

Daniel Ellsberg and Julian Assange

Patrick Martin
18 June 2023

The passing of Daniel Ellsberg, who died Friday at the age of 92 of pancreatic cancer, is an occasion for paying tribute to a principled and courageous fighter against militarism, reviewing the historical events with which he was indelibly associated—now more than 50 years old—and taking stock of the terrible decay in capitalist democracy in the decades since.

Ellsberg, a top-level Pentagon consultant, leaked thousands of pages of classified documents on the Vietnam War in 1971, because they provided incontrovertible evidence of US government war crimes and systematic lying to cover these crimes up.

The material he leaked was published in 18 newspapers, which fought and won a Supreme Court decision upholding their First Amendment rights. Today these same publishers would respond to such a release of secret information by turning in the leaker to the FBI, as the *New York Times* did with the Air National Guard technician who recently leaked the “Discord” papers exposing US conspiracies in Ukraine.

In 1971, Ellsberg turned himself in to face charges under the Espionage Act which could have led to a sentence of life in prison. He went free when his criminal prosecution was quashed because of government misconduct. But those who follow his example today, like Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and Julian Assange, face imprisonment, forced exile and the destruction of their health, and possibly their lives.

Born in 1931 to a middle-class Jewish family, raised in Detroit where he attended the elite Cranbrook school on a scholarship, Ellsberg came to maturity in the anti-communist environment of the early 1950s. He graduated from Harvard, where his professors included Henry Kissinger, and specialized in the application of game theory to military strategy, including the use of nuclear weapons.

He enlisted in the Marines in 1954, straight out of college, and extended his tour of duty in the hopes of seeing combat in the 1956 Suez Crisis. He then went to work at the RAND Corporation, as a top-level consultant for the US national-security apparatus. There he helped develop US nuclear strategic doctrines and advised Robert McNamara, secretary of defense in the incoming Kennedy administration, during the Cuban missile crisis and the initial stages of the US military escalation in Vietnam.

Fully supporting the global anti-communist crusade, Ellsberg went to work at the Pentagon full time in late 1964, and volunteered for a 1965 inspection tour in Vietnam where he spent three months accompanying US and South Vietnamese forces in raids on villages, and combat with insurgent forces of the National Liberation Front. His illusions were shattered by this experience, in which he saw peasants incinerated by US bombing or shot down indiscriminately by American and South Vietnamese soldiers. He began submitting pessimistic memos to his Pentagon bosses.

In 1967, as McNamara himself began to despair of the war’s

outcome, he established a research group at the Pentagon to compile a documentary history of US involvement in Vietnam through four administrations: Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson. Ellsberg was one of those chosen to participate, and his study of the history soon convinced him that the war was not only misguided, but criminal, and that every one of these administrations had lied to the American people about the US role.

At first Ellsberg’s opposition to the war was manifested in leaks of specific materials to Democratic politicians and the press. In February 1968, he leaked to Senator Robert F. Kennedy a classified report on the request by General William Westmoreland, the US commander in Vietnam, for an additional 200,000 troops. A month later, he leaked to the *Times* a report that the US military had greatly underestimated the strength of NLF forces before the Tet offensive, leaving US forces unprepared for the daring NLF assault on every major city in South Vietnam.

In 1969, after returning to RAND, he gained access to the entire 47-volume “History of U.S. Decision-Making Process on the Vietnam Policy,” which would become known to the world as the Pentagon Papers. He first approached leading Democrats, including Senator William Fulbright, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator George McGovern, a professed opponent of the war, who was to become the Democratic presidential nominee in 1972. They turned down his offer to review and make public the documents.

Ellsberg then turned to the press, approaching Neil Sheehan at the *New York Times*, a conduit for his previous leaks, and eventually supplied nearly complete copies of the Pentagon Papers to the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and a total of 18 US newspapers. The *Times* began to publish large excerpts, sparking panic and anger in the Nixon administration, which sought a court order to block publication.

The resulting case went quickly to the US Supreme Court, which handed down a ruling in *New York Times Co. v. United States*. The 6-3 majority found that the government had not provided the evidence required to overturn the presumption of press freedom to publish, based on the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

The publication of the Pentagon Papers, which continued for weeks in American newspapers, reinforced the shift in public opinion against the war. As with Ellsberg himself, popular sentiment was shifting drastically to the left, not merely opposing the war as unwinnable, but regarding it as unjust, even criminal. The credibility of the Pentagon, the White House—and the US government as a whole—was dealt an irreparable blow.

There is a direct chain of events leading from Ellsberg’s decision to leak the Pentagon Papers to President Richard Nixon’s forced resignation from office three years later.

