

Daniel Ellsberg: The Establishment's Whistleblower

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In 1972 Stanley K. Sheinbaum, chairman of the Pentagon Papers Fund, [wrote](#) with a hot pertinence that remains striking (at this time Julian Assange is facing grave prospects of being extradited to the United States) that both Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo had "struck a blow for us all when they gave the Pentagon Papers to the press and to the Senate: against the war in Vietnam and against new adventures in Cambodia, Laos, or elsewhere". And more besides, including striking against government secrecy in both domestic and foreign policy and directing a blow "for freedom of the press, freedom of the American people to be informed of what crimes their government might be committing in their name."

The Nixon administration was [mustard keen](#) to bang up Ellsberg for what would have been 115 years, and Russo for 35. The charges, absurd reading then as they are now, were for conspiracy, espionage, and larceny. Central to this particularly vicious effort on the part of President Richard Nixon and his inner circle was the release of the Pentagon Papers, a government document running into 7,000 pages that was much at odds with public statements made by respective presidential administrations on US involvement in the Indo-China War. Both men had been analysts and researchers at the RAND Corporation, with the former tasked with nuclear wargaming scenarios. Russo had aided Ellsberg in the mammoth task of copying the papers.

The treatment dished out by the US national security state was very much the blueprint for what is taking place against the WikiLeaks founder. Initial indictment, followed by further grand jury hearings, followed by another round of indictments. As Sheinbaum remarked, the absurdity of the charges was self-evident. "*Conspiracy against whom?*" he asked. "The American people to whom the documents belonged in the first place? The press to whom the Pentagon Papers were given – not sold – so that they could better inform the people on how a succession of administrations had deceived them and wasted this country's lives, resources, and honor?"

The case, thankfully, collapsed. The presiding judge, William M. Byrne Jr., even before the

jury's verdict was in, dismissed the action in May 1973, citing serious government misconduct (the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist had been burgled by the infamous "White House Plumbers"), not to mention illegal wiretapping. As part of that most Nixonian of sagas, the judge also revealed that he had been offered the role of FBI director by John Ehrlichman, the President's assistant for domestic affairs.

Initially in agreement with policies in the Cold War rollback of communism, Ellsberg came to have trouble with the narrative of one's country, right and wrong. In a sense, he became something of a model whistleblower: a figure initially besotted, a believer in the role of US power, only to then find evidence at odds with that belief.

While working at RAND, he visited Haverford College in August 1969, where his attendance at a conference of the War Resisters' International proved turning. He had initially found the participants, as he recalls in his memoir [Secrets](#), unduly simplistic, unnecessarily negative, dogmatic and extremist. It took a demonstration outside the trial of draft resister Bod Eaton to invest him with necessary confidence. "I had become free of the fear of being absurd, of looking foolish, for stepping out of line."

Then came a moving talk by peace activist Randy Kehler. The impression left by Kehler, far from being banally corny and naff, helped complete the Damascene conversion: the RAND employee would commit to the task of ending a war effort he had been complicit in advancing. His establishment skin would be sloughed.

As Spencer Ackerman [observes](#), the strength of Ellsberg's whistleblowing was the locus of power; it came from a figure so highly placed in the national security apparatus he had the ear of presidential advisors. In the post-9/11 era, there has been no equivalent, no reputational shedding of skin. The leaks and disclosures have come from such individuals as Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and Daniel Hale, all vitally important, yet all several steps removed from the centre of power. "The people of Ellsberg's equivalent rank and early-career promise more typically chose to serve the War on Terror, not resist it, going along with atrocities abroad and democratic destabilization at home."

Ellsberg's tenacious advocacy for Assange, for whom he acted as witness in the extradition trial in September 2020, was fortifying. "My own actions in relation to the Pentagon Papers and the consequences of their publication have been acknowledged to have performed such a radical change of understanding," [he outlined](#) in his statement to the court. "I view the WikiLeaks publications of 2010 and 2011 to be of comparable importance."

He also warned about that most odious feature of the Espionage Act of 1917, upon which 17 of the 18 charges against Assange have been framed. Motivation, he recalled in his own 1973 trial, was dismissed by government lawyers as irrelevant: the offences imputed "strict liability". As [he told](#) the Central Criminal Court in London, the Act effectively disallowed genuine whistleblowing to permit "you to say you were informing the polity. So I did not have a fair trial, no one since me had a fair trial on these charges and Julian Assange cannot remotely get a fair trial under those charges if he was tried."

As he revealed in December 2022, Ellsberg [had](#) been the WikiLeaks "backup" for releasing the documents that were eventually published in 2010. Assange, he told the BBC Hardtalk program, "could rely on me to get it [the information] out."

In any final reflections on what Ellsberg did, the conscientious duty of a figure to disclose

evidence of government misconduct, to enlighten the citizenry more broadly as political agents rather than obedient subjects, shines. "From the point of view of a civilization and the survival of eight or nine billion people, when everything is at stake, can it be worth even a small chance of having a small effect?" he reflected in an [interview](#) with *Politico*. "The answer is: Of course."

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Featured image: Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon Papers figure, holds up a copy of a book entitled ?The Senate Watergate Report? as he appears as a panelist at a conference on the Central Intelligence Agency and covert activities on Friday, Sept. 13, 1974 in Washington. (AP Photo/Henry Griffin)

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