



Lessons Not Learned From the Pentagon Papers

Description

In June 1971, at the height of the Vietnam War, a US government military analyst with the Rand Corporation and senior research associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dr. Daniel Ellsberg^[1], released to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* what became known as the “Pentagon Papers”, 47 volumes of confidential records comprising some 7000 pages of secret government reports that documented the US involvement in “dirty tricks” and illegal actions under the Presidencies of Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. The documents demonstrated that successive US Presidents had lied to the American people, that false flags had been organized, “fake news” disseminated, phoney narratives issued by successive Secretaries of Defense. As a *New York Times* editor wrote, “the Johnson administration had systematically lied, not only to the public but also to Congress about a subject of transcendental national interest”^[2].

The rational implications of the Pentagon Papers were succinctly articulated to the then President Richard Nixon by his chief of staff H.R. Haldeman. Bottom line was that through such disclosures the American people would feel that “You can’t trust the government; you can’t believe what they say; and you can’t rely on their judgment; ...the implicit infallibility of presidents, which has been an accepted thing in America, is badly hurt by this, because it shows that ... the president can be wrong.”^[3]

Thereupon Nixon sought an injunction to prevent further publication, but lost the case before the US Supreme Court^[4], which ruled by 6 to 3 that publication was legal because freedom of the press is one of the “modern pillars” of First Amendment Rights^[5].

Retrospectively we realize that Dr. Ellsberg acted ethically and performed a necessary service to the American people by revealing crimes that were being committed in our name, but were being covered-up or denied by successive governments. As Dr. Ellsberg said when he surrendered to the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts on 28 June 1971, “I felt that as an American citizen, as a responsible citizen, I could no longer cooperate in concealing this information from the American public. I did this clearly at my own jeopardy and I am prepared to answer to all the consequences of this decision”^[6]. Indeed, as I myself wrote in a book about secrecy in government, secrecy is an enabler of crime and a facilitator of negationism^[7].

Ellsberg was subsequently indicted under the archaic Espionage Act (1917, enacted after US entered WWI), on charges of espionage, theft and conspiracy that could have meant 115 years in prison. During his 1973 trial, Ellsberg tried to explain his actions, namely that the documents were *illegally* classified to keep them not from an enemy but from the American public. However, the Court ruled this argument “irrelevant”, Ellsberg being silenced before he could begin. In 2014, Ellsberg wrote in *The Guardian* that his “lawyer, exasperated, said he ‘had never heard of a case where a defendant was not permitted to tell the jury why he did what he did.’ The judge responded: ‘Well, you’re hearing one now’”. And so it has been with every subsequent whistleblower under indictment”[\[8\]](#). Nevertheless, Ellsberg’s lawyer, Harvard Professor Charles Nesson[\[9\]](#), was successful in proving that there had been illegal government wiretapping and that crucial evidence had been withheld from the defence by the prosecution. The trial lasted four months and ended with the dismissal of all charges. Dr. Ellsberg became the most famous whistleblower in US history, and some people came to understand that there were necessary limits to secrecy and to what governments were permitted to do. Far from being traitors, whistleblowers were citizens with conscience and civic responsibility, true human rights defenders.

Whoever reads the Pentagon Papers today may have a feeling of “déjà vu” – but when 50 years ago I read the reports, I experienced disappointment in our government officials, then sadness, then anger. My idealization of government under the rule of law, government committed to the welfare of the American people, committed to building a just world, collapsed. Whether I liked it or not, I had to accept that persons whom I had hitherto trusted, had let me and all of America down. The war in Vietnam was not a “civil war”, but a clear aggression by the United States against the people of Vietnam, not for their or our welfare, but for the satisfaction of the ideologues at U.S. think tanks, the military-industrial complex, already condemned by Eisenhower in 1961[\[10\]](#), and those who invented the “domino” theory. The lies and false flags were all over the media, and many of my friends from high school and college had volunteered to fight for “democracy” in Vietnam. Three of my friends were killed. They gave up their lives not for “democracy” or for “justice”, but for the geopolitical illusions of some megalomaniacs and wrong-intentioned “intellectuals” in Washington. I was reminded of the quote attributed to Samuel Johnson “the road to hell is paved with good intentions” (1791).

In 2017, 20th Century FOX released the historical drama *The Post*[\[11\]](#), directed by Steven Spielberg, focusing on the role played by the *Washington Post* in vindicating freedom of the press and the right of the American people to know what is being done in our name. The dialogue between the real-life characters is worth relistening to. Meryl Streep convinces as *Post* publisher Katharine Graham, Tom Hanks as the *Post*’s executive editor Ben Bradlee.