Nixon—along with Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser—decided to make an example of Ellsberg, destroy his

reputation and ruin his life. Kissinger was particularly adamant, calling Ellsberg “the most dangerous man in America.” In a meeting with Nixon, after the Supreme Court ruling on the Pentagon Papers case, Kissinger declared, “He must be stopped at all costs. We’ve got to get him.” Nixon responded, “[B]y God, we’re going to go after them.”

Nixon instructed his closest aide on domestic policy, John Ehrlichman, to set up the “plumbers” unit, so named because its job was to plug leaks. This group of ex-CIA and ex-FBI agents and thugs, headed by G. Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt, broke into the offices of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist in California, looking unsuccessfully for information to discredit him.

Nine months later, the same group was caught burglarizing the offices of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate office complex in Washington, seeking information to assist the Nixon reelection campaign. The scandal which developed over the president’s direct involvement in criminal actions and cover-up culminated in August 1974 in Nixon’s resignation, after congressional Republican leaders went to him and told him impeachment and removal from office were inevitable if he did not leave the White House.

In the course of the Watergate revelations, the federal prosecution of Ellsberg and his colleague Anthony Russo, brought under Section 793 of the Espionage Act, collapsed. The judge in the case dismissed the charges after the burglary of the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist by the “plumbers” became public, as well as other government misconduct, including illegal wiretapping of Ellsberg and offering the judge the position of FBI director if he handled the case as desired by the White House.

Unlike many other figures in the middle class who were radicalized in the 1960s by the Vietnam War and the civil rights struggles in the United States, Ellsberg never made his peace with the establishment. He remained a principled defender of civil liberties and an opponent of war and militarism to the end of his life, arrested in numerous protests, usually for non-violent civil disobedience. He sought to expose the lies propagated by the US national security apparatus to justify wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, and solidarized himself with those courageous individuals who broke with the military-intelligence agencies and sought to expose the crimes of American imperialism.

In 2017, he wrote an important book, *The Doomsday Machine*, tracing the development of US nuclear weapons doctrine in the 1950s and early 1960s, when he worked in that field with Kissinger, McNamara and others. As the WSWS review of the volume noted: “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.”

The review continued: “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.” And this figure was actually a low estimate: “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.”

Four years later, he revealed that the US government had drawn up plans in 1958 to use nuclear weapons against China—which was not then a nuclear power—if Chinese attacks on offshore islands controlled by Taiwan continued. No US administration has ever embraced a “no first use” pledge to prohibit the use of nuclear weapons in a

conventional war or surprise attack.

Ellsberg played a prominent role in the defense of Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and particularly Julian Assange, founder and publisher of WikiLeaks. He wrote of Assange, “I was the first whistleblower prosecuted under the Espionage Act, and now he is the first prosecution [under the Espionage Act] for publishing.”

While the *New York Times* and other corporate media had published material leaked by Manning and Snowden, or posted by WikiLeaks, they made no effort to defend them against prosecution by the Obama administration, which made more frequent use of the Espionage Act to persecute leakers and journalists than all previous governments in US history combined.

Ellsberg gave testimony in one of the innumerable court hearings in the protracted legal process in the course of which the British government kept Assange locked up in the high-security Belmarsh prison, Britain’s Guantanamo, even though the WikiLeaks publisher faced no criminal charges in Britain, only an extradition request from the United States.

Assange and his family deeply appreciated this support, and Assange put Ellsberg on the restricted list of people allowed to call and speak with him in Belmarsh. For that reason, Assange was allowed to call Ellsberg and say goodbye to him after he announced publicly that he was dying of pancreatic cancer.

The corporate media is entirely silent about this close connection. The two leading daily newspapers in the United States, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, managed to publish lengthy obituaries of Ellsberg which made no mention of Assange. The same is true of the *Guardian* in Britain, which published both a news report and a heartfelt tribute by Trevor Timm, co-founder with Ellsberg of the Freedom of the Press Foundation. In neither did the name “Assange” appear.

When the WikiLeaks publisher was dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy in London by British police in April 2019, these leading organs of imperialism, both US and British, positively gloated. An editorial in the *Washington Post* declared that Assange was “long overdue for personal accountability,” and suggested that the prospect of life in prison might lead to his “conversion into a cooperating witness.” The *Times* vilified him in a front-page “news” article as a “narcissist” who had “little interest in mundane matters like personal hygiene.”

The corporate media hates Assange and anyone who performs the essential function of a free press: exposing the actions which the government wants to keep secret, especially those which are anti-democratic or illegal. This is an expression of the colossal shift to the right, in both the corporate media and the upper-middle-class milieu to which it caters, over the past 50 years. They would greet a new Ellsberg as they have done Assange, not with extensive articles publicizing the whistleblower’s exposures or lawsuits to defend freedom of the press, but by endorsing and supporting their prosecution by the state.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact