

AN ORDINARY INSANITY

The Daniel Ellsberg Movie

—transcript—

“You can't have a large nuclear war, the kind we've prepared for and spent trillions of dollars preparing for, where the victim in that war would be limited to the adversaries or to any particular group of adversaries. Words do not exist in human language to describe that sort of decision or that sort of machinery. There is no possibility to limit damage, any more than there is a possibility to ‘win’ a nuclear war.

A threat and a readiness and a preparation and a rehearsal of causing nuclear winter and destroying most large life on Earth: that is insane. And you have to call it a kind of ‘ordinary insanity,’ because it's so widely shared.

I've long said: to my last breath, I will be doing what I can to postpone and avert the risk of nuclear war.”

In 1971, U.S. military analyst Daniel Ellsberg publicly released the Pentagon Papers and rocked the nation. Ellsberg had secretly copied 7,000 pages of that Top Secret report on the Vietnam War, a report he had helped write. It revealed the truth of a war that was unwinnable and immoral.

He risked 115 years in prison for a legendary act of whistleblowing that helped bring down a president and shorten the war.

But Ellsberg had also helped draft the nation's nuclear war plans. He had other secrets in his safe, nuclear secrets. He expected the FBI to come looking for them.

So he gave thousands of documents to someone he could trust: his brother Harry. Harry stuffed the papers in a big green garbage bag inside a cardboard box, and he buried it in the local dump — a place where he thought they would never be found. An old stove above marked the site so he could retrieve the papers when it was safe.

Then during the summer, a most unexpected twist in the story: a tropical storm unearthed the box of papers and sent the stove flying down the hill. For almost a year, Harry, his wife, and friend searched for the lost papers. They found a lot of buried green garbage bags, but not one of them had Top Secret nuclear documents inside.

In the decades that followed, Ellsberg dedicated himself to reconstructing the lost nuclear secrets and doing everything in his power to reduce the risk of a nuclear holocaust, a catastrophe that he had helped plan. Recorded shortly before his death, these are the urgent warnings of a nuclear war planner.

"My career, for 10 years at that point, had been as a researcher/consultant for the government on classified work for the Department of Defense — for the Air Force initially, and later as a consultant to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and even before that, Secretary of Defense Gates, under Eisenhower, on the command and control of nuclear weapons and the design of nuclear war plans — as a young man, in a job that no one ever did well.

At the RAND Corporation, I'd been studying the highest-stakes hypothetical gamble in human history: whether or not to launch nuclear missiles on the basis of ambiguous warning. This gives me a background with which to evaluate the risks and the possible benefits of these weapons.

At that point, the plan I was supplanting or modifying was the last plan left by the Eisenhower administration. His plan was simply to strike first, in nuclear terms, against the Soviet Union and China.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff estimated in 1961 the effects of our carrying out those plans, the annual operational plan for which the weapons existed and were on alert. They estimated it would kill 600 million people — 100 Holocausts — 325 million in the Soviet Union and China alone, another 100 million in the satellite countries (Hungary, Poland, the Warsaw Pact), and another 100 million of our allies in Western Europe would be killed by the fallout from our attacks on the Soviet bloc without a single warhead of ours falling on West Europe. Collateral damage — not desired; inadvertent, but expected — no way to avoid it. And finally, another 100 million in areas contiguous to the Soviet Union or China neutral areas like Austria, Afghanistan, Finland, Sweden, large parts of India, Japan. Remember: this is just our attack, without considering the Soviet response.

When I saw that estimate in the White House, I thought: *this is the most evil planning that has ever existed in the history of humanity.*

For only the last 40 years of the nuclear era, not considered at all before 1983, we've known soot and smoke was a crucial lethal effect of nuclear weapons. The firestorms created by nuclear weapons would have lofted the smoke from these burning cities into the stratosphere, quickly enveloping the globe and blotting out most of the sunlight. Not all of it, but about 70% of the sunlight, which would kill all harvests for at least several years and up to a decade or more, starving nearly everyone. Not quite everyone; it wouldn't be an extinction event. Still: 98% would be gone within a year, starving to death.

My friends and I were helping to create a nuclear war plan that was less dangerous, less bad than the one preceding it. That was a low bar. But if my improved plan had actually been carried out, the results would not have been less evil or less destructive than the Eisenhower plan.

Very simply, their entire framework of nuclear weapons is based on the idea that as bad as it would be to strike first, to preempt, it would be *less bad* than striking second. Our entire Air Force doctrine, our strategic doctrine, tells us that.

We build weapons to destroy enemy weapons, as if they could limit damage to the United States if they went first before they were themselves destroyed. But *it's not true*. The truth is that our nuclear policy from the beginning, especially from the time that Russia acquired nuclear weapons in 1949, is a policy of threatening first use against a nuclear-armed nation, the Soviet Union — which is a threat of an insane action. (*Is a threat of an insane action insane in itself?*)

These weapons are designed to kill people or to threaten to kill people — which is the way they've actually been used a number of times, quite specifically, in crises. When you point a gun at someone in a confrontation, you are using the gun. If you get your way without pulling the trigger, that's the best use of the gun.

