Ellsberg: Vietnam War lessons apply today

Half a century after a president seized on a congressional resolution to expand the Vietnam War, the man who disclosed a secret history of how those decisions were made says there are lessons for the United States today.

“Don’t let one man take us to war,” Daniel Ellsberg says.

“The framers of the Constitution intended that one man alone cannot take us into war; only the elected representatives of the people can do that. It is important to get that back.”

Although he has been critical of President Barack Obama, Ellsberg adds, “I give him credit that we are not involved in a hopeless mess” in any of half a dozen current trouble spots around the globe, among them Iran, Syria and Ukraine.

Ellsberg says that would not be true of John McCain and Mitt Romney — the two most recent Republican nominees for president — or of Hillary Rodham Clinton, the former secretary of state who is considered the leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016.

He also praises two modern-day disclosers of secret information, Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, formerly Bradley Manning. Snowden, a contractor for the National Security Agency, has gone to Russia. Manning, an Army private, has been sentenced to 35 years in prison.

“I was outraged that Edward Snowden could be regarded as a traitor,” Ellsberg says. “He is a great hero of mine.”

Ellsberg spoke Thursday in Portland as part of a panel assessing the Vietnam War. The panel was the fourth in a year-long series observing the 50th anniversary of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, whose passage President Lyndon B. Johnson used to justify a commitment that resulted in half a million U.S. soldiers at the war’s peak.

Other panel members were Christian Appy, a Vietnam War historian who teaches at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and Thuy Tran, who came to the United States when she was 9. Tran is an optometrist in Portland, a member of the Parkrose School Board, and a lieutenant colonel in the 142nd Medical Group of the Oregon Air National Guard.

The series is sponsored by the Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics at the University of Oregon, Oregon Historical Society and World Affairs Council of Oregon. The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon also sponsored the program.

Morse, a Democrat from Oregon, was one of just two members of Congress to vote against the resolution. He lost his Senate seat in 1968 and died in 1974 during a comeback attempt.

**Where Ellsberg was**

What is known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was put to a vote on Aug. 7, 1964, three days after Ellsberg, then 33, began as a special assistant to Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton. He had been an analyst at Rand Corp.

His first day at the Pentagon was also the same day he received reports of an attack by North Vietnamese patrol boats on two U.S. destroyers on the Gulf of Tonkin. Two days earlier, one of the destroyers was attacked, but the attack was repelled without U.S. casualties or damage.

Following reports of the second attack, Johnson ordered retaliatory bombing of North Vietnam and requested congressional approval of a resolution that gave him broad authority to wage war — but was not a declaration of war.

“I was present at the start of the destruction,” Ellsberg said in recapping the incident elaborated in his 2002 memoir, “Secrets.”

Within days, Ellsberg said he learned the second attack could not be confirmed — it never was — and the first attack happened after a series of covert operations by U.S. warships to provoke a reaction by North Vietnam’s coastal defenses.

“Where there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; there was no attack on our ships in the Gulf of Tonkin,” Ellsberg said.

The Vietnam War resulted in more than 58,000 U.S. deaths, and the Iraq War more than 4,000, Ellsberg said, plus millions of casualties among the populations.

American planes also dropped more bombs in Southeast Asia than were dropped in World War II. Ellsberg said 8 million tons; other estimates put it at 7 million, but both exceed the 2 tons dropped during the earlier war.

Just as in August 1964 about Vietnam, Ellsberg says, there were official denials four decades later about what war in Iraq would accomplish.

“But no one leaked those doubts to the press or Congress,” he said.

**After Tonkin Gulf**

Ellsberg spent two years in Vietnam for the State Department, from 1965 to 1967, before he eventually returned to Rand as a consultant.

In 1971, he released 7,000 pages of a secret study of Vietnam War decision-making that became the Pentagon Papers, first to The New York Times and then to other newspapers.

The study covered four presidential administrations from 1945 to 1968, but not that of Richard Nixon, who was then president. Nixon’s attorney general moved to block publication, but the Supreme Court ruled for the newspapers and against the government.

It was around then that Ellsberg met Morse for the only time. Ellsberg says Morse told him that if the information he possessed had been disclosed back in 1964, the Senate never would have passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, given
Democratic leaders critical of U.S. involvement.

While Ellsberg believes Johnson might have seized upon another incident to win congressional approval, “that war would not have happened” if disclosure had come during the 1964 campaign, in which LBJ beat Republican Barry Goldwater by a landslide for the presidency.

Ellsberg was prosecuted under the Espionage Act for disclosing the Pentagon Papers. But the charges were dismissed in 1973 after it was disclosed that a team authorized by Nixon’s White House had burglarized the Beverly Hills, Calif., office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist while seeking to discredit Ellsberg. The same burglars were later arrested and convicted in connection with bugging Democratic Party national headquarters at the Watergate in Washington, D.C.

Nixon resigned the presidency a year later.

But if Nixon had not been caught up in the Watergate scandals, Ellsberg said, he would have continued the Vietnam War even though U.S. troops were withdrawn in 1973 under the Paris accords. Nixon had given secret assurances to the South Vietnamese president that the U.S. would resume bombing North Vietnam for violations of the accords.

Ellsberg said while the war continued for a few more years, the effect of his disclosure of the Pentagon Papers was summed up by H.R. Haldeman, Nixon’s chief of staff, as quoted on the White House tapes in June 1971: “The implicit infallibility of presidents, which has been an accepted thing in America, is badly hurt by this, because it shows that people do things the president wants to do even though it’s wrong — and the president can be wrong.”

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