

“The level of government secrecy today is incredible”

A conversation with Judith Ehrlich

Richard Phillips
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Documentary filmmaker Judith Ehrlich (*The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers* [2009] and *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It* [2000]) spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* during the Sydney Film Festival.

Richard Phillips: What new discoveries did you make about Daniel Ellsberg and the Vietnam War period that your documentary covers?

Judith Ehrlich: I hadn't realised how much Dan had been a war planner and the extent to which he was responsible for war-making before he became an antiwar advocate. The other thing I hadn't realised was that the US government's operations against him weren't just tangential to Watergate but were, in some ways, more important factors in bringing down the Nixon administration. The break-in at Dr Fielding's office—Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist—and its linking back to the White House created a major crisis for Nixon.

RP: It is impossible to watch your documentary and not contrast how the US media defied the government and went on to publish the Pentagon Papers, and the criminal role the media has played in promoting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. How does this strike you?

JE: Obviously it's very different today. In many ways the media's decision to publish the Pentagon Papers was probably their finest moment. They had a moment of great courage, took a principled stand and it had very positive effect. It increased people's belief and trust in the media.

Today the media is on its knees and barely surviving economically. They are really facing hard times and under these conditions it is very hard to be courageous. It is a transitional period and I'm not sure how it's all going to pan out.

San Francisco Chronicle that shrunk to a tiny version of its former self and I almost expect it to announce its closure on any given morning. We now have so many other choices and don't have to get our news from the print media and television as we did in the past.

I've just been reading about this man who was arrested because he gave the military videos to Wikileaks. I'm certainly glad he did this; it was definitely information that people needed to know so they could see what the US is really doing in Iraq and Afghanistan. Dan's decision to reveal the Pentagon Papers was based on a real understanding of what people had a right to know.

A well-known American lawyer who retired last month recently said that everything important is something that somebody wants to keep secret. I'd never thought about it that way before, but it's true. The level of government secrecy today is incredible.

RP: But the media weren't just thinking about economic survival, they were printing lies and playing a direct role in preparing the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions. The *New York Times* had people like Judith Miller functioning as a direct conduit for the White House.

JE: Yes, that's right, and the *Times* also won the Pulitzer Prize for a story about wiretapping by the Bush administration that they sat on for a year. This was ridiculous. How can anyone win a prize for journalism when they kept this information quiet for more than 12 months? The media has played a very bad role in this situation and is still doing so.

Q: What role do you think should be played by documentary filmmakers under these conditions?

JE: The media is controlled by a few corporations, who obviously have a financial interest in maintain the

status quo, and so documentary filmmakers have taken up the role of being real critics. The long-form documentary allows people to get more than the sound bites they get on the news. We can really lay out an argument for a story in a thorough and unique manner.

RP: The prevailing climate in much of the film industry, however, is that you can't or shouldn't stand up to the powers that be.

JE: Yes that's a problem but our documentary, and the next one I'll be working on, will show that it does make a difference if you take a stand and stick your neck out. Dan Ellsberg is a great example of that.

I think documentary filmmakers can play a larger role providing vital background information about what we need to be aware, whether that be in movies like *Crude*, about the oil industry, or our film or others. As you know, there have been a number of films about Iraq and Afghanistan from the perspective of soldiers who are there and these have been very important.

I think we can also raise questions about whether war is a legitimate activity and why we are spending about \$1 trillion a year on war instead of using this money to stop people being thrown off welfare and out of their homes, or having schools closed and teachers fired.

The California budget is basically in free-fall and we've seen tremendous cuts to basic social programs. The economy has tanked and we have all sorts of arcane cuts on a state or federal level and yet we're spending about a million dollars per soldier in the field in Afghanistan, which is now the longest war in our history.

RP: Well it's now called the AfPak war, something that has occurred under the Obama administration.

JE: AfPak? I hadn't heard that term before. So when did we declare war on Pakistan and give ourselves the right to lob missiles onto people in that country? Nobody has given the executive branch the right to do that.

Dan Ellsberg now talks about Vietnamistan and points out that all the same government arguments used during Vietnam are being applied to Afghanistan. It was never a good time to stop the war in Vietnam, the government used to say, and these arguments are being churned up again.

RP: What do you think about the role being played by the Obama administration?

JE: It's very frustrating. We don't want to attack him

whole cloth because the alternative is much, much worse and we're glad to see an African-American as the president. On the other hand, all the power that Bush consolidated in the executive branch remains. The unbalanced state of executive power remains and is being used by Obama, but we're trying to be optimists, keep fighting and hope that things will get better.

Q: Isn't that rather naive view of things?

JE: Well perhaps. At the moment there is much more pressure coming from the extreme right than there is from the left. Obama is not living up to our expectations but I believe there is room for change and there can be change. I think he is capable of being a much better president than he has been so far. We are trying to reserve judgment and keep putting pressure on him to be the president he could be.



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