each time they gave in to it. There is a bureaucratic tradition

of mute service but the counterculture re-introduced public protest and Ellsberg was seduced and he breached the bureaucratic wall of mute service with his Rand letter and the subsequent Pentagon Papers. He realized it had become very American to think that violence is needed to show seriousness and be effective – however in Vietnam that narrative had now died and it's death was being covered up. In the end this book is about the dangers of the US postwar secrecy system, making sure no president has too much power (good luck with that) and about each one of us at some point having an Ellsberg moment and refusing to be an accomplice to what is being done daily in our name. Daniel says from “ratchet” to “one more turn of the screw” as a nation we still unthinkingly collectively use the language of torturers. He also reminds us of the depressing thought that every president involved with the Vietnam War had a Harvard professor at his side telling him not only how to commit a morally wrong action, but how to get away with it.

Alina Spiegel says

An incredibly important read for any American who believes that our foreign policy should be determined democratically. This book reveals the extent to which U.S. presidents can (and have) deceived the American public and the congress. It describes a culture (that likely still exists) in the executive branch that dismisses the opinions of a "common citizen" as uninformed, and therefore, not worth consideration. It begins to explain how a war so unpopular with the American public could last for twenty years, presenting a history of repeated secrecy and flawed policy--both ethically and strategically--that really should be taught in high school classrooms. Perhaps most importantly though, it makes me wonder how to cast my "whole vote"--how, as an American citizen, I can hold my government accountable, whether through truth-telling (as in Ellsberg's case), activism, or other means, because evidently, elections alone do not create effective democracy.

And a side note, for all of us engaged in deciding who will be our next commander-in-chief: read this book for an understanding how much control that person will have over our foreign policy, and to think about the qualifications that he or she should have. Do they have the understanding of history and international relations to make smart, ethical choices? The stakes are too high to choose lightly.

Jamie says

I wanted to say something much longer here, but, in short: it's the kind of book I immediately pass on to my father and then we discuss it for the next ~~two~~ six months.

There's not a dry paragraph in the book. I'm tempted to say there's not a paragraph that didn't humble me. One of the best books I've read on the subject, from the man who practically wrote the subject. One of the best books I've read this year.

Susan says

This meticulously detailed book details Daniel Ellsberg at first supporting the war in Vietnam to exposing the lies of three decades of American foreign policy decisions made during the Vietnam War. His work at the Pentagon provided the springboard of exposing the lies because he had total access to confidential

documents and secret files that covered up secret maneuvers and other operations that put our government and our soldiers in jeopardy.

After his volunteer tour in Vietnam as a State Department official, he saw firsthand the disastrous American military strategy to win the war at any cost and was convinced that President Johnson's policies were hopeless. He began to see his pessimism that was shared not only with the American public but even some government officials. Despite Johnson lying to the American people and other high officials that we were winning the war it was quite apparent by the up front news coverage that we weren't.

Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968 with the promise of peace and the end to the war but the war escalated even further. Ellsberg had gone beyond a critical belief in U.S. foreign policy and he describes so eloquently in dramatic fashion how he risk his career, his freedom from the deceptions of the entire American involvement in Vietnam. Five presidents knew that Vietnam was unwinnable war but we fought anyway. Was it to show that we were the number one superpower in the world?

Ellsberg blows the cover that the Johnson and Nixon Administration covered up the failure in the Vietnam War by exposing their deceitful deceptions to keep the American people in the dark and to use the war for their own political gains.

This riveting memoir is a great historical book to learn about how the logic of our leaders were off kilter and the manipulation they use to cover up their secrets from government officials as well as the American people.

Ellsberg took it up himself to expose these leaders by copying 7,000 pages of documents to reveal the real reasons why we were in Vietnam. He risked his life, his career and his freedom but Ellsberg did it not do it for fame or notoriety but to reveal the truth. His revealing these documents became the down fall for Nixon in the Watergate scandal.

