

Daniel Ellsberg: United States Nearly used Nukes during Vietnam War

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In-depth Report: [Nuclear War](#)

We came dangerously close to nuclear war when the United States was fighting in Vietnam, Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg told a reunion of the Stanford anti-Vietnam War movement in May 2014. He said that in 1965, the Joint Chiefs of Staff assured President Lyndon B. Johnson that the war could be won, but it would take at least 500,000 to one million troops. The Joint Chiefs recommended hitting targets up to the Chinese border. Ellsberg suspects their real aim was to provoke China into responding. If the Chinese came in, the Joint Chiefs took for granted that we would cross into China and use nuclear weapons to demolish the communists.

Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower also recommended to Johnson that we use nuclear weapons in both North and South Vietnam. Indeed, during the 1964 presidential campaign, Republican nominee Barry Goldwater argued for nuclear attacks as well. Johnson feared that the Joint Chiefs would resign and go public if Johnson didn't follow at least some of their recommendations, and he needed some Republican support for the "Great Society" and the "War on Poverty." Fortunately, Johnson resisted their most extreme proposals, even though the Joint Chiefs regarded them as essential to success. Ellsberg cannot conclude that the antiwar movement shortened the war, but he says the movement put a lid on the war. If the president had done what the Joint Chiefs recommended, the movement would have grown even larger, but so would the war, much larger than it ever became.

"The Most Dangerous Man in America"

Ellsberg, a former US military analyst and Marine in Vietnam, worked at the RAND Corporation and the Pentagon. He risked decades in prison to release 7,000 top-secret documents to *The New York Times* and other newspapers in 1971. The Pentagon Papers showed how five presidents consistently lied to the American people about the Vietnam War that was killing thousands of Americans and millions of Indochinese. Ellsberg's courageous act led directly to the Watergate scandal, Nixon's resignation, and helped to end the Vietnam War. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security advisor, called Ellsberg "the most dangerous man in America," who "had to be stopped at all costs." But Ellsberg wasn't stopped. Facing 115 years in prison on espionage and conspiracy charges, he fought back. The case against him was dismissed due to egregious misconduct by the Nixon administration. Ellsberg's story was portrayed in the Oscar-nominated film, "The Most Dangerous Man in America." Edward Snowden told Ellsberg that film strengthened his intention to release the NSA documents.

The April Third Movement

On April 3, 1969, 700 Stanford students voted to occupy the Applied Electronics Laboratory (AEL), where classified (secret) research on electronic warfare (radar-jamming) was being conducted at Stanford. That spawned the April Third Movement (A3M), which holds reunions every five to 10 years. The sit-in at AEL, supported by a majority of Stanford students, lasted nine days, replete with a printing press in the basement to produce materials linking Stanford trustees to defense contractors. Stanford moved the objectionable research off campus, but the A3M continued with sit-ins, teach-ins and confrontations with police in the Stanford Industrial Park. Many activists from that era continue to do progressive work, drawing on their experiences during the A3M. This year, we discussed the political economy of climate change, and the relationship between the counterculture of the 1960s and the development of Silicon Valley. Highlights of the weekend included three keynote addresses – Ellsberg’s, one delivered by Stanford political science Professor Terry Karl, and a talk by Rutgers professor of English and American Studies, H. Bruce Franklin.

“Accountability for War Crimes: From Vietnam to Latin America”

Terry Karl is a Stanford professor who has published widely on political economy of development, oil politics, Latin America and Africa, and human rights. She also testifies as an expert witness in trials against Latin American dictators and military officers who tortured, disappeared and killed civilians in the 1970s and 1980s, when their governments were supported by the United States. Karl’s testimonies have helped to establish guilt and accountability for the murders of El Salvador’s Archbishop Romero, the rape and murders of four American churchwomen and other prominent cases.

Karl quoted President George H.W. Bush, who announced proudly after the first Gulf War in 1991, “The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian peninsula.” Nevertheless, Karl observed, we have been involved in “permanent war” since Vietnam, in part because there had been no accountability, abroad or at home, for each of our past wars. The US global military presence around the world, according to Karl, is not there for defense, but rather to maintain the United States “at the top.” No defense can be based on having soldiers in 150 countries.

Beginning with Vietnam, we stopped paying taxes for the wars we fight, Karl said. The Korean War was financed with taxes, but the Vietnam War was paid for through inflation. This helped to produce the recession that was the basis for the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Wars in Central America, Iraq and Afghanistan have been “paid for” through debt. In this respect, permanent war not only threatens our democracy, Karl pointed out, but also our economic future. In one example, Karl noted that the United States fights wars to secure oil and gas, yet the largest consumer of oil in the world is the Department of Defense because of those very wars.

