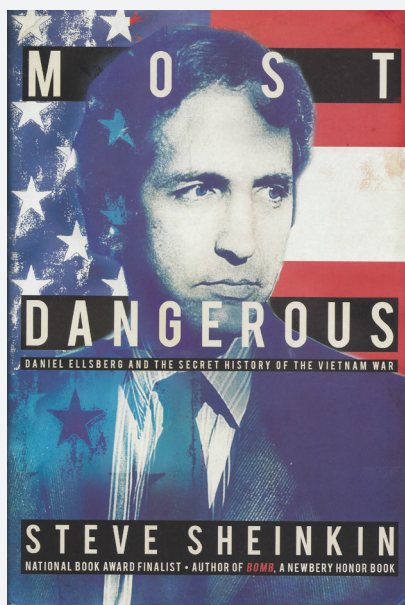


## Second Reaction: Citizen Hero or Crazy Traitor? Truth, Lies, Risk, and Power in a Fight to End the War in Vietnam

Sheinkin, Steve. *Most Dangerous: Daniel Ellsberg and the Secret History of the Vietnam War*. New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2015. Print.

Susan Tomlinson



*Would you be willing to go to prison to help end the war?* Faced with an opportunity to leak top secret papers to prove to the American public that they were lied to about American involvement throughout the Vietnam War, Daniel Ellsberg had a difficult decision to make. This intricately crafted account of the man who leaked the Pentagon Papers details the struggles encountered by Daniel Ellsberg as he became convinced that his answer to this question would be “yes.”

The Vietnam War era was a turbulent, volatile time. In U.S. history textbooks, this time period spans multiple chapters, examining these topics thematically or chronologically. Regardless of the approach, the U.S. presence in Vietnam—beginning in the 1950s—and the war that follows is complex and deserves more exploration than high school textbooks can afford to provide. Sheinkin’s book could be the vehicle to help teachers and students more accurately understand, dissect, and critically examine the impact of the Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon administration in continuing the war in Vietnam using Daniel Ellsberg as a major player in telling the story. The release of the Pentagon Papers and Nixon’s reaction are recounted in ways that trace his ultimate downfall and resignation as president.

The book begins with a categorized cast of more than 88 characters, helpful for any reader in understanding the relationships and affiliations. Ellsberg's story is the base from which to examine the way the government and military worked together to plan, execute, and track the progress of warfare half a world away. Several side stories enrich this book. Pilot Lieutenant Everett Alvarez, for example, was the first American prisoner of war (POW) in Vietnam, shot down during the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Some of his POW experiences are recounted, as is his release eight years later. John Kerry's testimony before Congress against the war and Randy Kehler's prison term for draft resistance are included, illustrating growing sentiment against the war. The large cast of characters provides a variety of vantage points and perspectives.

Ellsberg's work with high-level political and military power players at the Pentagon gives him a view of the war that tries his soul. A former Marine, at one point Ellsberg leaves his position in Washington and goes to Vietnam to see for himself the reality of this war. His experience there convinces him that American troop escalation is not the answer. Ellsberg is ultimately convinced that he cannot help end the war from the inside. He comes to believe that as a noble citizen he has no choice but to leak documents that will convince Americans that they had been lied to. This serves as the basis for what seems like a front row seat with Ellsberg as the reader becomes privy to the secret operations of the war.

There is an extensive, categorized list of works cited in the book that could serve as a springboard for student research. Sheinkin uses many quotes from conversations throughout the narrative, and provides 24 pages of source notes for these quotes. Further examination of the quotes would be a stimulus for class discussions. Passages from the book can be used for critical examination and serve as the first step of further investigation for critiquing viewpoints and decisions made.

Not simply a chronicle of the Pentagon Papers, *Most Dangerous* is an overview of the major players in the planning and execution of U.S. involvement, escalation, and, eventually, in turning the war over to the South Vietnamese in preparation for "peace with honor." Readers are educated about U.S. and Vietnamese political and military leaders, soldiers (John Kerry and John McCain), and Ellsberg's friends, family, and colleagues, who are included to paint a personal picture and to portray ethical struggles.

I shared this book with students by presenting a passage from the Gulf of Tonkin incident from our textbook, and then providing a passage of the same event from Sheinkin's book. It was eye-opening and resulted in one student exclaiming, "I loved this! Why doesn't our textbook include the doubt that was voiced in Sheinkin's book?" Students who read from the book came from regular and AP U.S. history classes, and they all appreciated the clarity of Sheinkin's writing.

I plan to use excerpts from the book when we study Vietnam this spring, specifically choosing sections that include private presidential quotes juxtaposed with those presidents' public pronouncements. Themes in this saga include discussion opportunities for citizen involvement

and responsibility, interpretation of the law, integrity, consequences, and the ways in which history repeats itself (e.g., Edward Snowden). Class discussions will be enriched by the use of this book. For teachers who are searching for a book to include for their students in a study of the Vietnam War, I would highly recommend *Most Dangerous*.

### **About the Author**

**Susan Tomlinson** teaches U.S. history and sociology at Franklin Central High School in Indianapolis, Indiana. She has been involved with field testing and reviewing curricula for the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial Fund's Education Center, and with her students has worked to collect and transcribe veterans' stories.