

Beyond the Pentagon Papers

“The Vietnam experience shows the deliberateness with which Presidents, advisers, and bureaucracies . . . excluded disengagement as a feasible alternative.”

HOW COULD IT HAPPEN IN Vietnam that a “small” commitment in the mid-1950s became a massive one in the mid-1960s? Several former administration “insiders” have recently stepped forward, encouraged by Daniel Ellsberg’s release of the Pentagon Papers to provide answers. Beginning in the Eisenhower years, we are told by George Ball, a series of “small steps” were taken “almost absentmindedly” until the United States found itself “absorbed” into Vietnam. It was “the politics of inadvertence,” Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has written in evident agreement with

Ball. Yet the basic policies and concepts were right, says Roger Hilsman; the American failure was a failure of implementation, a case of inept execution. Quite the contrary, Leslie H. Gelb has argued in a recent *New York Review of Books* article: the decision-making system worked as its participants intended it to work, on the basis of a misguided consensus about the international and domestic political dangers of failing in Vietnam. Ellsberg, while supporting much of Gelb’s analysis, has added his own dimension to the discussion, arguing that Presidential concern about future elections and the threat of a right-wing reaction to withdrawal short of victory was the first “rule” of policymaking on Vietnam.

The Pentagon Papers tell me that all of these explanations are misleading or inadequate. Choices to escalate rather than de-escalate or disengage were made deliberately, not haphazardly; policies were not merely implemented poorly, they were ill-conceived; concern over elections explains why changes in policy may have been postponed rather than why they resulted in continued or increased involvement. If the “system” as a whole worked so perversely well, it was because there was (and is) in American decision-makers and decisionmaking a disposition to respond to failure in ways that will perpetuate the “success” of America’s mission abroad. The decisions that were taken on Vietnam—always to press ahead with the war, usually to expand it—reflected much more than calculations about the domestic and international repercussions. They were manifestations of deeper drives to preserve and expand personal, institutional and national power.

The most fateful decisions on Vietnam—those that enmeshed the United States ever more deeply and dramatically enlarged the perceived “stakes” in the outcome of the war—occurred during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. What motivated these two Presidents and their common cast of senior policy advisers to make these decisions?

In the first place, they shared a number of bedrock assumptions about American responsibility for maintaining the global status quo before the

challenge of communist-supported revolutions: thus the critical nature of the Vietnam experience for the United States and the “Free World,” and the psycho-political importance of being firm in the face of the adversary’s “provocations.” One need not search between the lines for these assumptions; they emerge clearly from numerous documents and statements. The same John F. Kennedy who in June 1956 had spoken of Vietnam as “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike” also said as President seven years later: “We are not going to withdraw. In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there.” Those who theorize that Kennedy was on the verge of disengagement before his assassination and cite televised remarks of September 2, 1963—“In the final analysis it is their war” and “they have to win it”—ignore the essential point: Kennedy, as he demonstrated in throwing support to the anti-Diem generals, wanted this war won whatever the deficiencies of, and obstacles posed by, Saigon politics. “Strongly in our mind,” he said in a less-quoted response on NBC television (September 9), “is what happened in the case of China at the end of World War II, where China was lost, a weak government became increasingly unable to control events. We don’t want that.” Kennedy would not “lose” South Vietnam, a determination that every South Vietnamese government then and since has learned how to exploit for accumulating aid without implementing reforms.

Well before the Tonkin Gulf incidents, it was recognized that increasing American involvement was contributing to the perceived value of South Vietnam, both for foreign and domestic policy. But this only lent greater validity to the “test case” hypothesis, according to McNamara (in a trip report to Johnson, March 16, 1964). The entire world, he wrote, regards the ‘South Vietnam conflict . . . as a test case of US capacity to help a nation meet a communist ‘war of liberation.’”

