

Secrets, by Daniel Ellsberg

reviewed by [Tran Van Dinh](#) in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue

The founder of Buddhism, born Prince Gautama Siddharta in India in 563 b.c., began his journey toward becoming a Buddha, an Enlightened One, when he ventured out of his palace and witnessed the sufferings of the old, the sick, the poor and the dying. Daniel Ellsberg, now 73, one of the best and the brightest of the American elite, started on his path toward enlightenment as a result of what he saw during the two years he worked in Vietnam for the U.S. State Department in the 1960s.

As a Harvard graduate, a Marine Corps commander, a Rand Corporation analyst and a Defense Department official under Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Ellsberg was well trained to be a successful cold-war warrior in the 1960s and '70s. But what he observed in Vietnam was later reinforced by his access to a top-secret 7,000-page archive on U.S. involvement in that southeast Asian country.

The archive later known as the "Pentagon Papers" revealed his government's lies, fabricated to justify its failures and the military escalation in Vietnam. As a citizen of the most open society in the world, a country which has not only a Constitution but a Bill of Rights which even Congress cannot change, Ellsberg had faith in the traditional common sense of his people. He used the facilities of his workplace (the Rand Corporation) to make copies of the "Pentagon Papers," which he then leaked to the New York Times and the Washington Post in 1971.

The government, led by President Richard Nixon, prosecuted him and tried to destroy his reputation. The burglars who broke into the Watergate offices of the Democratic Party also ransacked the offices of Ellsberg's former psychoanalyst. These criminal acts sponsored by the president's advisers led to the Supreme Court's landmark ruling against censorship on national security grounds and to the impeachment and resignation of President Nixon.

"What we had to come back to was a democratic republic--not an elected monarchy--a government under law, with Congress, the courts and the press functioning to curtail executive abuses, as our Constitution envisioned," Ellsberg writes. "Moreover, for the first time in this or any country the legislature was casting

its whole vote against an ongoing presidential war. It was reclaiming, through its control of the purse, the war power it had fecklessly delegated nine years earlier. Congress was stopping the bombing, and the war was going to end." It was indeed the triumph of a system of government of the people, by the people and for the people.

The title of Ellsberg's book is somewhat misleading. This is really the moving story of an enlightened citizen who dared to "speak truth to power" and had faith in the protection afforded him by the Bill of Rights. It is an important book for any concerned citizen, especially now when, in the aftermath of September 11, we face a situation very different from and far more serious than our involvement in Vietnam.

The U.S. government, as any decent government would, has reacted to the threat posed by international terrorism by strengthening its executive machinery and by ameliorating its system of intelligence gathering. In one of the final acts of the 107th Congress, on November 19 the Senate voted 90 to 9 to fold 170,000 employees from 22 agencies into a new Department of Homeland Security charged with the responsibility of improving the nation's defense against terrorism. What effects this new department will have on the Bill of Rights, in particular on freedom of information and on the government's right to hold secrets, remains to be seen.

During the debate on the Freedom of Information Act in June 1966, a young Illinois congressman spoke: "No matter what party has held the political power of government, there have been attempts to cover up mistakes and errors. . . . Disclosure of government information is particularly important today because government is becoming involved in more and more aspects of every citizen's personal and business life, and so access to information about how government is exercising its trust becomes increasingly important." That Republican congressman was Donald Rumsfeld, who is now secretary of defense and in that role seems to have softened his former conviction. Ellsberg's book is an excellent and necessary reminder of how costly government secrets can be for the citizens of our country.