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Turning the Corner: The Origins of Daniel Ellsberg's Moral Rejection of the Vietnam War

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Professor Appy, Professor Forde
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Turning the Corner:
The Origins of Daniel Ellsberg's Moral Rejection of the Vietnam War

On April 2, 1968, Daniel Ellsberg traveled to Princeton University to attend an anti-war conference cosponsored by the American Friends Service Committee and the Woodrow Wilson School. The conference, titled "America in a Revolutionary World," lasted three days and drew participants from all corners of the broad anti-war coalition that had come together to oppose American involvement in Vietnam. This diverse array of activists and organizations included members of the antinuclear movement of the 1950s, members of the civil rights movement from the 1960s, committed pacifists that had resisted the draft since the Korean War and World War II, adherents to Gandhian nonviolent philosophy, and even Tom Hayden, the famed founder of the Students for a Democratic Society organization.¹ Despite their varying backgrounds, philosophies, and motivations, these activists were all brought together by their abhorrence of the Vietnam War and commitment to ending the American presence there.

Daniel Ellsberg, however, did not travel to Princeton as an activist looking to end the Vietnam War. He was at the conference as a professional counterrevolutionary, well practiced in arguing the government line at antiwar teach-ins and conferences, with the credentials and experience of a seasoned cold warrior. Ellsberg had worked in the Defense Department during 1964 and 1965, the years in which the Johnson

¹ *Secrets*, 209.

Administration had dramatically escalated American involvement in Vietnam. He then traveled to Vietnam in 1965 as a member of the State Department and spent two years working on “pacification,” which, in Ellsberg’s own assessment, could have been defined as rural counterrevolution.² Upon his return to the United States and at the time of the April 2, 1968 Princeton antiwar conference, Ellsberg was a RAND Corporation analyst that consulted with high-level US government officials on how to break through the stalemate and win the war in Vietnam.

However, unbeknownst to his employers and to the committed antiwar activists that surrounded him at the conference, Ellsberg’s views on Vietnam had begun to shift. While he may have traveled to Princeton in his capacity as a professional counterrevolutionary, he was no longer thinking like one. After four years of studying Vietnam as a government insider and even traveling to Vietnam itself to conduct extensive field research, Ellsberg saw the war as unwinnable.³ The conflict could be prolonged indefinitely, but the best that the United States could salvage from this grueling stalemate were lessons of failure.

Notably, in all of Ellsberg’s analysis and writing on the war prior to April 2, 1968, he never engaged with the morality of the war itself. He occasionally states a concern that the United States may be perceived as immoral if they continue to indiscriminately shell Vietnam, burn down villages, and force peasants to relocate, but these concerns are only in connection to the stated American goal of winning hearts and minds in Vietnam.⁴ None of Ellsberg’s writing questions the morality of the war itself or asks whether the

² *Secrets*, 210.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Johnson, "Remarks at a Dinner Meeting of the Texas Electric Cooperatives, Inc." An early example of President Johnson stating his aim to win hearts and minds in Vietnam.

United States has a right to be in Vietnam in the first place. This absence is notable because of Ellsberg's justification for later leaking and publishing the Pentagon Papers in 1971. He came to see the conflict as a war of American aggression and a moral wrong that had to be stopped, even if that meant betraying his colleagues in the government and at RAND and even risking life in prison.⁵

The origins of this moral transformation can be traced to that Princeton antiwar conference in April of 1968, and specifically to the influence of a young woman named Janaki Tschannerl.

On April 2nd, the first day of the conference, Ellsberg was eating lunch during the midday break in the "America in a Revolutionary World" programming. During this break, a young woman sat across the lunch table from Ellsberg who had immediately caught his eye because of her distinct appearance. She was from the Madras region in the South of India and wore a sari and a dot of red dust on her forehead, representing the footprint of God.⁶ Ellsberg made an effort not to stare or eavesdrop on the young woman's conversation, but quickly changed his stance when he heard her say, "I come from a culture in which there is no concept of enemy." Ellsberg, a trained academic that would explore and analyze new ideas with remarkable vigor and zeal, had to know more. He found this statement to be "hardly comprehensible,"⁷ and explained in his memoir:

I came from a culture in which the concept of enemy was central, seemingly indispensable—the culture of RAND, the U.S. Marine Corps, the Defense and State departments, international and domestic politics, game theory and bargaining theory... To try to operate in the world of men and nations without the concept of enemy would have seemed as difficult, as nearly inconceivable as doing arithmetic, like the Romans, without zero.⁸

⁵ *Secrets*, 257.

⁶ *Secrets*, 212.

⁷ *Secrets*, 211.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Rather than dismissing this novel world view as ridiculous or far fetched, Ellsberg, in line with his nature as an insatiably curious intellectual, followed up with the young woman. The two of them met the next morning and were quickly immersed in deep conversation, skipping a full day of the conference and talking into the night.⁹

Ellsberg learned that the woman's name was Janaki Tschannerl and that she had spent many years working in the *sarvodaya* movement in India, which strove for rural transformation through constructive action in line with Gandhi's teachings. According to these teachings, no human being should be regarded as an enemy that you have a right to hate, destroy, or regard as evil, because all people have goodness within them and can be learned from. Even if a person's *actions* in the present moment could be rightfully regarded as harmful, dangerous, or evil, the *person* could not be.¹⁰

Janaki explained to Ellsberg that this did not mean accepting evil actions or harmful conduct. In fact, Gandhi advocated exactly the opposite. Terrible wrongs required resistance that was militant yet nonviolent, even at great personal cost or the risk of one's life. This nonviolent resistance could take the form of noncooperation, obstruction, and most notably, "exposure: truth telling, acting out the truth of one's sense of human rights, and wrongs, relinquishing silence that can be interpreted as, and amounts to, acceptance and support."¹¹ When Ellsberg later released the Pentagon Papers in 1971, he was using the power of truth telling to expose the reality of American involvement in Vietnam and nonviolently oppose the war. Just as explained by Janaki in 1968, that act can come at great personal risk; for leaking the Pentagon Papers, Ellsberg

⁹ *Secrets*, 212.

