

# Daniel Ellsberg's More Than Fifty-Year Battle Against the Security State

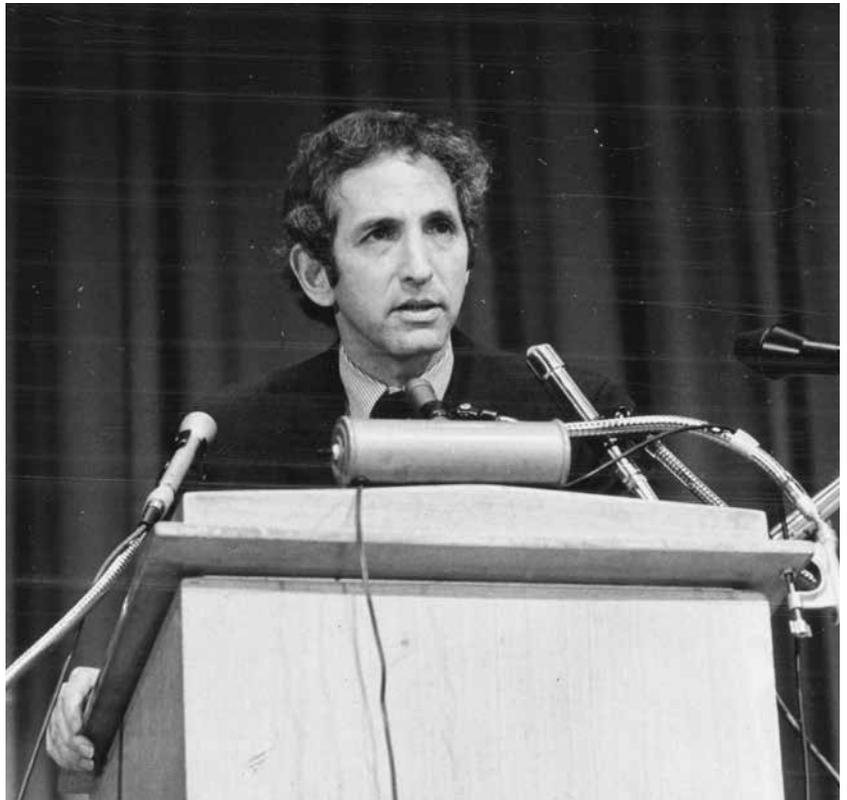
by Harley Schlanger

*The following article was written for the EIR Strategic Alert Weekly Newsletter, Vol. 37, No. 25, June 22, 2023, published by EIR GmbH, Wiesbaden Germany. It was provided with the author's permission to EIR News Service, which presents it here with minor editing.*

June 19—In an [interview](#) given to *Politico* and published June 4, less than two weeks before his death on June 16, Daniel Ellsberg demonstrated that neither the cancer which took his life, nor his over five-decades battle against a corrupted military-intelligence establishment, could dim his commitment to peace and justice, nor his passion for truth.

In the *Politico* interview, Ellsberg contended, “America still runs a covert empire around the world, embodied in the U.S. domination of NATO.” He also blamed Washington for “deliberately provoking Vladimir Putin into invading Ukraine, by moving NATO eastward toward Russia’s borders.” He often cited George Kennan, the author of the containment policy of the Cold War, who in 1998 called NATO expansion a “tragic mistake,” saying it would cause the Russians to “react quite adversely.”

Daniel Ellsberg burst onto the public scene on June 13, 1971, when the Pentagon Papers first began appearing in the *New York Times*. These were some 7,000 pages of reports on the Vietnam War, which included both historical analysis and government documents, compiled by the Vietnam Study Task



Bernard Gotfryd

*Daniel Ellsberg, responsible for initiating the famous Pentagon Papers scandal in 1971: “We cannot let officials of the Executive Branch determine what the public needs to know about how well and how they are discharging their functions.” Here he is shown speaking at a press conference in New York City in 1972.*

Force set up June 17, 1967 by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara of the War effort. What jumped off the pages was the discrepancy between the optimistic reports made public by the proponents of the war and the truthful admissions in private documents that the war could not be won. It also included details about the loss of lives and the destruction the war had unleashed, exposing secret operations which had been classified.

