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The Truth-Teller: From the Pentagon Papers to the Doomsday Machine

Daniel Ellsberg

The growth of the military-industrial complex poses an existential threat to humanity. Daniel Ellsberg, peace activist and Vietnam War whistleblower discusses with Tellus Senior Fellow Allen White the continuing existential threat posed by the military-industrial complex—and what needs to be done about it.

You became a pivotal figure in the anti-Vietnam War movement when you released the Pentagon Papers, a large batch of classified documents that revealed a quarter century of official deception and aggression. What inspired you to take such a risky action?

After graduating from Harvard with an economics degree and completing service in the US Marines, I worked as a military analyst at the RAND Corporation. In 1961, in that role, I went to Vietnam as part of a Department of Defense task force and saw that our prospects there were extremely dim. It was clear to me that military intervention was a losing proposition.

Three years later, I moved from RAND to the Department of Defense. On my first day, I was assigned to a team tasked with devising a response to the alleged attack on the US naval warship *USS Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin by the North Vietnamese. This completely fabricated incident became the excuse for bombing North Vietnam, which the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had wanted to do for some months.

That night, I saw President Lyndon Johnson and my boss, Secretary McNamara, knowingly lie to the public that North Vietnam had without provocation attacked the US ship. In fact, the US had covertly attacked North Vietnam the night before and on previous nights. Johnson and McNamara's claim that the US did not seek to widen the war was the exact opposite of reality. In short, the Gulf of Tonkin crisis was based on lies. I was not yet moved to leave government, though I had come to view US military action as ineffective, illegitimate, and deadly, without rationale or endgame.

By 1969, as the war progressed under Richard Nixon, I saw such evil in government deceit that I asked myself, “What can I do to shorten a war that I know from an insider’s vantage point is going to continue and expand?” When the Pentagon Papers were released in 1971, the extent of government lies shocked the public. The retaliatory crimes Nixon committed against me out of fear that I would expose his own continuing threats—including nuclear threats—ultimately helped to bring him down and shorten the Vietnam War. This outcome had seemed impossible after his landslide reelection in 1972.

Today, similar revelations do not occasion equal shock because in the current administration in Washington, lying is routine rather than exceptional. Whether we are headed for a turning point toward bringing liars to justice will become clear when the investigations of President Donald Trump’s administration are concluded.

Since then, you have been a vocal critic of both US military interventions and the continued embrace of nuclear weapons, an issue with which you had first-hand familiarity through your work at RAND and the Pentagon. How did your experience with nuclear policy contribute to your disillusionment with US foreign policy writ large?

At RAND, Cold War presuppositions dominated all our work. We were certain that the US was behind in the arms race and that the Soviet Union, in pursuit of world domination, would exploit its lead by achieving a capacity to disarm the United States entirely of its nuclear retaliatory force. We were convinced that we were facing a Hitler with nuclear weapons.

However, in 1961, I learned about a highly classified new estimate of Soviet weapons: four intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). At the time, the US had forty ICBMs, as well as thousands of intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Italy, Britain, and Turkey (compared to the Soviet Union’s total of zero). General Thomas Power, head of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), believed that the Russians had 1000 ICBMs. He was wrong by a factor of 250. This early mistaken belief signaled to me that something was very wrong with our perception of the world and, more specifically, with how we perceived the threat posed by the nation viewed as our most formidable adversary.

At the time, I regarded the erroneous “missile gap” as a misunderstanding or cognitive error of some kind. But, in fact, it was very much a motivated error—motivated in particular by the desires of the Air Force and SAC to justify their budget requests for huge increases in the numbers of US bombers and missiles. But why did we at RAND uncritically accept the wildly inflated Air Force Intelligence estimates, rather than the contrary estimates by Army and Navy Intelligence that the Soviets had produced only “a few” ICBMs? Again, a motivated error. Through self-deception, we viewed ourselves as independent thinkers focused exclusively on national security, assuming that our role as contractors on the Air Force payroll had no influence on our analysis.

In retrospect, it is clear that our focus and our recommendations would have been very different had we been working for the Navy. As Upton Sinclair said, “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.” It was very

important to us not to understand that our work was above all serving to justify the exaggerated budget demands by the Air Force.