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by Melvin Gurtov

Doris Lessing: Cassandra in a World Under Siege

“She is personal: she was one of the first women to write truthfully about sex. . . . She is also prophetic, but not in a vague, exhortatory, passionate mode . . . her grasp of what is actually happening in the world is ministerial. She is one of the very few novelists who have refused to believe that the world is too complicated to understand.”

DORIS LESSING IS A PROPHET who prophesies the end of the world. She is much read but not perhaps much heeded, for there is very little that can be done, in her view, to avert catastrophe. Why, then, does she continue to write for a posterity that does not exist? Because, she says, we must continue to write and live *as if*. She is used by now to living on the edge of destruction, though her conception of it has changed over the years: now she foresees a world polluted and ruined by nerve gas and fallout, with England

“poisoned, looking like a dead mouse in a corner, injected with a deathly glittering dew,” whereas she used to foresee revolution. One of her characters, contemplating her miserable marriage in the war years, comforts herself in these terms: “I’m caught for life, she thought: but the words, ‘for life,’ released her from anxiety. They all of them saw the future as something short and violent. Somewhere just before them was a dark gulf or chasm, into which they must all disappear. A communist is a dead man on leave, she thought.” And that is how she continues to write, though no longer a communist: a dead man on leave.

If her prophecies are listened to, it is with helplessness. Her literary prestige in England could not be higher, though she cares little for the literary world. She also has real readers. She is the kind of writer who changes people’s lives: her novel *The Golden Notebook* has been described as “the Bible of the young,” and although I don’t think she’d care much for the portentousness of the phrase, it certainly catches the feeling of converted emotion that she arouses.

In a new, as yet unpublished preface to *The Golden Notebook*, she says that like all writers she is constantly besieged by letters from students who want to write theses and essays about her work, and who ask for “a thousand details of total irrelevance which they have been taught to consider important, amounting to a dossier, like an immigration department’s.” To these students, she replies, “why don’t you read what I have written and make your own mind up about what you think, testing it against your own life, your own experience. Never mind about Professors White and Black.”

Her attitude to interviewers is much the same. She is interviewed occasionally, and sometimes lectures, but usually for practical reasons—to finance travel, to oblige publishers who believe that interviews promote sales. But she has very little faith in the value of what she says in such circumstances and insists that what she does want to say is written down in her novels. (Two of her books contain accounts of lecturers who have been unable to continue lecturing

through fits of stammering, caused by a lack of faith in the generalizations they are delivering from the platform of authority. Finding themselves in false positions, they become physically unable to speak.) I invited her to lunch, but found myself unable to ask her the usual interviewer’s questions, knowing as I did her views on the subject. We discussed these views a little, and then talked about our dentists, and the price of meat, lecture tours, psychoanalysts and dreams, and why people take so many pills these days. She is a great dreamer, a creative dreamer, but one doesn’t have to ask her to know it, because they are all there in her novels and short stories: Jungian dreams, prophetic dreams, what she describes as “bad B picture dreams.” It is only fair to say that for a writer who consistently foresees and confronts the worst, she is neither depressing nor apparently depressed. We talked about cooking and exchanged recipes. One can tell (again, from her novels) that she is a good cook, that she notices what she eats. She is an organized person: when working on a novel, she cuts herself off, doesn’t go out, doesn’t see people. She has learned to say no, though she doubtless learned the hard way: she is not a hard person.

Doris Lessing was not brought up in England. She came here in 1950 at the age of 30 with the manuscript of her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, which was accepted, published, and became an immediate success. So for over twenty years she’s been a courted, successful, even popular novelist. Part of her initial impact came from the subject matter of her work: she wrote about Africa and racialism, topics which in the ’50s could hardly have been more in the news. She was born in Persia, where her father ran a bank: the family moved to Rhodesia when she was five, because her father fancied that he could make a fortune growing maize. They went out, she told me, “with very little money, a governess, a piano, clothes from Liberty’s, visiting cards,” and there they all sat “in an elongated thatched hut, while the farm did not succeed.” She received hardly any proper education, she says, and that, together with “wandering about in the

by Margaret Drabble