

Daniel Ellsberg: A Father's Legacy to His Son - and His Country

Once dubbed the “most dangerous man in America,” Daniel Ellsberg (1931–2023) was no ordinary father.

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*On June 13, 1971, the New York Times published the first installment of a set of highly classified documents that changed the course of American history. Secretly copied by a military analyst named **Daniel Ellsberg**, they electrified readers with their revelations of how Washington had snookered Congress and the public into supporting the Vietnam War – with billions of dollars, and tens of thousands of lives. In the immediate aftermath Ellsberg was arrested and charged under the Espionage Act. Two years later, however, the government's proceedings against him fell apart, and all charges were dismissed.*

Fast forward a half-century, and the story of the [Pentagon Papers](#), as they became known, is familiar to anyone who has sat through a high school history or civics class. As for the man at its center, he spent the next fifty years resisting the powers that be as an anti-war activist and public intellectual.

Diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer in February of this year, Ellsberg died on June 16. He was 92. Still, he was active as late as May, [speaking with Politico](#) about the dark history of American imperialism; the human cost of US military interventions abroad, the ever-present danger of nuclear warfare, and the insanity – not to mention immorality – of threatening mass murder in the name of democracy or national security.

In the spirit of Father's Day, and in honor of a remarkable man who impacted not only his children but an entire nation, *Plough's* Chris Zimmerman spoke with Daniel Ellsberg's son Robert Ellsberg, author, editor, and publisher of [Orbis Books](#).

Chris Zimmerman (CZ): *Tell me about the last months.*

Robert Ellsberg (RE): The first three months after he was diagnosed with inoperable cancer were actually a very happy time for him. As he said, just as he had always written better under a deadline, it turned out that he was able to “live better under a deadline” – with joy, gratitude, purpose. Perhaps there was a feeling of relief that the fate of the world no longer depended on his efforts. My brother actually said that he had never seen Dad so happy. He didn’t feel there was any tragedy attached to dying at the age of ninety-two. He was assured by home hospice care that he would be spared pain; he was deeply moved by the outpouring of love that followed news of his diagnosis; and he used his time very productively in conducting interviews and recording podcasts about his life and his deepest concerns. He hoped that the urgency of his situation might lend gravity to his warnings, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine. Of course, gradually, he had to let go of many things. But even with his waning strength he kept telling us to remind people of their obligation to protect the world and its creatures.

CZ: Your father was always associated with a very public act – one that catapulted him onto the national stage. What was he like in private?

RE: Even when I was a child, my father tended to talk to me about “grown-up” things: his concerns about the Vietnam War, his discovery of Gandhian nonviolence, his thoughts on history, empire, the human capacities for evil *and* for changing the world, the meaning of truth, and the perils of nuclear war. In that way, I don’t suppose he was a typical father. At the same time, he could be very lighthearted. He loved performing magic tricks, he was a voracious viewer of movies, he loved nature, especially the ocean – lying on the beach or bodysurfing. He loved music, played the piano, had a photographic memory of all the poems he loved, and he could be wildly funny. He and I shared a similar sense of humor. He used to say I was the only person who found him funny. Later he revised that to say, “You are the only person with whom I am funny.” He had a deep desire to feel that I knew and understood him. Only much later did I feel that he made an effort to *know* me, but that phase of our relationship, which continued to grow and never really stopped, was very precious to me.

CZ: Did you see him much? You’re based in New York; and he’s in California.

RE: For most of my life my father and I did not live near one another. But we met regularly and spoke on the phone almost every week. During Covid we discovered the potential of Zoom, which he enjoyed because he could hear more easily. While I was working with him editing his two volumes of memoirs, [Secrets](#) and [The Domsday Machine](#), we spoke on the phone multiple times a day over a period of several years. Those were happy times for me.

CZ: What was it like to edit your father?

RE: My father was a fantastic writer. But he was famously challenged when it came to completing a project. In the case of *Secrets*, the first volume of his memoirs, on the Pentagon Papers, he came to a point of feeling completely blocked. Hitting “rock bottom,” he asked me if I would help. What ensued was two years of very close work. At the end of that process my half-brother Michael, who is also a skilled editor, stepped in and did some very judicious slashing, and we met the publisher’s deadline.

But my father felt that he still had another important mission – to share what he knew about the dangers of nuclear war. He had once seen a Pentagon document estimating the number of deaths that would occur in the Soviet Union and China if US plans for general nuclear war

were implemented: six hundred million. That was actually a huge underestimate, since it left out the effects of fire and the fallout that would devastate most of our allies in Europe and East Asia, not to mention the then-unknown impact of a resulting nuclear winter. My father thought this was an evil document. From that time he was committed to preventing nuclear war and warning the world about its prospects and dangers.