This is a must read book, its riveting, unbelievable, it will even make you angry that our government officials use their powers to manipulate the law to suit their needs. The truth will set you free and I know that is what Daniel Ellsberg was thinking when he wanted the American people to know what really were the motives behind our involvement in the Vietnam War.

Oraynab Jwayyed says

Once again, don't let the low-star rating fool you. Daniel Ellsberg's decision to expose the Pentagon Papers was brave beyond explanation. His memoir proves that the resistance against the draft and the Vietnam war was justified, because the public and the media were being misled. Worse, all five presidents that served during the war knew, without a doubt, that America's involvement would cost the country needless human lives and suffering.

However, the book was difficult to read. Ellsberg is a military man, with technical training in economics and policy, who holds a Ph.D., and the writing reflects that. It's just too detailed, and wrought with military and strategic jargon, it put me to sleep. Twice.

This does not dismiss Ellsberg's actions, though. His decision to turn over the classified material to the New York Times and the Washington Post was a smart one. As he states from the onset, Ellsberg tried numerous

times to warn his superiors that the war was a huge mistake, and that it would lead to a lose-lose outcome. He was right, because every underhanded, immoral strategy implemented by the five presidents that spanned the Vietnam war only succeeded in placing soldiers and civilians in harm's way. So why the prolonged war? According to Ellsberg, he believes after reading tens of thousands of classified documents, that the president holds too much power. Pretty scary now that we're living during the unstable Trump period.

If you're into the tedious, technical writing, go ahead and read the book. It will honor a man who sacrificed everything to perform his duty as a military man: to protect the country and the people he swore to serve.

Dawn says

Long before the birth of Edward Snowden, America was rocked by the revelations of whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg. This autobiography provides insight into his life and motivations, while also meticulously detailing the government's efforts to arrest and silence him.

Labeled a hero by some and a traitor by others, Ellsberg's release of the notorious (and highly classified) Pentagon Papers, a study by the US Government and the Rand Corporation of America's struggle in Vietnam, would shake American politics to the core. Bringing into question just how soon American leaders had understood that the Vietnam War was a lost cause, the Pentagon Papers laid bare the lies told by politicians, the CIA, and military leaders, about the war.

Ellsberg was, at first glance, an unlikely whistleblower. A clean-cut ivy leaguer, with a degree in economics from Harvard, after studying at Cambridge, he returned to the US and joined the Marine Corps. He soon found himself employed as a nuclear strategist by the CIA affiliated Rand Corporation. By 1964, he was working in the Pentagon under Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, quickly becoming embroiled in the escalation of the war in Vietnam. Under the command of General Edward Lansdale, he would spend two years working for the State Department in South Vietnam.

He returned home in 1967, tired and disillusioned, nominally employed by the Rand Corporation. He had long believed that the war was simply a mistake, that our leaders' hubris was blinding them to the reality on the ground, but the Papers, which he first read in 1969, called this view into question. They suggested that American leaders understood, as early as 1965, that the war was unwinnable. He believed the American public deserved to know the truth. He risked everything to ensure that the Pentagon Papers were published.

What follows is a two year struggle to get them publicly released, days spent on the run, and his eventual arrest. The government might have successfully tried and imprisoned him for life, but Pres. Nixon's rampant paranoia and criminal activities proved to be a godsend for Ellsberg.

An engaging read for anyone interested in American history, politics, and the Vietnam War.

Art says

The Post, the historical political thriller that released in December, drew on this book and The Pentagon

Papers as sources for the story. I read the Papers as that series first published then again before seeing the film. But, for the film, I also read Daniel Ellsberg's memoir, expecting to read only the relevant parts. But his interesting story kept me glued from cover to cover.

This memoir focuses on Ellsberg's extensive background and how he took the documents. The book also explores the war on Vietnam and why it took so long to end.

Sixty-eight became a pivotal year of the war. The Tet Offensive in January made a big impact on Congress and the American public because of the scale and coordination of the attacks throughout Vietnam.

