



Rolling Thunder A US army chopper flies over the bodies of Viet Cong guerrillas near Tan Phu village

EXCLUSIVE: MEETING ED SNOWDEN - II

“We Brought You The Promise Of The Future, But Our Tongue Stammered And Barked...”

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ARUNDHATI ROY

My phone rang at three in the morning. It was John Cusack asking me if I would go with him to Moscow to meet Edward Snowden. I'd met John several times; I'd walked the streets of Chicago with him, a hulking fellow hunched into his black hoodie, trying not to be recognised. I'd seen and loved several of the iconic films he has written and acted in and I knew that he'd come out early on Snowden's side with *The Snowden Principle*, an essay he wrote only days after the story broke and the US government was calling for Snowden's head. We had had conversations that usually lasted several hours, but I embraced Cusack as a true comrade only after I opened his refrigerator and found nothing but an old brass bus horn and a pair of small antlers in his freezer.

I told him that I would love to meet Edward Snowden in Moscow.

The other person who would be travelling with us was Daniel Ellsberg—Snowden of the '60s—the whistleblower who made public the Pentagon papers during the Vietnam war. I had met Dan briefly, more than 10 years ago, when he gave me his book, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*.

Dan comes down pretty ruthlessly on himself in his book. Only by reading it—and you should—can you even begin to understand the disquieting combination of guilt and pride he has lived with for about 50 of his 84 years. This makes Dan a complicated, conflicted man—half-hero, half-haunted spectre—a man who has tried to do penance for his past deeds by speaking, writing, protesting and getting arrested in acts of civil disobedience for decades.

In the first few chapters of *Secrets*, he tells of how, in 1965, when he was a young employee in the Pentagon, orders came straight from Robert McNamara's office (“It was like an order from God”) to gather “atrocious details” about Viet Cong attacks on civilians and military bases anywhere in Vietnam. McNamara, Secretary of Defence at the time, needed the information to justify “retaliatory action”—which essentially meant he needed a justification for bombing South Vietnam. The “atrocious” gatherer that “God” chose was Daniel Ellsberg:

I had no doubts or hesitation as I went down to the Joint War Room to do my best. That's the memory I have to deal with.... Briefly I told the colonel I needed details of atrocities....

Above all I wanted the gory details of the injuries to the Americans at Pleiku and especially at Qui Nhon. I told the colonel “I need blood”.... Most of the reports didn't go into gory details, but some of them did. The district chief had been disemboweled in front of the village, and his family, his wife and four children had been killed too. “Great! That's what I want to know! That's what we need! More of that! Can you find other stories like that?”

Within weeks, the campaign called Rolling Thunder was announced. American jets began to bomb South Vietnam. Something like 175,000 marines were deployed in that small country on the other side of the world, 8,000 miles away from Washington, DC. The war would go on for eight more years. (According to the testimonies in the recently

published book about the Vietnam War *Kill Anything that Moves* by Nick Turse, what the US army did in Vietnam as it moved from village to village with orders to “kill anything that moves”—which included women, children and livestock—was just as vicious, though on a much larger scale, as anything ISIS is doing now. It had the added benefit of being backed up by the most powerful air force in the world.)

By the end of the Vietnam war, three million Vietnamese people and 58,000 US troops had been killed and enough bombs had been dropped to cover the whole of Vietnam in several inches of steel. Here’s Dan again: “I have never been able to explain to myself—so I can’t explain to anyone else—why I stayed in the Pentagon job after the bombing started. Simple careerism isn’t an adequate explanation; I wasn’t wedded to that role or to more research from the inside; I’d learned as much as I needed to. That nights’ work was the worst thing I’ve ever done.”

When I first read *Secrets*, I was unsettled by my admiration and sympathy for Dan on the one hand and my anger, not at him of course, but at what he so candidly admitted to having been part of on the other. Those two feelings ran on clear, parallel tracks, refusing to converge. I knew that when my raw nerves met his, we would be friends, which is how it turned out.

