The Pentagon Papers and Daniel Ellsberg: the most unlikely whistleblower, with the most important achievement

On October 1, 1969, Daniel Ellsberg, Harvard professor, government agent, and former Marine, stood silently above the soft green glow of a Xerox machine to copy the Pentagon Papers, the top-secret detailed history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967 (Ellsberg 299). Two years later, the New York Times began publishing the documents, and suddenly, the acclaimed and thoughtful Ellsberg became a traitor, a thief, and yet, a national hero. From their original publication in 1971 to today, the Pentagon Papers remains to be one of the largest points of the Vietnam War, government secrecy, and the first amendment. The work of Daniel Ellsberg through the Pentagon Papers was necessary to reveal the failed veil of containment in Vietnam, as well as to liberate the confused public, allowing for decades of “whistle-blowers” to come.

Without a doubt, the Vietnam War remains one of the most intrinsically complicated wars of United States history. After asking several personal sources about the Vietnam War, the sentiment tended to be the same: “I’m not quite sure why we were there, but I know we shouldn’t have been.” Certainly, the statement is a simple one, but it does echo the idea of a lost war, made only more absurd by the fact that it was fought for almost twenty years. The ignorance of activity in Vietnam was exactly what Daniel Ellsberg wanted to highlight in his revealing of the Pentagon Papers. However, Ellsberg was aware of the vast amount of information on the war: in his memoir, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, Ellsberg described a scenario when he first started working at the Pentagon in 1961, and after asking for everything that came in from Vietnam, he received two six foot towers of information from a single day (Ellsberg 37). The Pentagon Papers itself totals a staggering 7,000 pages (Gelb). Then again, perhaps the cause of confusion was not the breadth of information but rather, the concept of the war itself. World War II was a battle against a living, breathing entity, but the Vietnam War was a creature of its own kind: the spread of Communism and nuclear warfare. Ellsberg notes that, “It was uncanny to think of humans designing and dropping on other humans a flaming substance that…would burn through flesh to the bone” (Ellsberg 22). The concept of an imminent, sudden, and unexplainable death drove home to Americans, stemming all the way back to the only administration to ever release a nuclear bomb on civilians: the United States Government.

However, Ellsberg, and many critics of the War, find direct fault in the Geneva Accords of 1954. The actual Pentagon Papers under Section III, A-1, cite, “the U.S. tried to sabotage the Geneva Conference, first by maneuvering to prevent the conference from taking place, then by attempting to subvert a settlement, and finally, by refusing to guarantee the resulting agreements of the conference…this charge is complete” (Gelb). The United States’ aim was to continue a war in Vietnam in order to produce a decisive military victory for the U.S., and thus, democracy (Gelb, A-1). The Geneva Accords of 1954 had originally allowed 350 military “advisors” in Vietnam, although some 700 were already there (Ellsberg 4). From the very beginning, the United States Government lied about the amount of coverage in Vietnam. Originally placed in Vietnam under the American notion of “united action: broad, multilateral, and military,” the French military faced a collapse (Gelb, A-1). This allowed for the United States to step in, fulfilling the original plan for a full-fledged war. Vice President Nixon heralded that, “the Vietnamese lack(ed) the ability to conduct a war and govern themselves” and that the United States *had* to send troops in order to avoid French defeat (Ellsberg 27). By 1963, the “American advisers” in Vietnam had increased to upwards of twelve thousand (Ellsberg 4). Yet with all of the expansion, Johnson still used the successful campaign slogan, “We seek no wider war” during his 1964 run for presidency (Ellsberg 50). And all these revelations and contradictions are only on the first page of Section III of the Pentagon Papers.

Ellsberg’s publication of the papers is unlike any other security breach in American history. He was no Benedict Arnold, selling secrets to the other side, and he certainly was not some sort of bomb planting renegade. Rather, he was a well-spoken man who worked his way through the government hierarchy to gain access to the top, all, quite generally, with trust in his supervisors. Ellsberg started working at the Rand Corporation, a nonprofit that focused on military aspects of the cold war (Ellsberg 3). Even in 1961, Ellsberg received a message from his superiors at Rand to “keep clear of Vietnam (because) we were on a losing course there” (Ellsberg 4). Eleven years before the end of the war, and government associates were already admitting the impossibility of victory in Vietnam. In 1964, Ellsberg moved to the Pentagon and on his first day in the office under John McNaughton, one of the members of the Vietnam Task Force that penned the Pentagon Papers, the Tonkin Gulf, or the supposed torpedo attack on America, incident took place (Ellsberg 6). At 11:37 p.m., Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, televised an announcement that, “air action is now in execution,” although, even then, the U.S. planes had not even launched, so much as approached North Vietnam (Ellsberg 11). There was such hindrance between the cables relayed to the United States and what was actually happening in Vietnam, that there was actually no complete affirmation that the incident had even taken place. Again, the United States government had created disconnect between their actions and their words.