Threats can work. Of course, they can work. When you point a gun, whether you're a policeman or a vigilante or a bandit going into a 7-Eleven, of course you can walk out with the contents of the cash register. These threats can work and have worked.

President Vladimir Putin has warned the West that Russia could use nuclear weapons if it was struck with conventional missiles. The U.S. and Russia are the only two of the nine nuclear states that plan launch-on-warning and act as if a first strike is better than a second strike, which it isn't — a deadly self-deception.

China, for reasons not entirely clear now (but I think they are proving their deterrent in a situation where they foresee some armed conflict with the U.S. over Taiwan) are not only building new ICBMs, but they are going toward launch-on-warning, which is inevitable with ICBMs. Fixed-location ICBMs can only be protected from destruction by being ready to launch before the other side's missiles arrive.

So, the Chinese are going in that direction. That makes the world more dangerous, in part because we are openly preparing to attack their missiles with low-yield submarine missiles, which Trump has now put on our Trident submarines for limited nuclear war. We're deliberately continuing, year-by-year, a posture and a policy and threats that raise the risk of near-extinction.

The idea of war between the U.S. and Russia, or the U.S. and China — which both sides are preparing for — should not be a human prospect. But it is.

There is only one weapon in our arsenal that confronts a president with the urgent decision of whether to launch nuclear war: *the decision to launch our ICBMs*. This is because they are vulnerable. They are fixed-location, known to the Russians. The Russians have missiles, both subs and ICBMs (as we do), that can destroy the fixed-location ICBMs.

It is solely these missiles' vulnerability that confronts the president with the challenge: *use them or lose them*. We currently have 400 of those operational, in silos on 10-minute alert. From getting an authenticated command to the time that the missiles are actually launched from their silos, it's a matter of minutes. Those missiles, of course, cannot be recalled. In about 30 minutes, they would land at their targets, which are largely in Russia and China.

We could lower that risk quite significantly by eliminating our intercontinental ballistic missiles, our ICBMs, because they are vulnerable in a way that our submarine launch weapons at sea are not. The submarines are invulnerable.

And our planes can be called back. In fact, they don't even have to be called back. They can take off on what's called 'positive control,' circling until they get a positive order to go ahead. They can do that for hours, delaying any decision as to what the situation is.

That's not true for ICBMs. From the mid-1960s, when the Soviets had acquired sub-launched missiles, submarines like ours that we could not target with our ICBMs... and at the same time, with the Russian ICBMs becoming very accurate, our ICBMs became very vulnerable. Thus, both sides were on a hair-trigger, unstable, mutually threatening posture where each targeted the other, essentially on a launch-on-warning basis. And that's been true ever since.

At that point, the ICBMs were no longer merely unnecessary and wasteful, as they are and always have been, but terribly dangerous — much more so, to us and to the world, even than the Polaris submarines, the Trident submarines, which we still have on both sides. At least these do not tempt either leadership to a decision, in a matter of minutes, to set off all-out nuclear war.

The very possibility of a false alarm setting off all-out nuclear war is based on the possession and deployment and alerting of ICBMs.

What happened in 1979 seemed to be not just that enemy missiles were coming over the pole, but they were coming in a coordinated synchronized way. Missiles seemed to be coming from both oceans — from Russian Soviet submarines and bombers in the air. Now, how could that all be wrongly seen as coming in exactly like a Soviet attack? The answer is that someone had put an actual simulation attack for testing the system into the operational system. I don't think it's ever been explained, 40 years later, how that came about.

(Secretary of Defense) William Perry was told about this incident on the phone, at 3:00 in the morning after it had already been debunked. He was told that 200 missiles had been thought to be on the way, and he explained what he meant to do about that. He had thought, "Well, 200... that must be aimed at our ICBMs." He said, "I think I would have advised Carter to send 200 or maybe 400 missiles at their ICBMs."

That could not possibly have done anything but set off the entire forces on both sides. No language really does justice to this, but *absurd* is one word. Other words are *cataclysmic*, *catastrophic*, *evil*.

Under President Carter, there were two other major alerts that went on for minutes. Those three major false alarms led Congress to call for investigation, and they found there had been hundreds and hundreds of false alarms which were not as serious as these.

In 1983, President Andropov, at that time former head of the KGB, believed that Reagan intended a first strike. He was preparing for it. He threatened it.

Colonel Stanislav Petrov got warning in his center that five American missiles — first one, then two, then five — American missiles were on their way from launch sites in America across the pole. His subordinates in that center all believed that they were under attack. Panic ... basically they were all urging him to report that Russia was under attack. But Petrov wasn't sure that it was an attack.

So he lied to his superiors, saying, 'It's a false alarm,' even though he wasn't sure that it was. Then he waited 10 minutes to see whether they were all going to be destroyed, not knowing whether it would happen. It wasn't certain, he said; it was about 50/50. But he felt sure that if he'd said 50/50 truthfully, they would have gone — that it would have been seen as being enough of a basis to go.