In March, Ellsberg, for the first time, gave classified reports to Neil Sheehan of The New York Times. The documents revealed troop strength and requests for more amid General Westmoreland's deceptive claim that enemy strength declined. The resulting article raised serious questions about Westmoreland's accounts, eroding confidence.

The documents that would become known as the Pentagon Papers began as The History of U S Decision-Making in Vietnam, 1945-68. The study took two years.

Ellsberg, who began as a hawk, came to see the war as a wrongful prolonging against the wishes of most Vietnamese. He drew inspiration from Henry David Thoreau's essay, On the Duty of Civil Disobedience, which urged a nonviolent withdrawal of cooperation. Speaking truth to power, a Quaker phrase from the mid-fifties, also appeal to Ellsberg. These two concepts gave him the moral underpinnings for his biggest project.

Almost fifty years ago, Ellsberg left work and walked past guards at Rand with a briefcase of secret documents that he would photocopy that night. A scene in the film brings that moment to life. Over its ten installments in the paper, the Pentagon Papers filled fifty pages in The New York Times. Ellsberg believed that the impact of the story played out by revealing the deceit, recklessness and cynicism of the leaders.

Sheehan, the journalist, knew that authorities lied to him but did not know the extent until he read the study. The Times published its first article three months after Ellsberg shared with Sheehan.

Walter Cronkite, the most trusted person in America as the CBS News anchor, described Vietnam as a stalemate after he returned from a trip to the country. My Dad stopped supporting the war around this time but kindly did not reveal his change of heart until I returned home from Nam.

Thanks to The Post, I read this intriguing book, which fleshed out my background on Daniel Ellsberg.

Phil says

This book was incredible. I'd recommend this to anyone interested in learning something about the Vietnam War and the lies and atrocities committed by our government. Ellsberg tells the story of his experience working for the Pentagon at the time and his travels in Vietnam. He risks his career and his life to release top secret Pentagon documents that expose the abuses of our government. It's a shame this book isn't more popular and that more people don't know who Ellsberg is and what he did for our country.

Themistocles says

A great book that reads like an Oliver Stone movie: one part Vietnam war, one part political thriller. Not only does Ellsberg a fantastic story to tell, but he tells it well to boot.

Granted, there are a few points that go on slowly, where he discusses internal politics, and also the final part (the papers release and the trial period) is toned down compared to third-party accounts and documentaries, but perhaps it's to be expected, since he's talking about himself...

Hadrian says

The recent attention over the Wikileaks cases, the Manning trial and Snowden's flight to Russia all have their precedent of Ellsberg in Vietnam. Although there are substantial differences in the nature and continuing effects of these cases, it still remains evident that the ethical imperative to 'speak truth to power' and to say the right thing even at immense personal cost is still alive and well.

That being said, this book, although overly long at points (and containing information about Vietnam with which we should all be familiar), still has some sound insights. I know only too well the thrill of working with massive amounts of information, and Ellsberg's chapters on the early days at Rand were very familiar to me.

What most interested me was his analysis of the psychological effect of being given privileged access to secret, top secret, or above top secret intelligence, and depending solely on that to make a decision at the loss of your trusted advisors and the experts. For example, McNamara's insistence on statistical controls as a measure of success was built on the shakiest foundations and largely ignored the political foundations of the conflict. Then there was Nixon's madman theory, then...

Its interesting to compare the effects of Ellsberg's actions with the more recent instances of whistleblowing. The 'drone strike' leaks had a more neutral reaction than I had anticipated, partly because it could be rationalized as saving American lives. Domestic surveillance, however, is far more controversial, and I doubt the burn from that will go away for a while. I hope as much. And after all, Ellsberg didn't serve a day in prison. Assange is on the run, Manning is convicted, and Snowden had to run away to Putin.

As an aside, another detail which interested me was the covert means by Ellsberg had to photocopy some 7,000 pages. That could be done much more easily today! Assange and Manning did multiple times that instantly, and without the smell of mimeograph on their hands.

