

VIETNAM REVISITED

United Media Syndicated Column

July 5, 2001

It's just 30 years since the publication of the infamous "Pentagon Papers" -- 36 volumes that allegedly uncovered the ugly "truth" about America's involvement in Vietnam. Not so.

Don't believe me. After all, I'm an unreconstructed hawk. I worked as a speechwriter for President Lyndon Johnson during some of the grimmest years of that tragic war.

Instead, consider two articles published on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times on June 29th. One is by Leslie Gelb, the chief compiler of the Pentagon Papers, now President of the Council of Foreign Relations. The second is by Daniel Ellsberg, the man who illegally provided the classified documents to the press.

There are striking differences in tone, substance and ethics between the two accounts. But there is one commonality. Here is Gelb about the Papers: "They showed our leaders and ourselves struggling, over the course of decades, with the conviction that the United States should not be responsible for losing any country to Communism and that Vietnam was a cockpit of the struggle between Communism and freedom."

Here is Ellsberg beginning a sentence, "A generation of presidents, believing that the course they were following was in the best interests of the country..."

Of course Ellsberg, the smug self-appointed conscience of America, then continues with familiar self-aggrandizing Ellsbergian fantasy. See, all those presidents from Truman on were lying, the hawks wanted Johnson to escalate, but Johnson wouldn't do it, but kept lying about winning, and Nixon said he had a secret plan to end the war, but no one believed him, but he

really did have one, and he lied about lying, and he tried it, but it didn't work, and Ellsberg had to try to save America even though he expected to spend his life in jail, blah, blah, blah. (Next time, no sugarcoating.)

Like Ellsberg, Gelb ultimately became a dove, but recalls the atmosphere differently. He writes: "I remember that I and almost everybody I knew deeply believed in that war. We supported it primarily because of beliefs about what the world was like at that time. Almost all of us changed our views gradually. Almost all the 'doves' I knew became doves far later than they remember."

What Gelb says is accurate. During my years at the White House (1966-1968) I would eat lunch at the round table of the White House Mess most every day. The people on LBJ's staff, some of whom subsequently turned dovish, were not saying we can't win, or it's an immoral war, or we ought to pull out. They knew that President Johnson was getting a wide range of advice and was trying to end the war honorably. I remember a meeting LBJ had with the White House speechwriters in late 1966, confiding to us that he expected the war to be over by spring of 1967.

The records now reveal that negotiations were then going on with North Vietnam.

Well, the war didn't end in the spring of 1967. But such a sentiment is a long way from "lying" -- Ellsberg's monotonous charge. Ellsberg writes, for example: "Throughout the campaign of 1964, President Johnson indicated to the voters -- contrary to his opponent Barry Goldwater -- that no escalation was needed in South Vietnam. He sometimes added, almost inaudibly, 'at this time.'"

Almost inaudibly? A little bit pregnant? LBJ said it publicly, surrounded by a ravenous press corps. By the spring of 1965, the North Vietnam army had moved into position to cut South Vietnam in half. American policy changed.

Ellsberg believed America should, as the saying went, "cut and run," or as Ellsberg now puts it, stage a "disguised withdrawal." But, he says, all American presidents had received such advice. Ruefully, Ellsberg writes, "And for some reason the presidents had always chosen to stay in. Their determination not to suffer the political consequences of losing a war outweighed, for them, the human costs of continuing."

What were those political costs? They were not about losing the next election. They were about losing the Cold War. If America -- the sole superpower containing an expansionist Soviet Union -- was unwilling to prevent the perimeters of freedom from receding, other dominoes could fall and the world would be in for big trouble.

The tragedy unfolded. American troops did leave Vietnam. Later, communist North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam. Some next-door dominoes did fall in Cambodia and Laos. The 1970s were a nervous time. Other communist insurgencies flourished.

But America and American allies persevered. Under pressure, both internal and external, the Soviet Union folded. Vietnam turned out to be a lost battle in a victorious Cold War. Victory in the Cold War has established plausible terrain for a long run of peace on earth. That's the truth about Vietnam we should start remembering.

BEN WATTENBERG IS A SENIOR FELLOW AT THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE AND IS THE MODERATOR OF PBS'S "THINK TANK."

©2000, *NEWSPAPER ENTERPRISE ASSN.*