Of course, hindsight is twenty/twenty, and in his memoir, Ellsberg recalled one of his most praised assignments as his most shameful. Ellsberg was assigned to find war atrocities in order to justify further bombing in Vietnam, stating specifically that he “needed blood” (Ellsberg 68). The pushing point was finally discovered in a story about two mutilated American advisors who had been captured and killed; although it was not clear if they had been mutilated and tortured before or after their death, it was enough for Ellsberg (Ellsberg 69). If anything, that data could have been used to justify the removal of American soldiers from Vietnam: their death standing as a stark example of the destiny that America faced in a winless war. However, the information was used in the exact opposite way, and Ellsberg recollects that he had “provided data…to justify and promote what we came to do from the air, and increasingly on the ground (for the next eight years)” (Ellsberg 73).

Unfortunately, the justification of bombing was not the final punch in Ellsberg’s decision to publish the papers. The first hit came to Ellsberg through a story following the Green Berets. Eight Green Berets were suspected of killing a Vietnamese double agent, and although the case had gotten some national attention, the case was dismissed and the men went unpunished (Ellsberg 286). The case raised the question: how can soldiers commit a war crime, kill a prisoner in cold blood, and yet, escape a trial? Doesn’t the American system check for that? Then, Ellsberg’s attention became focused on another flaw of the American system: men who were going to prison because of their refusal to go to war. Ellsberg recalled sitting in on a meeting, hearing Randy Kehler, a draft resister, speak about what led him to leave Stanford College to join the anti-war movement (Ehrlich). Overwhelmed with emotion, Ellsberg realized that in fact, the safest and wisest choice young American men could make for their futures was to go jail, which considering the American system and dream, he ruled as fundamentally devastating (Ehrlich). Due to Ellsberg’s clearance with McNaughton, he had access to the safe where the Pentagon Papers were held, and after reading them; he felt he had to make a choice (Ellsberg 186). The most startling sentiment in Ellsberg’s entire memoir is one that bears repeating: “It occurred to me that what I had…was seven thousand pages of documentary evidence of lying…to conceal plans and actions of mass murder” (Ellsberg 289). Finally, Ellsberg had realized the disturbing fact about Americans: they were better off going to prison than following this corrupt war. Ellsberg decided to take action.

The release of the Pentagon Papers helped to reveal the hypocritical gap of what was actually happening in Vietnam versus what the American public was told was going on. Perhaps the great confusion of the Vietnam War stemmed from the idea that rather than fighting a single power, such as Hitler in World War II, the United States began another stretch of containment, a democratic imperialism. Ellsberg attributed the support of the bombing of Vietnam to group think: in his discussions with John McNaughton, “do what’s good for your boss, the man that hired you, put that above what you think is good for the country,” which in his case, just happened to be Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense who originally ordered the Pentagon Papers to be created (Ellsberg 55). However, in most psychological textbooks, the definition of group think references governmental failures such as the Bay of Pigs and the launching of the Challenger because one individual refused to go against the grain or stand up to the largest, most important voice. Thankfully, Ellsberg noted that he “heard that (notion), but didn’t accept it,” a strength that would allow him to reveal the Pentagon Papers years later (Ellsberg 55).

After copying the Papers, Ellsberg and his colleagues penned a letter to the *New York Times* editors, asserting four significant moral conclusions on the war: one, there is no way to fight the North Vietnamese because U.S. forces have no idea of how large the enemy is, two, the United States was only subjecting the Vietnamese to a further more destructive system under military rule, rather than the capability to lead that the U.S. had once promised, three, the U.S. national interest in Vietnam was exaggerated, and four, that all costs of the war were outweighing the benefits (Ellsberg 312). Although the statements may seem somewhat obvious to a reader in the twenty-first century, for the 1970’s, it was revolutionary for government figures to step out of the created rose colored glasses of Washington and admit that everything in the world is just not right. After the letter’s publication in *the New York Times* and *the Washington Post*, Ellsberg realized he had to print the Pentagon Papers in full and give them to the public, choosing to correspond with Neil Sheehan, whom he had got to know in Vietnam, and who was also an editor for *the New York Times* (Ellsberg 368). On March 2, 1971, Ellsberg went to Sheehan’s home and described the papers to their full extent, asking if the *Times* would be willing to publish them (Ellsberg 368). By June 13th, the papers made headlines at the *Times*, then *the Washington Post*, *the Boston Globe*, *the St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and *the Christian Science Monitor* (Ellsberg 396). Whether the government liked it or not, the leaks were on the loose, and by this time, there was no possible “containment” in sight.