My distrust of the wisdom of Pentagon planners was also aroused by JCS estimates of the death toll resulting from deployment of our nuclear weapons. I had heard that the JCS avoided calculating this figure because they didn't want to know how many people they would be killing. To confront them, I drafted a question that appeared in a letter from the White House Deputy for National Security, Robert Komer, transmitted in the name of President Kennedy: "If your war plans were carried out as written and were successful, how many people would be killed in the Soviet Union and China?"

Within a week, I held in my hand a top secret, eyes-only-for-the-president document with an estimate of 325 million fatalities in the first six months. A week later, a second communication added an estimated 100 million deaths in Eastern Europe and another 100 million in our allied nations of Western Europe, depending upon the wind patterns in the aftermath of the strike. Additional deaths in Japan, India, Afghanistan, and other countries brought the total to 600 million.

That killings of this magnitude—100 times the toll of Jewish victims of the Holocaust—were willingly contemplated by our military transcended prevailing notions of crimes against humanity. We had no words—indeed, there are no words—for such devastation. These data confronted me with not only the question of whom I was working with and for, but also the fundamental question of how such human depravity was possible.

Your recent book, *The Domsday Machine*, describes "a very expensive system of men, machines, electronics, communications, institutions, plans, training, discipline, practices and doctrine designed to obliterate the Soviet Union under various circumstances, with most of the rest of humanity as collateral damage." How did this system come about?

World War II created a highly profitable aerospace sector upon which the US military relied for strategic bombing of cities, thereby setting the stage for the idea of bombers as a delivery mechanism for nuclear weapons. As orders precipitously declined by the end of the war, the industry was in dire financial straits, facing bankruptcy within a year or two. Accustomed to the guaranteed profits of the war years, they found themselves unable to compete with corporations experienced in building non-military products for the market, and demand for civilian aircraft on the part of commercial airlines was insufficient to replace the wartime military business.

The Air Force grew concerned that the industry would be unable to survive on a scale adequate to deliver military superiority in future conflicts. In the eyes of the government—and industry lobbyists—the only solution was a large peacetime (Cold War) Air Force with wartime-level sales to keep the industry afloat.

Thus emerged the military-industrial complex. Mobilization to confront a Hitler-like external enemy—a role filled by the Soviet Union—was viewed as indispensable to national security. Government military planning followed, essentially socialism for the whole armaments industry, including but not limited to aircraft production. With the benefit of hindsight, I now see the Cold War as, in part, a marketing campaign for the continual, massive subsidies to the aerospace industry. That's what it became after the war, and that's what we are seeing again today. The contemporary analog is the idea of China as an existential enemy, which, I believe, is the dream and expectation of the US Defense Department.

The threat of nuclear conflict persists as a near-term existential threat yet remains muted in political discourse and largely absent in public consciousness. How do you explain this glaring inconsistency?

Contemporary US media focuses on contradictions and conflicts between the two major parties. On the issue of nuclear weapons, little difference exists between them. They support the same programs and both receive donations from Boeing, General Dynamics, and Raytheon, among others. They both favor more aircraft than the Pentagon requests, itself an amazing situation given the existing level of spending. Right now, the F35, the largest military project in history, may end up costing \$1.5 trillion (an incredible sum even by historical standards of lavish Pentagon spending), yet still unable to achieve the promised performance. This kind of massive pork program is used by senators and representatives to secure political advantage—a “jobs” program that often is a euphemism for a “profits” program.

Nuclear weapons and climate change are two quintessential planetary threats requiring a coordinated global response. Do you see potential for alignment and cooperation between the anti-nuclear movement and the climate justice movement?

We, as a society, are conscious of the risk of the devastating impacts that could come from climate disruption. In contrast to the absence of public discourse around nuclear conflict since the end of the Cold War, climate has been a subject of intense public debate. Although the danger of the nuclear threat remains undiminished, the proposed \$1.7 trillion nuclear modernization program in the US is not a matter of serious debate.

It is difficult to compare climate and nuclear threats. The climate catastrophe toward which we are moving, while uncertain in terms of timing and outcomes, is indisputable. We have survived the nuclear danger for seventy years, although we have come close to conflict more frequently than the public realizes. I am not talking about just the Cuban Missile Crisis; in 1983, for example, we were also at the brink of a nuclear exchange, and there have been other instances. The risk of conflagration remains continuous and potentially catastrophic.