Karl also observed that we have not “won” all of those unpaid wars – if measured against their original objectives. The United States fought in Vietnam to prevent communist reunification of the country, yet that is exactly what happened. The Reagan administration decided to “draw the line” in El Salvador to prevent FMLN rebels from coming to power, yet the FMLN is the government today. And the Reagan administration supported the contras in Nicaragua to prevent the Sandinistas from governing that country; the Sandinistas are now in control. She predicted we would see similar “victories” in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“The Cultural Memory of the Vietnam War in the Epoch of Forever War”

H. Bruce Franklin was the first tenured professor to be fired by Stanford University, and the first to be fired by a major university since the 1950s. Franklin, who was a Marxist and an active member of the A3M, was terminated because of things he said at an antiwar rally, statements that, according to the ACLU, amounted to protected First Amendment speech. A renowned expert on Herman Melville, history and culture, Franklin has taught at Rutgers University since 1975. He has written or edited 19 books and hundreds of articles, including books about the Vietnam War. Before becoming an activist, Franklin spent three years in the US Air Force, “flying,” he said, “in operations of espionage and provocation against the Soviet Union and participating in launches for full-scale thermonuclear war.”

Franklin told the reunion about myths the US government has promulgated since the Vietnam War. “One widespread cultural fantasy about the Vietnam War blames the antiwar movement for losing the war, forcing the military to ‘fight with one arm tied behind its back,’” Franklin said. “But this stands reality on its head,” he maintains. Franklin cited the American people’s considerable opposition to the war. “Like the rest of the movement at home,” he noted, “the A3M was inspired and empowered by our outrage against both the war and all those necessary lies about the war coming from our government and the media, as well as the deceitful participation of institutions that were part of our daily life, such as Stanford University.” The war finally ended, Franklin thought, because of the antiwar movement, particularly opposition to the war within the military.

The other two myths Franklin debunked are first, that the real heroes are the American prisoners of war (POW’s) still imprisoned in Viet Nam; and second, that many veterans of the Viet Nam War were spat upon by antiwar protestors when they returned home. The black and white POW/MIA (missing in action) flag has flown over the White House, U.S. post offices and government buildings, the New York Stock Exchange, and appears on the right sleeve of the official robe of the Ku Klux Klan, according to Franklin. “The flag now came to symbolize our culture’s dominant view of America as the heroic warrior victimized by ‘Viet Nam’ but then reemerging as Rambo unbound,” he said. After talking to several Japanese scholars he met on a trip to Japan, Franklin realized he had missed the “most essential and revealing aspect” of the POW/MIA myth. The scholars told him, “When militarism was dominant in Japan, the last person who would have been used as an icon of militarism was the POW. What did he do that was heroic? He didn’t fight to the death. He surrendered.” Franklin told the reunion:

“Both the POW and the spat-upon vet become incarnations of America, especially American manhood, as victim of ‘Vietnam,’ which is not a people or a nation but something terrible that happened to us.”

He also said that there is absolutely no evidence that any Viet Nam vet was spat upon by an antiwar protestor. “These two myths turned ‘Vietnam’ into the cultural basis of the forever war,” Franklin said. He quoted George H. W. Bush who proclaimed in 1991, “By God, we’ve kicked the Viet Nam Syndrome once and for all.”

The Legacy of the Vietnam War

But, as Karl and Franklin observed, we are now engaged in a “permanent war” or “forever war.” Indeed, the US government has waged two major wars and several other military interventions in the years since Vietnam. And in his recent statement on US foreign policy, President Barack Obama said: “The United States will use military force, unilaterally if

necessary, when our core interests demand it – when our people are threatened; when our livelihoods are at stake; when the security of our allies is in danger.” Obama never mentioned the United Nations Charter, which forbids “unilateral” intervention – the use or threat of military force not conducted in self-defense or with the consent of the Security Council.

The US military, Karl noted, teaches that the Vietnam War was a success. And, indeed, during the next 11 years, leading up to the 50th anniversary of that war, the US government will continue to mount [a false narrative of that war](#). Fortunately, Veterans for Peace has launched [a counter-commemoration movement](#) to explain the true legacy of Vietnam. It is only through an accurate understanding of our history that we can struggle against our government’s use of military force as the first, instead of the last, line of defense.

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