

Interview with Legendary Whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg Following His 89th Arrest for Resisting Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear War and Government Secrecy

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Dennis Bernstein: We are honored to have Daniel Ellsberg here, the man who blew the whistle on the corrupt and illegal Vietnam War and has been blowing whistles and inspiring others ever since. Daniel Ellsberg gained notoriety in the early 1970s by leaking [the Pentagon Papers](#), the Defense Department's top-secret history of the Vietnam War, and then for outspokenly protesting the war and the government secrecy that sustained it. Yet few know that he has spent most of the previous decade immersed in highly classified studies of the U.S. nuclear war machine. Daniel, welcome. You were just arrested, weren't you, at Lawrence Livermore Labs?

Daniel Ellsberg: Yes, I've gone there nearly every year, around Hiroshima Day and Nagasaki Day, to send the message that no more weapons should be made in this country without having to arrest people to do it. It is wrong to be doing what Livermore is doing right now – in good conscience, I'm sure. But then I worked on war plans in good conscience. I was conned and so are they. The public was conned about Hiroshima.

Still today, hardly any people know just how much falsehood was fed to them to justify what we did. And when people protest the bomb now, I would say that most Americans would wonder why was it wrong to save a million American lives? After all, wasn't that the only alternative to an invasion of Japan? That's what they have heard from people in positions of authority. But in fact, it was not the only alternative. In fact, it was not a serious alternative to invasion.

The American people have believed killing 140,000 people immediately and 300,000 by the end of the year was necessary and therefore justified. If that is justified, what isn't? What we are doing right now isn't justified, threatening first use of nuclear weapons and preparing attacks that, if carried out, would destroy most life on earth. But it is not questioned, morally or practically.

Dennis Bernstein: Dan, how would you evaluate the dangers we face now in terms of a nuclear conflagration? Are we worse off now than we were thirty years ago?

Daniel Ellsberg: Well, in 1989-1991, things began to look better. The Cold War was over, the rationale for these weapons had disappeared. That was the time to get rid of them. Russia wasn't an ideological enemy anymore. The idea that there was this global conflict that

required us to arm in an unprecedented way was over. But the notion of a peace dividend passed with the Gulf War.

One of the things I learned today from talks given at Lawrence Livermore Labs was that for the past seven years, each budget for nuclear weapons has increased. In particular it was true in 2015 under Obama, who increased it to over Cold War levels. The peak of Cold War spending was in 1985. Spending went down with the fall of the Soviet Union until the second Bush came into power. We're back at Cold War levels, \$9 billion per year. From 2015 till now, each year the budget has risen. It didn't start under Trump. But right now, under Trump, we are budgeting 40% higher than in the Cold War. It is obscene, it is crazy, it is wrong.

That money doesn't go to foreigners, it goes to Americans: Boeing, Lockheed, Raytheon, Grumman, General Dynamics. They do very well in this process. There is one reason why we are budgeting for a weapon being designed at Lawrence Livermore right now and that is to put it on *new* ICBMs being made by Boeing. There isn't a reason in the world for having those except for the jobs in each district that Boeing has distributed around the country. And Lockheed will be a subcontractor. The votes, the campaign contributions and the profits.

Amazingly enough, I learned something today which has made me more hopeful than I have been for a long time. The House defense budget authorization is different from the Senate version. The House version cuts out funding for the new ICBMs and for the new production facilities. The Senate put it all back in, but it has to be coordinated now at a conference, probably in September, and I will be doing everything I can to convince House members and their constituents that they should tell their House members to stand fast on those cuts. Those weapons are dangerous.

Davey D: Is the thinking that if we have the most advanced nuclear weapons, we can win using them and survive? Do people really think that we can use these weapons and win with them?

Daniel Ellsberg: We have always had people who have *said* that we could win with them. A number of presidents and certainly people in the Air Force. On the other hand, I knew a lot of people while I was in the system who knew that wasn't possible. But it is only since 1983, when nuclear winter was really discovered, that it became absolutely clear that it didn't make any difference whether you went first or second and all of our weapons are designed to go first.

