

Daniel Ellsberg's *The Doomsday Machine*: A prescient warning of the danger of nuclear war

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The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner by Daniel Ellsberg, Bloomsbury USA, 2017, 397 pages.

Daniel Ellsberg is an American anti-war activist who in 1971, while working for the RAND Corporation, leaked a series of documents called “The Pentagon Papers” to the *New York Times* and other news outlets. The papers revealed to the American public that successive US administrations from Truman to Nixon lied about the scale and legality of increasing US involvement in the Vietnam War.

Ellsberg was charged with treason under the Espionage Act by the Nixon administration, which sought a court order to prevent the *New York Times* from publishing the documents, ultimately denied by the Supreme Court. The most recent film by Steven Spielberg, *The Post*, concerned itself with these events.

Ellsberg himself was the target of extra-legal harassment by the Nixon administration before the charges against him were dropped against the backdrop of the unfolding Watergate crisis.

The publication of the Pentagon Papers was arguably the last time the American bourgeois press had any real commitment to democratic rights and journalism. In the ensuing decades, Ellsberg has become a pariah to the establishment as he has maintained his commitment to anti-war activism and spoken out in defense of modern-day whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, and Julian Assange.

Ellsberg is one of the few figures from the establishment, like Chris Hedges, formerly of the *New York Times*, who broke from their privileged background and took considerable personal risk to tell the truth. Moreover, as someone who was privy to top-secret and classified information, he knows whereof he speaks. Any class-conscious worker, serious intellectual, and young person can learn something from his work.

In December 2017, Ellsberg published *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, a memoir of his days as a nuclear war strategist for the Pentagon and the RAND Corporation in the early 1960s. Ellsberg has said that he copied nuclear war plans and intended to release them to the public after the publication of the Pentagon Papers. Unfortunately, while Ellsberg was on trial these documents were hidden in a briefcase in a landfill and were lost when a tropical storm swept in.

The contents of the book are disturbing on many levels. Ellsberg recounts his own personal history and how he came to work for the “defense” establishment during a time of critical episodes of the Cold War, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, where he provides his own version of events.

Chapter by chapter, Ellsberg describes US plans for nuclear attack that can be triggered by accident, or by intention, very easily, leading to a nuclear holocaust which would wipe out all life on the planet.

In the prologue he writes how, when he was working in the Pentagon as a special assistant to the assistant secretary of defense, he came upon a document which read, “Top Secret- Sensitive” and marked “For the President’s Eyes Only.” The document was a question to the Joint Chiefs of Staff which read: “If your plans for general [nuclear] war are carried out as planned, how many people will be killed in the Soviet Union and China?”

The answer was in the form of a graph, which Ellsberg reproduces in the book from memory. The vertical axis showed the number of deaths in the millions while the horizontal axis showed the amount of time in months. It was assumed that at least 275 million people would die almost instantaneously, while after six months the number would rise to 325 million deaths.

When the question was asked, “[H]ow many would die from radioactive fallout?” the Pentagon calculated another 100 million deaths in the Warsaw Pact countries and probably another 100 million dead in Western Europe, “depending on which way the wind blew.” Thus, the grand total of a nuclear US first strike would be at least 600 million dead, “a hundred holocausts” by the Pentagon’s own estimate.

Ellsberg writes, “I remember what I thought when I first held the single sheet with the graph on it. I thought, This piece of paper should not exist. It should never have existed. Not in America. Not anywhere, ever. It depicted evil beyond any human project ever. There should be nothing on earth, nothing real, that it referred to.”

So begins the book. Over the next pages and chapters Ellsberg sets out to demolish all preconceived notions of nuclear warfare, to lay out what really is. His assertions include the following:

- The basic plans of nuclear war today are essentially the same as those developed in the 1960s, which is essentially a system of thousands of nuclear weapons aimed at Russian cities and military targets ready to be launched at a moment’s notice.
- The US strategy has always been for a first strike: not necessarily a surprise attack but not an attack which came “second” in a nuclear war.
- Every US president, all the way to Trump, has used the threat of nuclear war as deterrence to their adversaries.
- The US threat of nuclear attack has precluded any “effective nonproliferation campaign” among other nation-states which have decided to acquire nuclear weapons themselves.
- US nuclear war plans, and the hypothetical and real scenarios

under which they unfold, are far more extensive than the public can imagine. Ellsberg writes how the public perception of a “nuclear button” with one finger on it, presumably the President’s, is a lie. In fact, there are many fingers on many buttons, to delegate authority to launch nuclear missiles in case the President and the leadership were incapacitated. These same systems exist in Russia, and probably other nuclear-armed powers as well.

