

The Pentagon Papers Are Public This Time

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If a new Daniel Ellsberg were to release a new pile of Pentagon Papers exposing the lies behind the Afghanistan War, or even the past few decades of misdeeds by our country in that one, the result would differ from what happened to Ellsberg in a number of stark ways. No newspaper would touch it. The whistleblower would go to prison. Little of substance would be added to what we already know and tolerate. Nobody would be impeached. And no war would end.

These thoughts occurred to me when I had occasion to watch for the second time the film "The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers," when the Naro Cinema in Norfolk, Va., asked me to speak and lead a discussion following the screening.

In the movie, Ellsberg recounts his experience of trying to choose a patrol to go out with in Vietnam in order to experience the war for himself. He learns that all the maps of night patrols passed around in the Pentagon, even to high-level staff like himself, are pure fiction, that the U.S. troops stay home at night, when the entire nation is owned by the Viet Cong. Following this past month's glorious victory over the fictional city of Marja in Afghanistan, the Taliban still controls that rural area by night, and cooperation with the occupiers is the surest way of getting yourself killed. Sounds at least similar, right? It's not. What was happening in Vietnam was kept from the American people. What is happening in Afghanistan is in newspapers and available online.

In the film, Ellsberg tells us about flying in a plane with Secretary of So-Called Defense Robert McNamara and having a conversation in which McNamara argues that the war has gone from bad to worse. Then McNamara gets off the plane and tells the press that the war is improving and things are looking up. Our ambassador in Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry recently wrote to President Obama about the hopelessness of the war in Afghanistan, and then lied about rosy progress to the United States Congress. See the parallel? There isn't one. Nobody knew what McNamara had said on that plane. Eikenberry's statements are public.

In the film we see President Lyndon Johnson stubborn as a donkey in his determination to "win" in Vietnam, and we now know that the Pentagon understood there was no possible way to do that. Today we see the same approach from the White House and its servile court of congressional jesters, but it's public knowledge that military experts believe there's no possible way to win. The National Security Advisor says more troops will just be swallowed up. Top generals say hundreds of thousands of troops would be needed, and that civilian efforts would be needed at a level four times higher than the military effort. There is no serious dispute that the war in Afghanistan cannot possibly be "won" and that the entire "global war on terror" has produced a global increase in terror. The Pentagon acknowledges

that the enemy in the war, Al Qaeda, is not in the nation where the war is happening. Let me repeat that: the enemy ISN'T THERE. This is nothing like President Johnson's situation. When he sent troops to Vietnam, he pretended it would make a difference. When President Obama sent 21,000 troops and 5,000 mercenaries to Afghanistan last year, he did it for its own sake, saying he would later try to devise a strategy for the war.

Ellsberg is shown in footage from the time of the Pentagon Papers' release saying that he thought the lesson to be learned was that the president must not be allowed to run the country without the Congress or the public. Yet, we now have members of congress who claim to be "opponents" or "critics" of the war who explain their votes to fund it by saying they want to obey the President. In a Senate committee hearing on Wednesday morning we watched Republican senators ask the Attorney General to violate the Constitution, and Democratic senators support allowing the president to comply with the law if he chooses, even arguing that complying with the law should be acceptable because President George W. Bush sometimes did so.

John Dean makes an appearance in the film. He came to believe that Bush's White House was far more abusive than Nixon's, and he predicted that Bush's successor would be one of two things, either the best or the worst president in history. He, or she, would either undo the damage and prosecute the crimes, or protect the criminals and continue the abuses. Ellsberg was active in the campaign to impeach Bush and Cheney. He argued that the impeachment campaign against Nixon facilitated the passage of progressive legislation and helped to end the Vietnam War.

Congress let Bush walk away, and we are left with a president who claims the powers of illegal war, murder, lawless imprisonment, torture, warrantless spying, and unprecedented secrecy and legal immunity. What's left to expose? We know the drones mostly kill innocent people, and that we are the illegal aggressor against all of those we kill. We know the night raids murder more people now than the drones. We know that the leading cause of death for U.S. troops is suicide. We know that we are going into financial debt and making ourselves less safe. Our paid assassins told the LA Times this week, in regard to moving their focus from Iraq to Afghanistan: "Hunting season is over in Iraq." If you were going to blow a whistle, where the hell would you blow it?

That's not a rhetorical question. There is an answer. You would blow it on the internet. And if enough of them are blown, if enough people speak out, highlight atrocities, and refuse to cooperate with evil, it will make a difference. One whistleblower might not have as much impact anymore. We need deep reforms in our communications system and our election system, so we are playing with one hand tied behind our backs. But a thousand one-handed people can do anything. Until we pass a whistleblowers bill of rights and a media shield, and enforce them, we should be building a fund and a legal services organization to support and protect whistleblowers. There may not be a dangerous man left anywhere in government, given the openness of our public crimes. But there is still a dangerous group of men and women yet to be brought together, yet to grasp the superior and more enjoyable and rewarding life Ellsberg has led since he stepped out of line 39 years ago.

"Glaubt es mir – das Geheimnis, um die größte Fruchtbarkeit und den größten Genuß vom Dasein einzuernten, heisst: gefährlich leben." – Friedrich Nietzsche

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