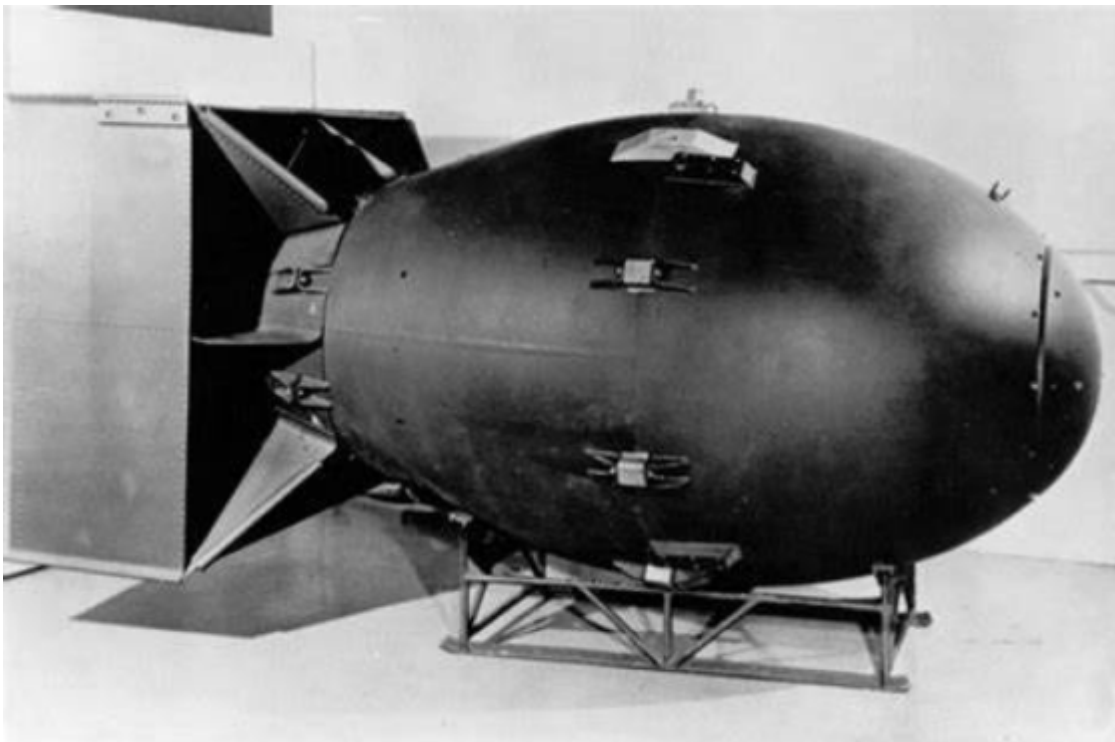
Boeing tells us that, however bad that is, it is not as bad as going second. Elizabeth Warren was questioned in the latest debate why she is for no first use. She was then asked whether she wanted our cities incinerated *before* she will use the nuclear weapons. How to answer that? If she thinks that our cities couldn't be incinerated if we used them first against Russia, where is she? It's crazy. In other words, these ICBMs, which are vulnerable and tempt a president under a false alarm, the instinct of the military and the president is, "My ICBMs are about to be destroyed. I've got to get them off the ground."

Dennis Bernstein: Have we been moved closer to a nuclear war by these new generation nukes they say are smaller? Would they be more of a temptation to war planners?

Daniel Ellsberg: To a degree, yes. But these dangers did not start with Trump. Strictly

speaking, I don't think that under Trump the danger is markedly greater. The point is that the danger is not going down. Regarding these low-yield weapons, if Trump could be tempted to use those, the results would be catastrophic. We have low-yield nuclear weapons already. Why would we want new ones? Livermore needs things to do, Lockheed, Boeing, etc. By the way, you wouldn't have heard me say this a year ago. For the past forty years I've focused on the military and government part of the military industrial complex. Only this past year have I been studying the industrial part. It is new for me to see the Cold War as, in large part, a marketing campaign for vast annual subsidies to the aerospace industry.

Dennis Bernstein: One of the bombs that we dropped on Japan was built at Hanford. That program is still exploding in Hanford.



"Fat Man" – The bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, killing 90,000-166,000 people. Many more have died since. [Credit: all-that-is-interesting.com]

Daniel Ellsberg: Unfortunately, my father was chief structural engineer of the buildup at Hanford right after the war, having worked on these problems during the war. He resigned from the program for two reasons, which he told me about some forty years later. He had been asked to work at Savannah River – which, by the way, may now go into the business of making nuclear weapons. It used to make material for it. It was work for the H-bomb, which was going to be a thousand times more powerful than the A-bomb. The first hydrogen bomb we exploded in 1954 was *one thousand times the yield of the Hiroshima bomb*. The Hiroshima bomb was the equivalent of 15,000 tons of TNT. That was a thousand times the biggest bombs of World War II. The first hydrogen bomb was 15 megatons. This was three times larger than they predicted.