Fortunately, he was right (to wait. If he hadn't,) we would not be here, because of the nuclear winter effect.

Eliminating ICBMs will not eliminate the existence, the occurrence, of false alarms. But it will eliminate the pressure to respond in a way that would blow up the world. There will be no incentive for a president or a leader of any nuclear state to respond immediately, even to an actual attack. It's the ICBMs alone that create this "3:00 a.m. 10-minute warning" situation.

It is, of course, absurd to think that a human can deal rationally or reasonably with such circumstances. If we eliminated ICBMs, then there would be no 'jamming' the president to act very swiftly.

It is not the case that an enemy missile or a terrorist missile on Washington would paralyze our ability to respond with an authentic order. It has never been true. And that's true for Russia and almost certainly every other nuclear nation. There are a lot of fingers on a lot of buttons in the world, a fact that has been kept very secret from the public so as not to worry them.

America's top general, just two days after the January 6th Capitol insurrection, was so worried about the then-President's angry and erratic behavior that he called a secret meeting with top deputies, including the chain of command for the country's nuclear

arsenal. This was generated by concerning intelligence that the Chinese were worried about an attack on them by the United States.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Milley, was worried that the President might try to start a nuclear war to distract from his imminent removal from office, having lost an election. He actually was discussing with other officers whether they should be prepared to obey or not obey such an order. That would be, in effect, mutiny.

They began to investigate whether he could be restrained by other people, or whether it was really true that he could order this as a sole authority. The answer to that is yes. And the answer as to whether he could be constrained: *no*. Constitutionally there could be a mutiny. In effect there could be a refusal, but that person could be fired in immediately and replaced, and if the next person refused again that process could continue.

We are now engaged in modernizing our forces — that is, replacing the Doomsday Machine with a whole new set of submarines, ballistic missiles, ICBMs, and bombers, at the cost of an estimated \$1.7 trillion, and almost certain to be enormously more than that. (For example, we initially thought the price for Sentinel would be about \$95 billion; now the Air Force reports that it will be \$132 billion — nearly 40% more.)

Why are we thinking of spending a quarter of a trillion dollars over the next 30 years, a hundred billion dollars in the next 10 years, to produce a replacement for the Minute Man III, when we should *eliminate* the Minute Man III missiles, the current ICBMs, altogether? *Why?*

Is it mainly because Northrop Grumman, or its rivals Boeing or Lockheed, have channels of influence and have in effect bought influence and — let's be frank — bought Congress? They have carefully distributed the earnings, the jobs, and the votes across 35 states. And it's about campaign donations to the Congressmembers, and it's about revolving-door jobs between the highest-level military and these corporations. The present Secretary of Defense, for example, comes from the board of Raytheon Corporation. He was preceded by Esper from Boeing and Mattis from General Dynamics. All of them were from the boards of these top corporations, all of them experts in the military-industrial complex.

“As part of our defense, we must modernize and rebuild our nuclear arsenal — hopefully never having to use it, but making it so strong and so powerful that it will deter any acts of aggression by any other nation or anyone else.” This highly motivated delusion has meant trillions of dollars of sales for Boeing, Northrup, Grumman, General Dynamics, Lockheed, and Raytheon. They — and the people in the government whom they talk to and influence and hire and buy — have failed all of humanity.

I repeat a judgment I've made at age 90, and long before that: *all* humans are capable of participating in projects that are, in their effects and their injustice, evil. I'm talking now of participating in the widest sense: by silence.

Nuclear war planners (of which I was one) have written plans for the possible destruction of billions of people, with weapons we have possessed and readied and alerted. This is what has always been. It's a kind of "ordinary evil," in the sense of how widely we humans are vulnerable to participating in it.

How could I be that combination of stupid and irresponsible? Well, I'm human. And I wasn't the only one — which doesn't excuse me. The point is that to think that we are led now by people smarter, more responsible than the ones who got us into World War I or II is simply wrong.

We're looking, then, at something that is a human capability in everybody. But we're not condemned to act that way. We can transcend that and act otherwise.

So we either change course or...

It will not come from within the Pentagon. It will not come from people who take their economic and political relations more seriously than they do the survival of humanity."

"Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds."

"Can humanity survive the nuclear era? We don't know. I choose to act as if we have a chance."

During his lifetime, Daniel Ellsberg was arrested over 80 times for civil disobedience, standing up against nuclear war. He believed we could make nuclear war less of a threat and avoid ending most life on Earth.

ABOUT "AN ORDINARY INSANITY"

In this 29-minute documentary, renowned whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg provides a powerful wakeup call about the global threat posed by nuclear weapons and advocates how we can dramatically reduce the real and present danger of nuclear annihilation. Before he released the top-secret Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War, Ellsberg was a nuclear war planner with access to classified information on U.S. nuclear strategy. Filmed one year before his death at age 92, Ellsberg speaks with clarity and urgency about the dangers we face. <https://www.anordinaryinsanity.com>