- The Cuban Missile Crisis was even more dangerous than previously thought, as demonstrated in a highly classified study in 1964 which was never made public until this book.
- The strategic nuclear war systems are much more prone to “accidents” and false alarms than previously thought, risking the threat of unauthorized launchings.
- The potential risk of nuclear war has been systematically covered up from the public, including the aforementioned graph showing hundreds of millions of deaths, a third of the planet at the time. Ellsberg notes that in 1961 when the document was made, it was two decades before the concept of nuclear winter and nuclear famine were accepted, which meant that in reality most humans would die along with most other large species after a nuclear war.

Perhaps the greatest value of Ellsberg’s work is its sense of urgency. Despite the fact that nuclear weapons stockpiles have decreased by 80 percent from their height in the 1960s just a small fraction of the existing arsenals would still kill all seven billion people alive today.

Yet the official public discourse treats the threat and fear of nuclear conflict as something of an anachronism from the Cold War era. Masses of people are simply not as aware of the dangers as previous generations. Even into the 1980s there were mass rallies opposing nuclear war, involving hundreds of thousands of people. The fear of a Third World War affected the culture of all the major industrialized countries of the world, prompting the building of fall-out shelters, duck-and-cover drills in classrooms, and immortal satire like Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*.

Ellsberg warns that the threat of nuclear destruction has only increased since the end of the Cold War, precisely because the public sense of the dangers has steadily eroded, in addition to the American government’s quest for world hegemony as exemplified by the Trump administration. To his credit, Ellsberg writes that Trump is not an aberration from previous administration, but the fitting culmination of an insane system.

To underscore this point, in Chapter 20, Ellsberg writes how in many ways the bellicose threats from the “madman” Trump is little different from the “madman theory” pioneered by President Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger. Ellsberg likens the threat of nuclear war by a nation as akin to a robber holding up a store with a gun. It matters not whether the gun or threat is real, what matters is that the robber threatens to use violence to get their way.

In this respect, we have the logic of Nixon’s and Trump’s threats on the world stage. The notion that the commander-in-chief whose finger is on the button is not mentally stable is supposed to be enough to get the opposing side to negotiate.

Ellsberg includes the following exchange between Nixon and Kissinger, based on a tape of Oval Office conversations regarding an ongoing North Vietnamese offensive from April 25, 1972:

Nixon: I still think we ought to take the dikes out now. Will that drown people?

Kissinger: About two hundred thousand people.

Nixon: No, no, no ... I’d rather use the nuclear bomb. Have you got

that, Henry?

Kissinger: That, I think would just be too much.

Nixon: The nuclear bomb, does that bother you? I just want you to think big, Henry, for Christ sakes.

This would not be the first or last time, nuclear weapons were threatened by the United States against another country. Ellsberg mentions how during the Korean War, both Truman and then Eisenhower threatened to drop nukes in order to get the Chinese to negotiate. However that is not all. Ellsberg then lists more than 25 such incidents throughout the Cold War of public and private nuclear threats by US presidents, some little known.

Of course, this list is incomplete. Ellsberg then illustrates how Presidents Bush and Obama have threatened nuclear war on Iran on several occasions. All the recent presidential contenders, including both Democrats and Republicans, have shown their willingness to use nuclear weapons as a kind of litmus test to prove to the ruling class their ruthlessness. Trump’s tweets are just the public and open version of what American presidents and presidential hopefuls have been doing for decades.

It is beyond the scope of this review to go into every chapter and detail, as fascinating and horrifying as it is. This reviewer simply recommends readers of the WWSW buy or at least rent the book to discover more.

This is not a book for late-night reading and yet one can’t put it down. When the pages have all been read, one doesn’t necessarily want to jump back into it, almost out of self-preservation, and so it lies around the table or book shelf upsetting the conscience like something out of “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allen Poe. The best sort of books tend to do that.

It is essential to note that Ellsberg offers no serious solution to this existential crisis facing mankind, the greatest in our history. He is of the opinion that an informed citizenry can exert pressure on the existing political leaders and institutions. In our view, this is a futile perspective because, as Ellsberg’s books so eloquently explains, we are dealing not with individuals who may or may not be mad, but a system which is mad, namely, capitalism.

The Marxist would argue that dying capitalism can only offer two alternatives that Rosa Luxemburg called “socialism or barbarism.” Ellsberg, like many of his generation, sees the threat of omnicide, the destruction of the species, as something inherent in the human condition itself, thus minimizing the overall impact and seriousness of his work.

Despite this, *The Doomsday Machine* is an extremely prescient and important book. Ellsberg, now 87, has devoted his remaining years to speaking out against the approaching Third World War, and even more significant, makes the argument that it can and must be stopped.



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