Daniel Ellsberg (right) blocking the gates with protesters at Livermore Lab on August 6, 2013. [Credit: [youtube outtake](#)]

On Hiroshima Day and Nagasaki Day (August 6 and August 9), it shouldn't be business as usual at these plants where they continue to build Nagasaki-type bombs which are used to set off an H-bomb. I remember the dates very well because they bracket my wedding anniversary, which is August 8. We couldn't celebrate because I was always getting arrested. Livermore has found out how to keep these things quiet, by not bringing us to trial, which keeps it out of people's eyes that something is going on there that other Americans protest.

Dennis Bernstein: You released the secret history of the Vietnam War, but you also had the secret history of the proposed nuclear war and you wanted to release that, too. What happened?

Daniel Ellsberg: It was a great disappointment in my life. I thought I would put out the thousands of pages I had on nuclear threats and dangers after I put out the *Pentagon Papers*. A friend of mine named Randy Keillor told me at the time that those were more important than the material on the war. It was true but Vietnam was where the bombs were falling then. I would see what I could do to end that bombing and then I would put out the nuclear information. Unfortunately, I gave the thousands of pages on the nuclear program to my brother to keep. He hid them in a trash heap, but it was hit by a hurricane and we could never find those documents.

Dennis Bernstein: What did we lose then?

Daniel Ellsberg: Much of the information we lost then is in my book now, many years later. A lot of it has been declassified. I don't discuss Hiroshima much in the book because it is such a tangled web for Americans. They have been so brainwashed on "why it was all right" and "why it was necessary" to drop the atom bomb.

The atom bomb came into the world for Americans in the worst possible way for them to understand the implications of the nuclear era. Imagine if Hitler had come out first with the bomb. It would have been recognized as the quintessential Nazi weapon, a weapon of extermination of civilians. That would have been the number-one war crime at Nuremberg.

It wouldn't have won the war for them. It might have destroyed London, Liverpool, but it wouldn't have won the war. But people would have been hanged for it, and not just the decision makers, all of the scientists. I am not for capital punishment, but I think that trials for war crimes can be very useful. Unfortunately, because we had been doing the bombing, we didn't charge them with their bombing of civilian centers. In effect, we wrote that off from war crimes. Because we didn't want to put *ourselves* in the dock – either for the atom bomb or for what had happened earlier – we didn't charge them.



Hiroshima leveled with the “Fat Bomb” dropped by the United States on August 6, 1945, killing hundreds of thousands of people in an instant. [Credit: jimsjunket.com]

And we still regard that kind of bombing as available to us. Listen to what our president said the other day: “I could win the war in Afghanistan, but I would have to kill 10 million people.” This goes back to Harry Truman, who did not see the dropping of the atom bombs as a moral issue. That was fairly reasonable in his position because we had been killing as many Japanese civilians as we could for five months before that.

The Hiroshima bomb that was dropped on August 6 was the second largest act of terrorism in human history. Nagasaki three days later was the third largest act of terrorism. The largest one-day act of terrorism in human history was March 9 and 10, 1945, when we burned Tokyo and killed between 80 and 120 thousand people in one night. We did it with napalm, invented at Harvard University. This was used on humans because it sticks to your skin and burns through. It was very good for burning buildings and people. They also used white phosphorus and other incendiaries, with the intent of burning as many people as possible.



The *Operation Meetinghouse* firebombing of Tokyo on the night of March 9–10, 1945, was the single deadliest air raid in history. [Credit: [wikipedia](#)]

We then proceeded to do that to sixty-seven other Japanese cities. All of this was before the atom bomb. We killed something like 900,000 Japanese civilians before the atom bombs, which added another 300,000. This is about equal to the number of Jews gassed at Auschwitz and they didn't exactly die better than in the gas chambers. When information began to come out about radiation, General Groves said he had heard it was rather a pleasant way to die. Actually, that is not true. But most of the people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki died from fire. (The people who jumped from the Twin Towers weren't fools. The alternative was burning to death.)



The charred remains of a victim found near the hypocenter of the Nagasaki blast. [Credit: [quora.com](https://www.quora.com)]

There wasn't a moral difference between Tokyo and Hiroshima. The bomb was just more efficient, cheaper. The point is that the American people have scarcely heard of this at all. The Hiroshima decision was not a big decision for Truman. But the rationale that it was necessary is taught to generation after generation of Americans and their allies. If that was all right then, then *threatening* to do it on a much larger scale is also acceptable.

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Daniel Ellsberg is a senior fellow of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, author of [The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner](#) (2017) and [Secrets](#) (2003), the subject of the Oscar-nominated documentary [The Most Dangerous Man in America](#). He is also a key figure in Steven Spielberg's film about the Pentagon Papers, [The Post](#), and the winner of the of Palme Prize for profound humanism and exceptional moral courage.

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