Although many men in the government began to turn their backs to Ellsberg, this was not the case for all government officials. One such man was Senator Mike Gravel, who on June 29, began reading the Pentagon Papers out loud during a filibuster of a subcommittee where only he was present, a filibuster that he planned to run until the draft expired in the Senate (Ehrlich). While realizing what the papers actually admitted, Gravel began to cry moved by the ideas that the Pentagon Papers brought to light, and by 1:00 a.m., he swung his gavel to unanimously vote that the Pentagon Papers be public record (Ehrlich). Not only were the Pentagon Papers finally in circulation, but also they had become a part of public news record and history forever.

Percy Shelley wrote in his *Essay on Christianity*, “History is a cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of man”. If the revealing of the Pentagon Papers lent itself to nothing else, the declassification was at least a major step for opening communication from an unchecked system to the general public. In the documentary, *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*, interviewee John Dean, White House Counsel to President Nixon, asserted that Ellsberg’s uncovering of governmental deceit led to the eventual discovery of Watergate, and ultimately, Nixon’s resignation (Ehrlich). The Supreme Court cases, *New York Times Company v. United States* and *The Washington Post Company v. United States*, represent some of the biggest achievements for the first amendment and freedom of the press, as well as libertarians everywhere (Kingsbury). Like Shelley wrote, history is cyclical, and the twenty-first century has brought its own variation of Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon Papers, and Watergate: Julian Assange, WikiLeaks, and Cablegate.

In Greg Mitchell’s book, *The Age of WikiLeaks: From Collateral Murder to Cablegate (and Beyond)*, Mitchell explores the sudden onslaught of Assange’s popularity in the media and the unusual fashion in which WikiLeaks has risen to fame. The controversy began when Assange and his associates edited a seven-minute video, then posted to youtube.com, entitled “Collateral Murder.” The video showed United States Apache helicopters killing upwards of a dozen people on the streets of Baghdad in 2007 (Mitchell 132). Two of the men killed were revealed to be Reuters agents, a British news agency (Mitchell 132). The video gained attention due to its blatant abuse of the Rules of Engagement in policy and protocol. In order to open fire on a group, Mitchell states, the following steps were supposedly disregarded in the video: proportionality, or the awareness of civilians and combatants, positive identification, or reasonable certainty that the person is displaying hostile intent, communication and approval from upper authority, and awareness of the wounded, so that those who are surrendering or no longer pose a threat because of their injuries are not engaged (Mitchell 294). Due to video’s editing and the later surfacing of a longer uncorrupted video, critics of the video focused on the fact that the civilians were carrying guns and that the Reuters employees made no attempt to make known their positions and that there is evidence that the Apaches made an attempt to follow code (Mitchell 305). However, one has to beg the question: in a time of war, why should civilians even be considered as enemy targets? The idea that a civilian has to prove his or her innocence asserts the notion that the general public in Afghanistan is guilty in the first place. Why would an innocent bystander be a military target?

Following “Collateral Murder”, the public began to question the personnel behind WikiLeaks. One such person to wonder was Daniel Ellsberg, who, after learning that the tapes had been withheld from the public said that he, if given the opportunity to publish the Pentagon Papers today, “wouldn’t have waited that long…(but) I don’t think that (putting them on the internet) would have had the same impact at the time” (Mitchell 492). Perhaps Assange even realized that he needed to add legitimacy to his presentation of the information or that he needed another medium, but by the end of the year, he had added the *Times* to the circuit of WikiLeaks publishers (Mitchell 962). However, if both Ellsberg and Assange are “whistle-blowers,” what makes one movement more legitimate than the other?

The motives of these men are perhaps what drive them to their furthest differences. *The New York Times* spoke to some of Assange’s associates, who reported that originally, Assange was a charismatic innovator, but that his goals for WikiLeaks had become overrun by his growing celebrity (Mitchell 133). Whether his demeanor is agreeable or not, it is hard to deny that Assange has fascinated the general public and media. However, the idea of celebrity is a far cry from the careful and deliberate Ellsberg. At the end of the documentary *The Most Dangerous Man in America*, the Pentagon Papers most significant achievement was praised as, “the decision by a public official to give priority to conscience as compared to career” (Ehrlich). There is not a sense of self with Ellsberg; responsibility, yes, but a responsibility to the United States rather than to the promotion of some independently functioning website or organization. In the twenty-first century filled with tweets and blogs, the hardest part of affecting change is to remove identity because that seems to be the only thing the internet generation can talk about: themselves.

The similarities between the two men seem more superficial than ideological.