Perhaps my initial unease, my inability to react simply and generously to what was clearly an act of courage and conscience on Dan’s part had to do with my having grown up in Kerala, where, in 1957, one of the first-ever democratically elected Communist governments in the world came to power. **So, like Vietnam, we too had jungles, rivers, rice fields, and Communists. I grew up in a sea of red flags, workers’ processions and chants of Inquilab Zindabad (Long Live the Revolution)!** Had a strong wind blown the Vietnam war a couple of thousand miles westward, I would have been a “gook”—a kill-able, bomb-able, Napalm-able type—another body to add local colour in *Apocalypse Now*. (Hollywood won the Vietnam war, even if America didn’t. And Vietnam is a Free Market Economy now. So who am I to be taking things to heart all these years later?)

But back then, in Kerala, we didn’t need the Pentagon papers to make us furious about the Vietnam war. I remember as a very young child speaking at my first school debate, dressed as a Viet Cong woman, in my mother’s printed sarong. I spoke with tutored indignation about the “Running Dogs of Imperialism”. I played with children called Lenin and Stalin. (There weren’t any little Leons or baby Trotskys around—maybe they’d have been exiled or shot.) Instead of the Pentagon papers, we could have done with some whistle-blowing about the reality of Stalin’s purges or China’s Great Leap Forward and the millions who perished in them. But all that was dismissed by the Communist parties as Western propaganda or explained away as a necessary part of Revolution.

Wars today aren’t aberrations but systemic exercises to preserve a way of life for a chosen few by a protracted war for hegemony: Lifestyle Wars.

But despite my reservations and criticism of the various Communist parties in India (my novel *The God of Small Things* was denounced by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala as anti-Communist), I believe that the decimation of the Left (by which I do not mean the defeat of the Soviet Union or the fall of the Berlin Wall) has led us to the embarrassingly foolish place we find ourselves in right now. Even capitalists must surely admit, that intellectually at least, socialism is a worthy opponent. It imparts intelligence even to its adversaries. Our tragedy today is not just that millions of people who called themselves communist or socialist were physically liquidated in Vietnam, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, not just that China and Russia, after all that revolution, have become capitalist economies, not just that the working class has been ruined in the United States and its unions dismantled, not just that Greece has been brought to its knees, or that Cuba will soon be assimilated into the free market—it is also that the language of the Left, the *discourse* of the Left, has been marginalised and is sought to be eradicated. The debate—even though the protagonists on both sides betrayed everything they claimed to believe in—used to be about social justice, equality, liberty, and redistribution of wealth. All we seem to be left with now is paranoid gibberish about a War on Terror whose whole purpose is to expand the War, increase the Terror, and obfuscate the fact that the wars of today are not aberrations but systemic, logical exercises to preserve a way of life whose delicate pleasures and exquisite comforts can only be delivered to the chosen few by a continuous,

protracted war for hegemony—Lifestyle Wars.

What I wanted to ask Ellsberg and Snowden was, can these be *kind wars*? *Considerate wars*? *Good wars*? Wars that respect human rights?

The comical understudy for what used to be a conversation about justice is what the *New York Times* recently called ‘Bill and Melinda Gates’s Pillow Talk’ about “what they have learned from giving away \$34 billion”, which according to a back-of-the-envelope calculation by the *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, has saved the lives of 33 million children from diseases like polio:

“On the (Gates) foundation there’s always a lot of pillow talk,” Melinda said. “We do push hard on each other.” ...Bill thought Melinda focused too much on field visits while Melinda thought Bill spent too much times with officials.... They also

teach each other, Melinda says. In the case of gender, they’ve followed her lead in investing in contraception, but also they developed new metrics to satisfy Bill. So among their lessons learned from 15 years of philanthropy, one applies to any couple.... *Listen to your spouse!* (*NYT*, July 18, 2015).

They plan—the article goes on to say without irony—to save 61 million more children’s lives in the next 15 years. (That, going by the same back-of-the-envelope calculation, would cost another \$61 billion, at least.) All that money in one boardroom-bed—how do they sleep at night, Bill and Melinda? If you are nice to them and draw up a good project proposal, they may give you a grant so that you can also save the world in your own small way.

But seriously—what is one couple doing with that much money, which is just a small percentage of the indecent profits they make from the corporation they run? And even that small percentage runs into billions. It’s enough to set the world’s agenda, enough to buy government policy, determine university curricula, fund NGOs and activists. It gives them the power to mould the whole world to their will. Forget the politics, is that even polite? Even if it’s “good” will? Who’s to decide what’s good and what’s not?