He had a contract for the second volume of his memoirs, *The Doomsday Machine*, and he had written the first part of it. But even after working on it literally for decades, he could not bring it to conclusion. He said that if he didn't finish this book he would feel that his life had been a failure. Not that he thought it would necessarily save the planet. But he couldn't bear the thought that he had not done everything in his power to help.

He finally turned to me and asked if I would help. This was a very different project from *Secrets*. For one thing, he was now in his eighties. He had produced thousands of pages of drafts and notes but he didn't know how to draw it together. In this project, which involved close work and conversation every day for two years, I was not just an editor, but a counselor, motivational coach, analyst, at times ghostwriter, and confessor. I remember that after the 2016 election of Donald Trump he was ready to quit. He said to me, "What's the point?"

I said, "Dad, everywhere in the world people are waking up today and asking themselves, *What can I do?* You are incredibly lucky that you don't have to ask that question - you have a task of unique importance, which only you can do! Now is not the time to give up." Well, that seemed to motivate him and he got moving.

And he kept at it until we crossed the finish line together - having produced what I consider his masterpiece. As a son, there could not have been a more gratifying expression of my love for my father than to help him fulfill his mission. It was as if I was born and raised to do this. Beyond that, there was no doubt in my mind that helping him complete this work was the greatest contribution that I could make to the cause of peace.

CZ: Long before you edited your father, you helped him photocopy the Pentagon Papers. What was that like, being a partner in crime with him? Scary? Disorienting? Exhilarating?

RE: It was none of the above. I didn't fully comprehend the implications. It was something my father asked me to do, and I admired him so much, I would have done anything he asked. Later in his life, he explained his motivations for involving me: feeling that he would soon go to prison, possibly for the rest of his life, he wanted to leave me with the example that there could come a time when one might be compelled to make a sacrifice or take personal risks for the sake of a greater good. My father did not teach me to ride a bike or catch a baseball. But he wanted to pass along that lesson.

CZ: How did your involvement come about?

RE: In October 1969 my father took me out for lunch and told me about his plans to copy what became known as the Pentagon Papers. His intention was to make them available to Congress, and he had some hopes that this might help end the war, though it would involve the risk of prison. He had been sharing with me books and writings by Gandhi, Thoreau, Martin Luther King, and other teachers of nonviolence, so I understood what he was talking about it. He asked if I would help him. So that afternoon I spent the day at a Xerox machine copying Top Secret documents. I was thirteen.

Two years later the Papers were published in the *New York Times* and other newspapers, and my father went underground while he completed the work of distributing the documents to various media. Then he was indicted – ultimately with twelve felony counts, and facing 115 years in prison. When I was fifteen I was subpoenaed to testify before a grand jury.

CZ: What was your family life like in the midst of all this?

RE: It was very difficult. Not a happy time. My parents were divorced. I grew up with my mother and sister in Los Angeles, where the trial was eventually held. My mother was very upset that my sister and I were involved in this public drama, and she was very eager to shield us from the media frenzy. Meanwhile I leapt at the chance to become an exchange student in England for my senior year in high school, and so was overseas for most of the trial, following the story in the newspapers.

It was a very stressful time for me, not just because I was worried that my dad would go to prison, but because of the real fear – in those crazy times – that he might be assassinated. Later we discovered that this fear was in fact not baseless. The White House had authorized a special team to “neutralize” my father, including a plan to physically attack him on the steps of the Capitol. Ultimately the charges against him were dismissed when it turned out that government agents had burglarized his psychiatrist’s office.

CZ: You yourself later joined the antiwar movement alongside the Berrigans, for instance, and the Catholic Worker. Any connection with your father there, and his activist stance?

RE: No doubt my father’s example inspired my feeling that I had to find my own way and live by my convictions – to find what my life was for. I had struggled for some years over how I would deal with the draft when my time came. As it happened, the draft had ended by the time I turned eighteen in 1973.

Nevertheless, I felt I was wrestling with questions I couldn’t find answers to in college. So I left [Harvard] after my sophomore year in 1975 and went to the [Catholic Worker](#) community in New York. I actually didn’t intend to spend more than a few months there, but then Dorothy Day asked me to become managing editor of the Catholic Worker newspaper, and I ended up staying for five years. I left in 1980, just before her death, and returned to college.

Those years in New York were a time of enormous learning – not just from books. It was definitely a time of activism. I was arrested a dozen times, several times with my father. In 1978 we were arrested together at Rocky Flats, a nuclear facility in Colorado, where we sat on the tracks leading into the factory that makes the nuclear triggers for hydrogen bombs. I spent sixteen days in solitary confinement, fasting the whole time.

