

What the Pentagon Papers 50th Anniversary Means

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It was a humid June on the east coast 50 years ago when the New York Times began publishing the Pentagon Papers. The anniversary is worth marking, for reasons sweeping and grand, and for reasons deeply personal.

In 1971 [Daniel Ellsberg](#) leaked the Pentagon Papers, a secret U.S. government history of the Vietnam War, to the *Times*. No one had ever [published](#) such classified documents before, and reporters feared prosecution under the Espionage Act. A federal court ordered the *Times* to cease publication after an initial flurry of excerpts were printed, the first time in U.S. history a federal judge had invoked prior restraint and shattered the 1A.

In a legal battle too important to have been written first as a novel, the NYT fought back. The Supreme Court on June 30, 1971 handed down a victory for the First Amendment in [New York Times Company v. United States](#), and the *Times* won the Pulitzer Prize. The Papers helped convince Americans the Vietnam War was wrong, their government could not be trusted, and The People informed by a free press could still have a say in things. This 20 year anniversary rightfully marks all that.

Today, journalists expect a Pulitzer for a snarky tweet that mocks Trump. In our current shameful state where the MSM serves as an [organ](#) of the Deep State, the anniversary of the Papers also serves as a reminder to millennials OnlyFansing as journalists that there were once people in their jobs who valued truth and righteousness. Perhaps this may inspire some MSM propagandist to realize he might still run with lions instead of slinking home to feed his cats.

The 50th anniversary of the Papers is also a chance to remember how [fragile](#) the victory in 1971 was. The Supreme Court left the door open for [prosecution](#) of journalists who publish classified documents by focusing narrowly on prohibiting the government from prior restraint. Politics and public opinion, not law, have kept the feds exercising discretion in not prosecuting the press, a delicate dance around an 800-pound gorilla loose in the halls of democracy. The government, particularly under [Obama](#), has meanwhile aggressively used the Espionage Act to [prosecute](#) whistleblowers who leak to those same journalists.

There is also a very personal side to this anniversary. When my book, [We Meant Well](#),

turned me into a State Department whistleblower and set off a wall of the bad brown [falling](#) on me, Pentagon Papers leaker Daniel Ellsberg sent me two of his books, unannounced, in the mail.

He wrote a personal message inside each one, explaining to me what I was doing was hard, scary, and above all, a duty. It changed me and my understanding of what was happening to me. I wasn't arguing procedure with the State Department and grubbing for my pension, I was defending the First Amendment itself. I wrote Dan a thank you note. Here's some of it.

Thank you for sending me copies of your books, and thank you even more for writing "with admiration for your truth telling" inside the cover flap of one. I am humbled, because I waited my whole life to realize today I had already met you.

In 1971 I was 10 years old, living in Ohio. The Vietnam War was a part of our town's life, same as the Fruehauf tractor-trailer plant with its 100 percent union workforce, the A&P and the Pledge of Allegiance. Nobody in my house went to war, but neighbors had gold stars in their windows and I remember one teacher at school, the one with the longer hair and the mustache, talking about Vietnam.

It meant little to me, involved with oncoming puberty, but I remember my mom bringing home from the supermarket a newsprint quickie paperback edition of the *Pentagon Papers*. There of course was no Internet and you could not buy the Times where I lived. Mom knew of politics and Vietnam maybe even less than I did, but the Papers were all over the news and it seemed the thing to do to spend the \$1.95. When I tried to make sense of the names and foreign places it made no impact on me.

I didn't understand then what you had done. While I was trying to learn multiplication, you were making photocopies of classified documents. As you read them, you understood the government had knowledge early on the war could not be won, and that continuing would lead to many times more casualties than was ever admitted publicly.

A lot of people inside the government had read those same Papers and understood their content, but only you decided that instead of simply going along with the lies, or privately using your new knowledge to fuel self-eating cynicism, you would try to persuade U.S. Senators Fulbright and McGovern to release the papers on the Senate floor.

When they did not have the courage, even as they knew the lies continued to kill Americans they represented, you brought the Papers to the New York Times. The Times then echoed the courage of great journalists and published the Papers, fought off the Nixon administration by calling to the First Amendment, and brought the truth about lies to America. That's when my mom bought a copy of the Papers at the A&P.

You were considered an enemy of the United States because when you encountered something inside of government so egregious, so fundamentally wrong, you risked your own fortune, freedom, and honor to make it public. You almost went to jail, fighting off charges under the same draconian Espionage Act the government still uses today to silence others who stand in your shadow.

In 2009 I volunteered to serve in Iraq for my employer of some 23 years, the Department of State. While I was there I saw such waste in our reconstruction program, such lies put out by two administrations about what we were (not) doing in Iraq, that it seemed to me that the

only thing I could do — had to do — was tell people about what I saw. In my years of government service, I experienced my share of dissonance when it came to what was said in public and what the government did behind the public's back. In most cases, the gap was filled only with scared little men and women, and what was left unsaid hid their flaws.

What I saw in Iraq was different. There, the space between what we were doing (the waste), and what we were saying (the chant of success) was filled with numb soldiers and devastated Iraqis, not nerveless bureaucrats. It wasn't Vietnam in scale or impact, but it was again young Americans risking their lives, believing for something greater than themselves, when instead it was just another lie. Another war started and run on lies, while again our government worked to keep the truth from the people.

I am [unsure](#) what I accomplished with my own book, absent getting retired-by-force from the State Department for telling a [truth](#) that embarrassed them. So be it; most people at State will never understand the choice of conscience over career, the root of most of State's problems.

But Dan, what *you* accomplished was this. When I faced a crisis of conscience, to tell what I knew because it needed to be told, coming to realize I was risking at the least my job if not jail, I remembered that newsprint copy of the Papers from 1971 which you risked the same and more to release. I took my decision in the face of the Obama administration having already charged more people under the Espionage Act for alleged mishandling of classified information than all past presidencies combined, but more importantly, I took my decision in the face of your example.

Later, whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning, Julian [Assange](#), and Edward Snowden would do the same. I know you have encouraged them, too, through your example and with personal messages.

So thank you for the books you sent Dan. Thank you for your courage so that when I needed it, I had an example to assess myself against other than the limp men and women working now for a Department of State too scared of the truth to rise to claim even a whisper of the word courage for themselves.

Fast-forward to 2021. In these last few years the term "[whistleblower](#)" has been co-opted such that a Deep State operative was able to abuse the term to [backdoor impeachment](#) against a sitting president. The use of anonymous sources has devolved from brave individuals speaking out against a government gone wrong into a way for journalists to manufacture "proof" of anything they want, from claims the president was a Russian spy to the use of the military to create a photo op in Lafayette Park.

On this anniversary we look at individuals like Ellsberg and reporters like those at the Times and know it is possible for individuals with courage to make a difference. That is something worth remembering, and celebrating.

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