Ellsberg, a military veteran who was employed by

the RAND Corporation, had initially been a supporter of the U.S. military engagement in Vietnam, but turned against it, and concluded he could not remain silent. After copying the documents compiled by McNamara's Task Force, Ellsberg attempted to convince several Congressmen to release the report, but none would. So he went to the press.

This had an immediate, explosive effect. The Nixon Administration went ballistic, getting a court to order the *New York Times* to cease publication of the documents, while launching a massive slander campaign against Ellsberg—Henry Kissinger accused him of being a “Kremlin agent”—and the White House ran a break-in to his psychiatrist's office, seeking incriminating information. Despite frantic efforts to suppress the Pentagon Papers, the *Washington Post* ran the stories after the ruling against the *Times*, and eventually won a court case allowing it to continue publishing the papers.

### He Regretted Not Acting Sooner

On June 23, 1971, ten days after the first *New York Times* publication of the first pages appeared, Ellsberg was interviewed by CBS News. Asked by News anchor Walter Cronkite what the documents showed, Ellsberg replied, “Our officials never did concern themselves with the effect of our actions on the Vietnamese.” (The same can be said of U.S./NATO war hawks today, who are refusing to negotiate an end to the Ukraine War, while pouring weapons and money into the battle against Russia, leading to growing casualties on both sides, despite admitting privately the war cannot be won.)

Ellsberg faced the prospect of a life behind bars, but was spared imprisonment when a mistrial was declared on grounds of “prosecutorial misconduct” committed by Justice Department officials. Ellsberg said that his one regret was that he had not acted sooner, to spare lives of Vietnamese and Americans in the War.

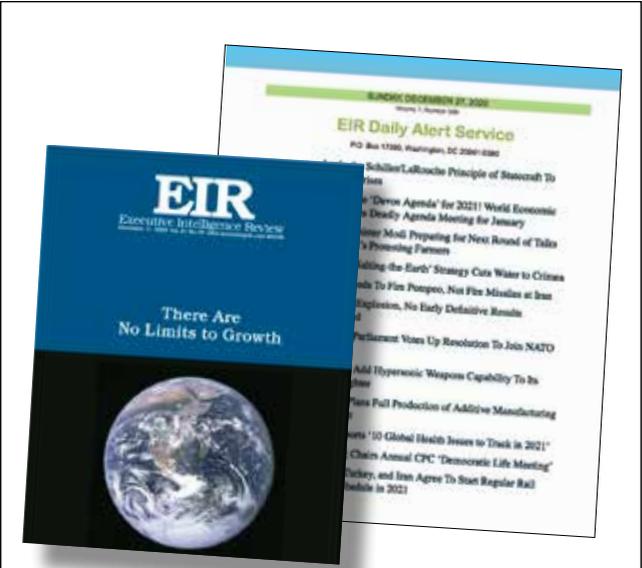
He never dropped his campaign against government security. In that same interview with Cronkite, he challenged the legitimacy of the secrecy in which the security state operated:

I think we cannot let officials of the Executive Branch determine for us what ... the public

needs to know about how well and how they are discharging their functions.

Daniel Ellsberg spoke out against the national security policies of all presidents, and was especially tough on George Bush, Jr. for the lies leading to the Iraq War; and Barack Obama for his attacks on whistleblowers. He praised Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and other whistleblowers, and was an initiator in setting up the Freedom of the Press Foundation, to counter security state efforts to lie and censor.

His other major contribution was his damning critique of nuclear war planners—he himself had been one while at RAND. He wrote a book warning of the danger of nuclear war, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, published in 2017. In the last days of his life, he spoke out about his concerns that the NATO war in Ukraine could lead to a nuclear war, which would wipe out the human race.



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