But it was also a time of spiritual growth. I spent two years working as a hospice orderly in a home for terminal cancer patients run by an order of Dominican sisters. (Ironically, this provided me with bedside skills that I could employ while helping to care for my father.) It was during this time that I decided to become a Catholic. And that was a step that led me in the direction of studying theology, coming to work as editor-in-chief at Orbis Books, editing five volumes of writings by Dorothy Day, and writing many books about saints and holiness.

CZ: Henry Kissinger called your father “the most dangerous man in America.” To many people, though, he was a hero, at least in the 1970s. More recently the tide seems to have been changing. Two years ago, the *New York Times* published an [opinion piece](#) attacking

your father and calling his actions an “assault on democracy.” What’s going on?

RE: People don’t often ask why Henry Kissinger called him “the most dangerous man in America.” They presume that the White House simply feared his influence and wanted to discredit him. As Nixon said, not trusting the courts, “we have to destroy him in the press.” But the reason he was so dangerous was their fear that he had allies in the National Security Council who were going to give him documents that would reveal the Nixon Administration’s secret plans for the escalation of the Vietnam War, including threats of nuclear war. My father’s knowledge of these plans was a prime motive for him to copy the Pentagon Papers. But he didn’t have the actual documents. If he had had them, he would have released them. But Kissinger didn’t know that, which is why he thought my father had to be stopped.



Daniel and Robert Ellsberg on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, 1977.

Of course, opinions have always been sharply divided. Many regarded him, then and now, as a hero and a patriot; many others as a traitor. If anything, though, I think the tide has turned in my father’s favor. People recognize that he performed a public service; they admire him for being willing to face the consequences of his actions. He is seen as a kind of patriarch of whistleblowing. Unfortunately, that doesn’t necessarily translate into paying serious

attention to his message. Nevertheless, with the news of his impending death, there was a great tide of media interest, and he was generally acclaimed as a national hero.

The piece you're referring to, which was published in the *Times* around the fiftieth anniversary of the Pentagon Papers, is an outlier, but it reflects a real belief among some people that any kind of publication of government secrets is contrary to the principles of democracy. My father believed the opposite, at least in the case of secrecy being used as a means to subvert democracy. He took seriously his oath as a public official to "defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic." He believed that far more harm was done to the country by keeping illegal and immoral actions secret than by revealing them.

CZ: Before he switched sides, so to speak, your father was the consummate Washington insider. He had high-level security clearances, and he was committed to the war; he even volunteered to go to Vietnam in 1965 to study pathways to military "success." How did he move from there to questioning the war, and then becoming so bitterly opposed to it that he was ready to throw away his career, his reputation, his safety, and that of his family?

RE: Interestingly, my father was never a "believer" in the Vietnam War. It seemed to him to be a losing proposition from the beginning. He also knew from the start that it was built on lies. His first day working in the Pentagon as a deputy assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense was the very day in 1964 of the so-called Tonkin Gulf Incident, which was used as a pretext for congressional authorization of military action in Vietnam. He saw from day one that everything said about the incident was a lie.

Nevertheless, he went to Vietnam to see firsthand what the prospects for success might be. To that end he traveled the country for two years, and even went out on patrols with Marine units under fire. He came to the conclusion that we *had* to get out of the war - it was a terrible mistake. A case of hepatitis sent him home in 1967. Then his work as part of the team compiling the Pentagon Papers changed his understanding of the origins of the war, convincing him that the war was not just a problem or a mistake - but actually a crime that must be resisted.

Incidentally, many people believe my father released the Pentagon Papers because he was offended merely by its chronicle of lies. The truth is, he was offended by the crimes that those lies were protecting - they were lies about murder.

Of course, his actions meant expulsion from the world of insiders. But he didn't consider that a huge loss. In fact, he turned out to be one of the most fortunate of whistleblowers. True, he lost his job and prospects for any future government job and was on trial for a year. But most whistleblowers have faced far worse consequences. He didn't go to jail. In fact, the people who tried to destroy him largely ended up going to prison themselves, or facing the judgment of history. In effect, his actions did help to end the war. And he lived on for another fifty years to continue to work for peace.

CZ: That's one aspect of the story that especially fascinates me - the sheer power of a solitary individual to effectively face down an entire government. Certainly it is much easier to sit back and lob generalized criticisms at vague monsters like Big Government. Your father seems to have been guided by his conscience and impelled by a sense of personal responsibility.

RE: Yes, my father was one of those people who saw something that needed to be done,

and did it, without regard for self-interest. The people who do that sort of thing often don't think there is anything exceptional about their action. "Isn't this what anyone would do?" But clearly it was exceptional.