I'm going off on a tangent here. The point is that Ellsberg's actions were a vital example of true American patriotism, and that those chapters which discuss those and the nature of government should be carefully studied.

Steve says

"Secrets" is the memoir of Daniel Ellsberg, the patriotic whistleblower who leaked a top-secret history of the Vietnam War (later called the "Pentagon Papers") in order to help end it, by revealing to the American

people that the case for the war had been built on decades of lies and deception -- and that the war was not only unjust, but also fundamentally unwinnable.

Ellsberg was a high-level analyst who spent considerable time in Vietnam and advising policy-makers; he was, in fact, a Cold Warrior (though one always focused on averting nuclear war) and Vietnam war planner. But as he learned more about the history of the war -- and especially when he became only the third person to read a classified, 7,000-page history of the planning and execution of U.S. involvement in Vietnam under Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson -- he became increasingly opposed to it. And when he learned that the pattern of threats and deception was continuing under a fifth President, Nixon, he decided to do whatever he could to stop it, including civil disobedience, inspired by his reading of Thoreau, Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Ellsberg's disobedience was to inform policy-makers and the public about the truth behind the war, by leaking the classified study. This book is the long story of his involvement with the war, including significant detail on his time "on the ground" in Vietnam, his growing disillusionment, his decision to release the Pentagon Papers, and the consequences of that decision -- which included a landmark First Amendment Supreme Court ruling, the resignation of President Nixon due, in part, to his attempts to discredit Ellsberg, and finally an end to the Vietnam War. Ellsberg certainly doesn't deserve all the credit for ending the war -- but he deserves all the credit in the world for risking his livelihood and his freedom to tell the public the truth, and end an immoral war being conducted by his government.

In addition to telling his personal story, Ellsberg's book reads to me like an extended discourse on the proper relationship between the people and the government in a democracy. In an era in which the Director of National Intelligence (James Clapper) can blatantly lie to the Congress and the public by claiming that the government does not collect data on millions of Americans, while a low-level analyst (Edward Snowden) is charged with espionage for telling the public the TRUTH about government programs that DO collect data on millions of Americans, we ALL should be meditating on what Ellsberg writes about -- and then ACTING on it, as he did.

Henry Kissinger called Daniel Ellsberg "the most dangerous man in America." At the ACLU of Massachusetts Bill of Rights Dinner on May 12, 2014, at which Ellsberg received the ACLU's Roger Baldwin Award, ACLU attorney Ben Wizner (who represents Snowden) said "the most dangerous man in government is the one with a conscience." Kissinger was wrong (in this and many other instances); Wizner is right -- Daniel Ellsberg is a patriot and a true American hero. If you've been interested enough to read to this point of my review, I strongly encourage you to read Ellsberg's book!

Pabgo says

Awesome memoir! Read like a thriller, a page turner. And it really happened!! All your favorite characters are there: Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, John Paul Vann, Neil Sheehan, and of course, Ellsberg himself. All the despots too, Mitchel, Erlichman, Kissinger, Hunt, Colson, Halderman, that psychopath Liddy, and the biggest scumbag of all, responsible for the needless deaths of thousands upon thousands (many young Americans), the war criminal Richard Nixon.

This is a detailed story of a true patriot. I always had a sketchy impression of the whole Ellsberg thing. I thought he just copied the papers, then walked into the NY Times and had them published. Wrong! This is the story of a man on the inside of the government, who believed in the cause, who's relentless thoroughness to do the best job he could, found the truth revealed to him, turned 180 degrees and became instrumental in

bringing an end to the debacle that was Vietnam. His journey to try to do that WITHIN the system is amazing, showing that release of the documents through the press was really a last resort.

Why is this book relevant? It is now common knowledge that the Bush administration began planning the invasion of Iraq from day one. Reading this book illustrates that this abuse of executive power is nothing new, (and not just among the Republicans!). An enlightening filling in the blanks of history, in an engaging, and might I say, entertaining read.