Now let’s fast-forward to “Desert Storm” and the war against Iraq over its invasion of Kuwait 1990, the entrapment of Saddam Hussein by US officials, the propaganda lies used to convince the American people that Saddam was another Hitler.[\[12\]](#) Think of the run-up to NATO’s bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999[\[13\]](#), the deliberate exaggerations about ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and the anachronisms practiced after the war to retroactively justify it[\[14\]](#). Change the names and the places, and we have similar scenarios of government misconduct, secrecy, covers-up, false flags, phoney narratives and atrocity stories[\[15\]](#) as in the Pentagon Papers. We can review the continuing information war aimed at justifying the US claim to world hegemony – justifying it in the eyes of the American people, so as to make it appear plausible, that what our government says is true and that what government does is just.

The evidence is all over the internet and in scholarly-researched books. It is only necessary to open our eyes, read, discuss with our friends. But first we must shed the scales over our eyes and accept what the American people accepted in 1971, that our government systematically lies. We have seen similar scenarios concerning our wars in Yugoslavia[16], Afghanistan[17], Iraq[18], Libya (2011)[19], Syria (on-going)[20], concerning the events in Maidan[21] in 2014, in Crimea[22] and Donbass, and in the US/NATO proxy war in Ukraine since 2022. We are swimming in an ocean of official lies. Most revealing is the US involvement and denial of the blowing up of the Nordstream pipelines[23].

Now scroll back to the official manipulation of public opinion revealed in the Pentagon Papers. Why is it that we have learned nothing from those revelations? And after the spectacular lies that our governments told us about Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction, after the embarrassment of blatantly lying before the UN Security Council[24], after the revelation of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Iraq and Afghanistan by Wikileaks, how can we believe anything that the State Department or the Pentagon tells us?

Why is it that many Americans still want to believe the unbelievable denials of the State Department and Pentagon when it comes to Nordstream? Why is it that the mainstream media today is no longer a watchdog but functions as an echo chamber for governmental propaganda, or worse, when the media becomes an attack dog that intimidates and censors those who dissent from the official narrative? What has happened to the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and most of the “quality press” over the past 50 years? It seems that only the US government has learned from the Pentagon Papers, has adapted to better control the risk of disclosure, to better dissimulate crimes, and learned how to keep the mainstream media on the leash, so that when a prominent Professor at Colombia University and Advisor of four UN Secretary Generals, Jeffrey Sachs, disagrees with the official line, he gets yanked off the air for saying the obvious – that the US was behind the blowing up of Nordstream.[25] While the revelations in the Pentagon Papers are of enormous and urgent relevance to our perception of the war in Ukraine, the US government determines the music, and those who do not want to dance to their tune are ignored, defamed, ridiculed.

Daniel Ellsberg was and is on the right side of history and common sense when he reminds us that notwithstanding all the narrative management by our government “A failing war is just as profitable as a winning one... It’s the old Latin slogan, *Cui Bono*, who benefits?...We’re not after all a European nation and we have no particular role in the European Union. But in NATO—that’s as the Mafia says *Cosa Nostra*, our thing—we control NATO pretty much and NATO gives us an excuse and a reason to sell enormous amounts of arms now to the formerly Warsaw Pact nations...Russia is an indispensable enemy.”[26]

Today, more than ever, we need a free press, but we do not have it. We need investigative journalists like Seymour Hersh, but they are an almost extinct species. We need a vigorous alternative media that gives us the information that the “quality press” suppresses. We need academics with courage and intellectual honesty like Professors Nils Melzer[27], John Mearsheimer[28], Jeffrey Sachs, Richard Falk, who accept the factum that they must pay a price for their commitment to truth and the rule of law. We need whistleblowers who know exactly what happened with the bombing of the Nordstream Pipelines. Silence in such cases is not honourable. It means covering-up terrorist activities.

We need documentaries and Hollywood films that will educate the general public about what is going on today and how that will affect the future not only of Americans but also of the rest of the world. We

need a new 20th Century Fox blockbuster like *The Post*, with a story about the lies and covers-up of the run-up to the wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Ukraine. We need serious documentaries about the “extraordinary rendition” program, about torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, about the bombing of the Nordstream pipelines. Who will play the roles of George W. Bush, Barak Obama, Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Antony Blinken and Victoria Nuland? Who will play the roles of Julian Assange, Edward Snowden[\[29\]](#), Chelsea Manning[\[30\]](#), Jeffrey Sterling[\[31\]](#), John Kiriakou [\[32\]](#)? I do not suggest a movie with a simple binary plot – the good versus evil. I mean a movie with all the complexities that a balancing of interests requires, that elucidates the crisis of conscience of government officials who sacrifice truth to expediency, of “patriots” who only see “my country right or wrong” and who are incapable to understand that long-term patriotism requires truth and wisdom. Such a movie should make palpable the existential fear of whistleblowers, who take huge personal risks – because they have to, because their conscience compels them to act. In this context, it is also important to revisit the persecution of Julian Assange and the complicity of the media in his persecution. Is anything left of the rationale in the Supreme Court judgment in ***New York Times Co. v. United States***, 1971, or in the acquittal judgment in the case against Daniel Ellsberg 1973?

