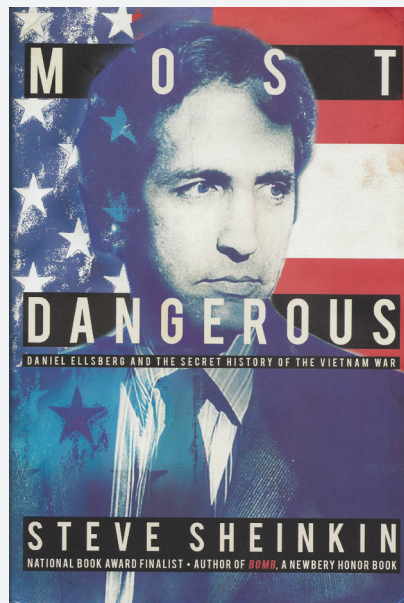


## First Opinion: Using Historical Nonfiction to Understand the Complexity of U.S. History and in Writing about U.S. History

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

*Kathryn Obenchain and Erin Vaughn*



One important purpose for studying history is that the more we understand our past, the better we understand our present. In order to understand the past, we must thoughtfully examine our achievements, our failures, and those times in which achievements and failures coexisted. If we do not approach this with care and authenticity, we diminish the potential to learn about ourselves, our nation, and our place in the world—both past and present. *Most Dangerous: Daniel Ellsberg and the Secret History of the Vietnam War* is a historical account of the United States' involvement in Vietnam, including the development and distribution of what became known as the Pentagon Papers. The people and the era examined in this book detail the achievements of the young men and women who fought and died in Vietnam, some of whom spent years as prisoners of war surviving horrific conditions, and the failures of multiple U.S. presidents and their administrations, who knowingly and consistently lied to American citizens. It also details Daniel Ellsberg's personal and professional decisions, including his own achievements and failures.

Written for a young adult audience, Steve Sheinkin's book is not a biography about Ellsberg; instead, Ellsberg is the unifying character in a complex, nonfiction narrative detailing the

often secretive decisions regarding the U.S.'s engagement in and eventual withdrawal from Vietnam. The reader experiences tension as Ellsberg struggles with where to ground his loyalties—to his bosses at the Pentagon and the White House, or to the people of the United States. He determines that he cannot be loyal to both and that he will eventually need to choose.

The text is organized chronologically into three distinct periods. *Part I: Insider* provides a personal history of Ellsberg, alongside a history of early U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Though a Pentagon employee and early supporter of the Vietnam conflict, Ellsberg's support wavers as what he witnesses in Vietnam contradicts what Americans are being told by the administration. *Part II: Secrets and Lies* details Ellsberg's continued frustration as he works on Secretary Robert McNamara's commissioned history of Vietnam, and as the U.S. experiences the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. *Part III: Outsider* describes Ellsberg's decision to leak the Pentagon Papers and the resulting personal and professional implications. Interwoven throughout is the love story between Ellsberg and his eventual second wife, Patricia Marx; the experiences of Lieutenant Alvarez, the first U.S. prisoner of war imprisoned in the infamous Hanoi Hilton; and the decisions made by the administrations of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon as they worked to preserve their political reputations against a war that they knew was unwinnable. The book concludes by drawing a parallel to 2013 and Edward Snowden, a former employee of the CIA, who revealed a "vast system of surveillance the American public had no idea existed" (321).

Sheinkin's book is an extraordinarily well-written and well-researched historical text and an excellent example for secondary students about the amount of research required in creating a historical text. The book is comprehensive and dense, and the reader can get lost in the complexity. However, the complexity is necessary so that readers understand that presidents and individuals make decisions within historical, political, and economic contexts. They shape and are shaped by the times and places in which they live. As such, Sheinkin also includes political assassinations, presidential elections, the Kent State shootings, and the Watergate scandal. Although each event provides a solid contribution to understanding the complexity of the Vietnam War, it makes for a challenging independent read for many young adults. To support the reader, Sheinkin provides a cast of characters in the front of the book that is useful in keeping track of the multitude of historical actors involved. Numerous historical primary sources are also used to support the story.

As social studies educators, the potential of the text for exploring the rights and responsibilities of citizens is intriguing. For example, Ellsberg clearly violates the law by releasing top secret government information. But is violating the law acceptable if it is the only way to expose a government lie? This is a complicated question about which citizens continue to disagree, making it worth exploring. Through skillful and informed facilitation, young adults should grapple with the controversies and enduring issues in this book. However, due to the complexity of the book's content, teachers will require substantial historical knowledge in order to maximize the learning potential.

### **About the Authors**

**Kathryn Obenchain** is an associate professor of social studies education at Purdue University. Her research interests are in democratic citizenship education, in both the United States and newly emerging democracies, with an emphasis on the civic identities of teachers and students. In addition, she publishes in social studies teacher education with an emphasis in integrating social studies and literacy. She is particularly interested in how classrooms are structured to promote democratic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

**Erin Vaughn** is a doctoral student of social studies education at Purdue University. She is also a graduate student teaching assistant for the elementary social studies methods course. Vaughn is approaching the dissertation phase of her degree and plans to study the civic identities of preservice teachers. Her research interests are in teacher education and the preparation of preservice teachers to teach for critical citizenship. She plans to graduate in May 2017.