I know that he was inspired by the example of young draft resisters who were willing to risk prison for their beliefs and in order to save lives. People like Randy Kehler, whom he met at a peace conference at Haverford, a Quaker college near Philadelphia, in 1969. That had a deep impact on him, just as his own example later inspired others. It certainly influenced my own choice to spend much of my life writing about "saints, prophets, and witnesses for our time" - the subtitle of my book [All Saints](#). Courage, holiness, goodness are contagious; and the people who model them expand our moral imaginations - they open up new horizons and possibilities for humanity. Such figures have played that role in my own life. And they have fed my vocation as a writer in sharing their stories, spreading seeds of compassion and peace.

CZ: Your father's doctoral dissertation popularized something known as the Ellsberg Paradox - the idea that people are so averse to taking incalculable risks, they would rather settle for a calculable one, even if the utility of the decision in question is less. And yet, look at his decision to publicize the Pentagon Papers: talk about taking an enormous and surely incalculable risk!

RE: His thesis, in a nutshell, was on decision-making under uncertainty. That turned out to equip him for what seemed like the most important question facing humanity - how to avoid a catastrophic nuclear war. Of course he came to believe that some of the premises of this planning were wildly insane - like the presumption that there were better or worse ways of using nuclear weapons. He came to believe that any system built on the threat and willingness to implement "Doomsday" was evil.

The uncertainty today rests to some degree on what can be done about it. Now the threat of nuclear war has been joined by the devastating consequences of climate change. It is very unclear whether humanity and our social structures as currently constituted are equipped to meet these threats. And yet the consequences of inaction are so catastrophic that they justify any effort to remedy them, even without certainty of success.

One of the lessons of the Pentagon Papers is that you just can't know what the long-term consequences of your actions will be. It seemed at the time, despite all the publicity, that the release of the Papers had no immediate effect on ending the war. Nixon was reelected in a landslide. And yet it was Nixon's reaction to my father's actions that ultimately brought about his downfall.

As I said earlier, Nixon authorized the so-called White House plumbers to burglarize my father's psychiatrist's offices. And when the same people, working for his reelection committee, were arrested at the Watergate complex [for breaking into the Democratic National Committee headquarters], he obstructed justice and authorized payoffs to keep them quiet about their actions against my father. This ultimately forced his resignation as president, and in turn brought the war to an end.

The lesson is that you just don't know what can happen. If we do avoid catastrophe, it may similarly depend on very unlikely and seemingly accidental twists of fate. Which may be another word for grace.

CZ: Speaking of effectiveness, the world seems no better now than it was in the early 1970s. New conflicts and wars seem to be breaking out all the time. Did your father ever despair?

RE: My father devoted his life to opposing ongoing wars and preventing nuclear war. He wrote, gave interviews, lobbied, protested, and was arrested almost a hundred times. Yet in his last years he wondered whether any of it had made a difference. In the context of the war in Ukraine he felt the danger of nuclear war was greater than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Furthermore, he felt that the war had dealt a terrible blow to any renewed progress on arms control and non-proliferation. If partisan polarization in Congress makes it seemingly impossible to deal with even hugely popular policies, like commonsense gun control, where is the space to deal with the existential threats facing our planet? He also felt that a renewed Cold War with Russia made it difficult to consider any global response to climate change. So he was very discouraged. And yet, he never gave up hope. He said, “I *hope* that my expectations are incorrect.” To him, hope was not just optimism. It was a form of action, a way of life.

CZ: In a [piece](#) you wrote a dozen years ago, on the occasion of your father’s eightieth birthday, you wrote, “In the chronicle of conscientious actions, one candle lights another.” What candles did your father light in your own life?

RE: I’ve addressed his influence in inspiring my writing. But basically this all goes back to a lesson he passed on to me long ago. In a recent interview he said, “We all care about those in our circle, our group, our tribe. But who cares about the others? About those outside our group, our country? About other species? About future generations?” He also said, “I identify with those who care about the others. Those people are my tribe.” In this, my father stands for me as an example of courage, integrity, unswerving commitment to the truth, and faithfulness to his inner voice. Having found his mission, he never “retired” – that is, he never stopped conveying his belief in the importance of peace and the protection of all life.

He was not what you would call a “person of faith.” He was happy to think of himself as a person of hope. Yet I feel he was preoccupied with what you might call deeply spiritual questions. To me, he was a prophet, calling on the world to turn around, to choose life, to avoid catastrophe. To himself, he was more like Cassandra. She was blessed with the gift of seeing the future, but also a curse: no one would believe her when she spoke about what she saw. This caused him intense pain. Still, he loved life, he loved the world and its creatures, and so he kept on reminding us of our responsibility to warn the world – to care about the planet and its inhabitants.

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Featured image: One last trip to the beach – father and son near Berkeley, California, April 2023. All photographs courtesy of Robert Ellsberg.

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