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The New York Times

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor: Please print my response to the Op-Ed pieces of Daniel Ellsberg and Leslie H. Gelb of June 29, 2001.

The two OP-Ed articles (NYT June 29, 2001) “Lying About Vietnam” by Daniel Ellsberg and “Misreading the Pentagon Papers” by Leslie H. Gelb expose two conflicting viewpoints on the Vietnam War. However, Ellsberg, a “dove,” who revealed the Pentagon Papers, and Gelb, a “hawk,” agree that the “government officials “lied” about the war. Ellsberg states that Pentagon Papers “proved that the government had long lied to the country.” Gelb agrees: “Yes, the government officials lied to the public about the war.” Gelb, who directed the Pentagon Papers research project, states that the Defense Secretary Robert McNamara requested classified answers to about 100 “dirty questions,” which had “little to do with history.” Gelb and his team “proposed 20 individual studies, which [were] later expanded to 36.” Secretary McNamara approved this proposal and ordered the study to be “encyclopedic,” saying “let the chips fall where they may.” None of those “dirty questions” mentioned the most important one: was it Soviet Union or was it Communist China who supported the North Vietnamese aggression in Vietnam? Ellsberg in his article points out that Pentagon Papers revealed that “from 1964 through 1968 the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged a litany of secret recommendations, including mining Haiphong; hitting the dikes; bombing near the Chinese border; closing all transportation routs from China...” There was no mention of the Soviets in this “litany.” Neither Ellsberg, nor Gelb mentioned Johnson Administration’s persistent evasion of the fact that America’s adversary in Vietnam was not China but the Soviet Union. Johnson Administration was understandably disturbed by the uncomfortable prospect of a conflict

with that formidable Soviet enemy and was buying psychological solace by blaming a less threatening “whipping boy,” and China became the favored target for venting American frustrations.” Blaming scapegoats to avoid facing the unpleasant truth has been common human weakness from time immemorial. Although this weakness is most understandable, it is the least excusable, especially for political leaders

President Johnson refused to acknowledge that the Soviets were behind what they called “Wars of National Liberation” in Vietnam and other places. When asked whether he “credited the Russians with a sincere desire for peace in South Vietnam,” Johnson replied, “We have always hoped that they would like to see this war brought to an end. That has been their indication to us.” Johnson’s Secretary of State Dean Rusk asserted that China was behind the North Vietnamese aggression. The American press often pointed to “yellow peril.” The obsession with the “Chinese threat” persisted despite well-known facts that China was then a weak power involved in border disputes and military clashes with the Soviets along their 2000 mile-long common border. The Chinese refused to allow Soviet arms deliveries to North Vietnam through Chinese territory. The turmoil of the “Cultural Revolution” was, in essence, an explosion of frustration over China’s helplessness and isolation. Chinese leaders viewed Soviet meddling in Vietnam as Russian attempt to encircle China.

Ellsberg mentions in passing that in the fall of 1969 Morton Galperin (deputy to Henry Kissinger) told him that Richard Nixon “really had a secret plan.” But Ellsberg was too committed to forcing American withdrawal from Vietnam even at the cost of Communist victory there that he was certain that any Nixon plan would fail. Nixon was elected when America was ablaze with "anti-war" demonstrations, when it became fashionable to burn American flags, to dodge the draft and to demand withdrawal from Vietnam. “Peace movement” activists, among whom Ellsberg was very prominent, declared their opposition to the “corrupt South Vietnam regime” and described the North Vietnamese aggression as “agrarian revolution.” As if afflicted by total moral blindness they failed to recognize the barbaric and bestial nature of the Communist regime in the North.

President Nixon did not advertise his “secret plan” – he implemented it. Instead of chasing the Vietcong through the muddy fields and the jungle trails, Nixon confronted the

real source of evil. He ordered the bombing of Hanoi, denied safe heaven to the Vietcong in Cambodia and Laos and, most importantly, bombed the North Vietnamese port of Haiphong while Soviet ships were unloading military supplies there. He sent Henry Kissinger to China and went to Moscow, where the Soviet leaders gave him a red carpet welcome. This is how the bullies behave when their bluff is called. Moscow got the message. It was impressed with Nixon's decisiveness. Kissinger signed The Paris Peace Treaty with the North Vietnamese and received the Nobel Peace Prize. American POW came home. Nixon extricated America with honor from the unpopular war. But the Watergate scandal led to Nixon's resignation. Democrat-controlled Congress passed "The War Powers Act," effectively preventing President Ford from deploying American forces to defend the hard-won peace. The North Vietnamese attacked the South with impunity, trashing "The Paris Peace Treaty." The rest is an abysmal history of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese "boat people," trying to escape their "liberators" and perishing at high sea. President Ford was blamed for pardoning Nixon and lost the election. Jimmy Carter was elected on the promise to "cleanse the country of Vietnam and Watergate shame." No doubt, one day it will become clear why officials were lying about Vietnam. This day is getting close judging by the fact that President Ford was recently honored by an award for his courage in issuing pardon to President Nixon, an act for which he had been much maligned at the time. □