Among the lessons we must still learn is that because all governments lie, some more, some less, we must demand transparency and accountability from all of our elected officials and institutions. Even then, we must nurture a healthy scepticism about what we read in the media. We know that we have been lied to before and we must expect to be lied to in the future. We owe it to ourselves and to our civilization to remain alert about the corruption of certain institutions and the general loss of trust as a result of breaches of the rule of law. We need more whistleblowers, not less. We also need a **Charter of Rights of Whistleblowers**, so that they are no longer subject to persecution and vicious lawfare. We must have the courage to understand that the same forces that brought us the Vietnam and Afghanistan disasters are likely to bring us further disasters in Ukraine and elsewhere. We must learn to accept that the unipolar world is a dinosaur and that the survival of mankind requires compromise, a reasonable *modus vivendi* based on the UN Charter and buttressed by a sense of brotherhood in international solidarity.

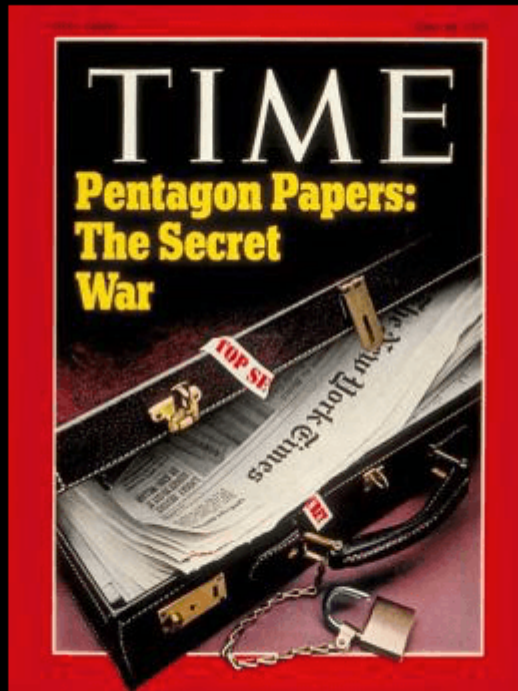


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Notes.

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See also Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017. In 2020, Ellsberg testified in defense of Julian Assange during his extradition hearings, <https://apnews.com/article/julian-assange-daniel-ellsberg-archive-extradition-united-states-2fe79f6b7e3171b3865cdccc3ecce822>. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-63832899>

[2] R.W. Apple, “Pentagon Papers”, The New York Times, 23 June 1996.

[3] <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB48/nixon.html>

[4] *New York Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713 (1971)

[5] <https://web.archive.org/web/20110318192603/>

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[7] Alfred de Zayas, *Völkermord als Staatsgeheimnis*, (Genocide as State Secret – dealing among others with the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, Halabja and Srebrenica), Olzog Verlag, München

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[8] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/30/daniel-ellsberg-snowden-fair-trial-kerry-espionage-act>

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[10] history.com/this-day-in-history/eisenhower-warns-of-military-industrial-complex

[11] https://www.imdb.com/video/vi11581465/?playlistId=tt6294822&ref_=tt_ov_vi

[12] in 1990 a Kuwaiti girl named Nayirah testified in Congress that she saw Iraqi troops throwing babies out of incubators. Amnesty corroborated her story, and this was used to get the public to support war. Afterwards it turned out the entire thing was a lie concocted by a PR firm

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[14] <https://www.counterpunch.org/2019/08/20/americas-forgotten-bullshit-bombing-of-serbia/>

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<https://www.claritypress.com/product/atrocity-fabrication-and-its-consequences-how-fake-news-shapes-world-order/>

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<https://www.telesurenglish.net/analysis/US-NATO-Lies-to-Justify-Genocide-and-Destruction-in-Yugoslavia-20160323-0005.html>

[17] <https://theintercept.com/2021/09/08/afghanistan-iraq-generals-soldiers-disciplined-911/>

[18] <https://www.dw.com/en/the-iraq-war-in-the-beginning-was-the-lie/a-43301338>

[19] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/29/diplomat-gaddafi-troops-viagra-mass-rape>
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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/05/ukraine-bugged-call-catherine-ashton-urmas-paet>

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Leaked call between former Estonian Foreign Minister Ummas Paet & then High Representative of EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton – It was not Yanukovych behind the snipers who killed both Maidan protesters & policemen but somebody from the new coalition

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Hersh, the US and the Sabotage of the Nordstream Pipelines

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Jeffrey Sachs' testimony at UN security council on the Nord Stream Pipeline destruction

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