So that, roughly, is where we are right now, politically speaking.



\$34 BN Charity What is one couple doing with that much money, a small percentage of their indecent profits?

Coming back to the 3 am phone call—by dawn I was worrying about my air ticket and getting a Russian visa. I learned that I needed a hard copy of a confirmed hotel booking in Moscow, sealed and approved by the Ministry of Something or the Other in Russia. How the hell was I to do that? I had only three days. John’s wizard assistant organised it and couriered it to me. My heart missed a beat when I saw it. The Ritz-Carlton. My last political outing had been some weeks spent walking with Maoist guerrillas and

sleeping underneath the stars in the Dandakaranya forest. And this next one was going to be in the *Ritz*? It wasn't just the money, it was...I don't know.... I had never imagined the Ritz-Carlton as a base camp—or a venue—for any kind of real politics. (In any case, the Ritz has turned out to be the venue of choice for several Snowden interviews, including John Oliver's famous conversation with him about "dick pics".)

I drove past the long, snaking queues outside the heavily guarded US consulate to get to the Russian embassy. It was empty. There was nobody at the counters marked "passport", "visa forms", or "collection". There was no bell, no way of attracting anybody's attention. Through a half-open door, I caught an occasional, fleeting glimpse of people moving around in the backroom. No queue whatsoever in the embassy of a country with a history of every imaginable type of queue. Varlam Shalamov describes them so vividly in *Kolyma Tales*, his stories about the labour camp in Kolyma—queues for food, for shoes, for a meagre scrap of clothing—a fight to the death over a piece of stale bread. I remembered a poem about queues by Anna Akhmatova—who unlike many of her peers, had survived the Gulag. Well, sort of:

*In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent
Seventeen months in the prison lines of Leningrad.
Once someone 'recognised' me. Then a woman with
bluish lips standing behind me, who, of course, had
never heard me called by name before, woke up from
the stupor to which everybody had succumbed and
whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there):
"Can you describe this?"
And I answered: "Yes I can."
Then something that looked like a smile passed
over what had once been her face.*

Akhmatova, her first husband Nikolay Gumilyov, Osip Mandelstam and three other poets were part of Acmeism, a poets' guild. In 1921, Gumilyov was shot by a firing squad for counter-revolutionary activity. Mandelstam was arrested in 1934 for writing an ode to Stalin that showed signs of satire and was not convincing enough in its praise. He died years later, starved and deranged, in a transit camp in Siberia. His poetry (which survived on scraps of paper hidden in pillow cases and cooking vessels, or committed to memory by people who loved him) was retrieved by his widow and by Anna Akhmatova.

This is the history of surveillance in the country that has offered asylum to Ed Snowden—wanted by the US government for exposing a surveillance apparatus that makes the operatives of the KGB and the Stassi look like preschool children. If the Snowden story were fiction, a good editor would dismiss its mirrored narrative symmetry as a cheap gimmick.

A man finally appeared at one of the counters at the Russian embassy and accepted my passport and visa form (as well as the sealed, stamped, hard copy of the confirmation of my hotel booking). He asked me to come back the next morning.

When I got home, I went straight to my bookshelf, looking for a passage I had marked long ago in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. Comrade N.S. Rubashov, once a high-level officer in the Soviet government, has been arrested for treason. He reminisces in his prison cell:

All our principles were right, but our results were wrong. This is a diseased century. We diagnosed the disease and its causes with microscopic exactness, but whenever we applied the healing knife a new sore appeared. Our will was hard and pure, we should have been loved by the people, but they hate us. Why are we so odious and detested? We brought you truth and in our mouth it sounded like a lie. We brought you freedom, and it looks in our hands like a whip. We brought you the living life, and where our voice is heard the trees wither and there is a rustling of dry leaves. We brought you the promise of the future, but our tongue stammered and barked....

Read now, it sounds like pillow talk between two old enemies who have fought a long, hard war and can no longer tell each other apart.

I got my visa the next morning. I was going to Russia.

Next: [Things That Can And Cannot Be Said \(Contd\)](#)

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