It is true that climate change may totally disrupt civilization as we know it, but how many lives would it cost? Whatever the number, some form of civilization would probably survive. By contrast, a nuclear winter, which has a non-zero possibility of occurring, would occasion near extinction.

That being said, both climate and nuclear threats are existential in nature, even as the degree and type of destruction differ. And both share another critical feature: the role of corporate interests and influence in sustaining the threat. As we speak, a pristine Arctic snowfield is under threat of oil drilling. Will Exxon and the other corporations be content to leave their known oil reserves in the ground, as needs to be done? I think that's as unlikely as Boeing eschewing military contracts.

To the question of alignment of the nuclear and climate movements, in my view, we cannot deal with the climate problem, globally or nationally, without massive government spending to speed up the production and lower the cost of renewables, and thereby accelerate the transition from a fossil-fuel economy to a renewable energy one. This will also require subsidies to the underdeveloped countries to ease their transitions. In short, we need a new super-sized Marshall Plan combined with government regulation to constrain the most damaging impulses of the fossil-based market economy embraced by Reagan, Thatcher, and other market fundamentalists. We need a national mobilization akin to that achieved during World War II. We confronted Hitler then as a civilizational threat. Climate disruption demands an equivalent response.

And here's where the climate-nuclear nexus comes into play again. We cannot afford the wasteful and dangerous development of new nuclear weapons that "modernize" the Doomsday Machine at the same time that we need to apply vast sums to reduce the threat of climate disruption. In the face of imminent climate catastrophe, the \$700-plus-billion military budget is both untenable and irresponsible. We must convert the military economy to a climate economy. We cannot have both. To do so, we must recognize that the risks posed by the military-industrial complex far exceed those posed by Russia.

The Great Transition envisions a fundamental shift in societal values and norms. To what extent does eliminating the nuclear threat ultimately depend on such a shift?

Few would disagree that to activate plans for deployment of nuclear weapons leading to a nuclear winter—and thereby killing nearly everyone on Earth—is immoral to a degree that words cannot convey. It is a crime that transcends any human conception or language. But what about the threat of deployment? For many, propagating the threat of an immoral act is itself immoral. But in the nuclear era, the nuclear states have not accepted that as a norm. Our entire nuclear posture, and that of our NATO allies, is based on deterrence of a nuclear war and, if it occurs, responding with our nuclear arsenal.

Revisiting this norm is very difficult. It is deeply embedded in the mindset of the US, Russia, and other nuclear-armed states and reinforced by the interests of powerful corporations. When Reagan and Gorbachev agreed that nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought, they did not say that it cannot be threatened or risked. Both nations continued such preparations and do so to this day. We have been taught that nuclear weapons are a necessary evil. Without a shift in norms and values, this situation will not change.

The Great Transition depicts a hopeful future rooted in solidarity, well-being, and ecological resilience. Given the dystopian scenarios you outline in *The Doomsday Machine* and your other work, where do you see the basis for hope?

My intention in addressing the threat of nuclear annihilation is that it will at least open up the possibility of change. While such a shift in values and norms would be almost miraculous, miracles can happen, and have happened in my lifetime. In 1985, the falling of the Berlin wall a mere four years later would have seemed improbable, if not impossible, given decades of nuclear tensions and near conflicts. But then it happened. And Nelson Mandela coming to power in South Africa, without a violent revolution, was impossible. But it happened.

So, unpredictable changes like these can happen, and their possibility inspires my commitment to continue my peace activities against long odds. My activity is based on the belief that small probabilities can be enlarged and that, however remote success may be, it is worthwhile pursuing because so much is at stake.

My experience with the Pentagon Papers showed that an act of truth-telling, of exposing the realities about which the public had been misled, can indeed help end an unnecessary, deadly conflict. This example is a lesson applicable to both the nuclear and climate crises we face. When everything is at stake, it is worth risking one's life or sacrificing one's freedom in order to help bring about radical change.

About the Interviewee



Daniel Ellsberg is a writer, peace activist, former military analyst, and whistleblower known for his release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. His work since the Vietnam War era has focused on nuclear dangers, US foreign interventions, and the need for patriotic whistleblowing. He is the author of *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, and *Risk, Ambiguity and Decision*. He received the Right Livelihood Award in 2006 and serves as a Senior Fellow of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation.

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