¹⁰ *Secrets*, 213.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

was prosecuted by the U.S. government and faced the possibility of a 115-year prison sentence.

When Ellsberg first heard Janaki mention a worldview without the concept of “enemy”, it seemed inconceivable, almost impossible, like attempting to do arithmetic without zero. Yet after spending hours learning from Janaki about the philosophy of nonviolence, Ellsberg came away with a new understanding. He found nonviolent resistance to be “a surprisingly coherent doctrine with a relevant body of experience supporting it.”¹² Gandhian philosophy was no longer impossible or naïve in Ellsberg’s eyes but was instead “intellectually challenging, plausible, a new way of understanding problems and possibilities,”¹³ with human morality lying at the very center of it all.

At the conclusion of the Princeton antiwar conference, Ellsberg flew back to the RAND Corporation headquarters in Santa Monica and worked on his prospectus for personal research on Vietnam, focusing on what could be learned from American failures. This proposal was submitted to Henry Rowen and Charles Wolf just two weeks after Ellsberg met Janaki. Critically, in outlining the failures of U.S. policy in Vietnam, Ellsberg included the following section:

7. Morality of means. Developments in Vietnam that raise the issue of morality, and attitudes and considerations that condition judgment of relative moral acceptability; the potential impact of moral judgments on U.S. policy, in conduct or intervention in counterinsurgency; basis for judging specific practices of the U.S. or its Allies (and the VC) ‘immoral;’ consequences of such judgments, in internal U.S. affairs and its foreign relations.¹⁴

This passage does not revolve around recognition of a shared humanity as a Gandhian teaching does, nor does it deliver a critique of how the American system perpetuates this

¹² *Secrets*, 213.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ “Prospectus for Personal Research on Vietnam”, Ellsberg Archive, UM 109.

immoral conduct against the will of the people. It does, however, align with messages found in the broad coalition of the anti-war left and reflect the Gandhian ideology that Ellsberg had been exposed to just weeks prior. In this research prospectus, Ellsberg is asking central questions of right and wrong that were completely absent from his analysis while at the State Department from 1964-65 and similarly omitted from his field research in Vietnam from 1965-1967. Is what we're doing in Vietnam immoral? How can we measure the morality of our actions? If what we're doing is immoral, or is seen as immoral, what might the consequences of that be? Can we afford to keep treating the Vietnamese people, who we have deemed our enemy, this way?

These questions naturally feed into the next section of Ellsberg's prospectus, which analyzes how to avoid intervening in such situations. He asserts the need for "a realistic assessment of U.S. ignorance, in its various forms; reassessment of the past, perceived aims and general arguments for intervention."¹⁵ Ellsberg then recounts a series of these arguments made under the shroud of ignorance, all of which are framed around defeating a series of enemies: "domino theory, challenge of Chicoms, importance of outside -- DRV -- support to VC insurgency, perceptions of the nature and impact of Communist rule and its practical alternatives, feasibility and effectiveness of various forms of U.S. intervention."¹⁶

Each of these steps and rationales was accepted as a necessary measure to defeat the enemy, who were seen by the U.S. government as evil figures without legitimate motivations or redeeming qualities, whether they be the Soviet Union (as seen in the "domino theory" rationale), the Chinese Communists (the "Chicoms"), the Viet Cong

¹⁵ "Prospectus for Personal Research on Vietnam", Ellsberg Archive, UM 109.

¹⁶ Ibid.

(“VC insurgency”), or the communist ideology as a whole. The American system of analysis made all of its assumptions in a manner antithetical to the Gandhian view of conflict. The enemy was evil and must therefore be destroyed.

Ellsberg and Janaki kept in touch following the Princeton antiwar conference and became close friends, frequently speaking on the phone and writing letters, which continued to influence Ellsberg’s political thinking.¹⁷ Ellsberg began to thoroughly review pacifist and Gandhian literature at RAND, prompted by a series of recommendations that Janaki had provided, and attended more antiwar conferences on Janaki’s invitation.¹⁸

Through exposure to the anti-war movement, Gandhian doctrine, and nonviolent teachings, Daniel Ellsberg continued to ask new questions and change his views on the Vietnam War. While Ellsberg never returned to Vietnam to gather field data, he continued to alter the framework through which he analyzed information that he had already gathered. These new perspectives on the American involvement in Vietnam increasingly involved questions of morality, complicity, and how governmental decision makers regarded the Vietnamese people. The Princeton Conference was a critical step in this transformation. Ellsberg arrived “professional counterrevolutionary” and left contemplating the power of noncooperation and truth telling in the face of injustice. This framework of morality and resistance proved pivotal in Ellsberg’s 1971 release of the Pentagon Papers and the life of nonviolent resistance and activism that he has led ever since.

¹⁷ Wild Man, 308.

¹⁸ Wild Man, 309. The literature recommendations include: *Stride Toward Freedom* by King, *The Conquest of Violence* by Joan Bondurant, *Revolution and Equilibrium* by Barbara Deming, “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau

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