On October 23, 2010, Assange and Ellsberg joined together to discuss Obama’s repressive pursuit of “whistle-blowers” (Burns). According to a *New York Times* article, Ellsberg spoke of the likeness of Obama’s condemnation of Assange to Nixon’s prosecution of Ellsberg in the 1970’s (Burns). Neil Sheehan, the author of the acclaimed biography, *A Bright Shining Lie* and reporter for the New York Times during the Pentagon Papers leak, served as a reliable source of comparison for a 2010 interview with ProPublica (Mitchell 985). Sheehan praised WikiLeaks for letting the American public into the realities of War, but by no means do the cables reveal the same kind of high level decision making that the Pentagon Papers displayed, stating, “(WikiLeaks) is coming during an unpopular war…it’s nitty-gritty stuff, low-level stuff” (Mitchell 999). Sheehan also acknowledges that WikiLeaks is a useful tool, as it uncovers the actual wars that were fought under the Bush Administration, just as the Pentagon Papers revealed the truth of the war abroad (Mitchell 1011).

Although both men stand as utilities in unveiling the government’s coveted secrets to the public, the differences, in credentials and approach, far outnumber the similarities. Ellsberg is the quintessential Harvard man: with a doctorate in economics, his language is reasonable and to the point, not cutting corners but without much exaggeration. In his memoir, Ellsberg describes himself as a “Truman Democrat: liberal on domestic matters, but realistic and tough” (Ellsberg 25). On the other hand, Assange stands as a renegade, described by Steve Kroft as “an anti-establishment ideologue with conspiratorial views“ (“Julian Assange”). Certainly, Ellsberg wasn’t void of conspiratorial views, he did, after all, come up with the idea of publishing the Pentagon Papers himself; however, his intentions were inescapable. The security of the early 1970’s was incredibly restricted; the Pentagon Papers could be traced to their removal almost immediately. Assange, however, can rest easy in the anonymity of the twenty-first century. Rather than top-secret information traveling from person to person, the online network of documents known as SIPRNet, or the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network, is open to a community of nearly 500,000 people (Kingsbury). Like any well-informed and successful hacker, Assange’s operation is mobile, working off independent routers with almost undetectable I.P. addresses. The WikiLeaks staff is small, but the confidential information’s backup is tremendous. In the interview with Kroft, Assange made the self-assured statement that not only does America “lack the technology” to close down Wikileaks, but also that there are 2,000 independent partnerships around the world (“Julian Assange”).

The Pentagon Papers marked an omniscient view of the history of the Vietnam War: the papers chronicled what actually happened from a third person perspective. However, the WikiLeaks debacle reveals a personal aspect of U.S. relations: the release “marked the first time in history that such a large collection of candid communiqués among diplomats and military officials was exposed to public view” (Kingsbury). During the 60 Minutes interview, Kroft asserted that over 300 names had been revealed and put at risk in the release of the collection, to which Assange responded with double negatives in full force, stating, “we don't say that it is absolutely impossible that anything we ever publish will ever result in harm“ (“Julian Assange”). However, it is ridiculous for Assange to assert that his actions will result in no repercussions: if the United States found out about double agents working for Iraq they would undoubtedly prosecute them. Whether it’s negative or positive, those agents at least have the supposed comfort of the American justice system, while those double agents revealed in Afghanistan and Iraq have nothing but the possibility of staying unseen. When compared with the considerate plight of Daniel Ellsberg, Assange appears as a computer-savvy anarchist with his tongue out to the institution. His mannerisms do not discount his message though: the declassification of information is important for a greater understanding of the United States’ international involvement.

Unfortunately, no matter which perspective WikiLeaks is viewed from, the problem of how to deal with Internet security is troubling. According to Alex Kingsbury in his report, “Government Secrecy: Does Greater Openness Threaten International Security?”, Obama created the National Declassification Center in order to declassify government information at the appropriate time and speed, as well as the Reducing Over-Classification Act, signed by Obama in 2010, in order to “standardize classification and declassification procedures…across the government” (Kingsbury). The liberal perspective would praise Obama for establishing open communication between forbidden government information and the general population, and WikiLeaks being universal in their declassification rather than targeting one state. For an American rationalist, the exposing of powerful, confidential materials would only heighten the chance for a change in global power, and although necessary in the view of the rationalist, negative when the power is being taken away from the United States, and thus, democracy. Although all of these movements have been made, the entire Pentagon Papers was only recently release in June of 2011, a far cry from an expeditious declassification. Due to Assange’s assurance of the impenetrability of WikiLeaks and the ever-expanding base of information, there seems to be no definite end to the current crisis of “whistle-blowing.”

The Pentagon Papers release and Daniel Ellsberg’s steps towards lifting the veil of government secrecy and falsehood paved the way for a more informed America as well as a path for future “whistle-blowers” under the first amendment. Although Julian Assange and other associations may have the same idea towards government honesty as Ellsberg, there still lies a great difference between them, and the man who started it all in 1971.

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