

# *The Man Who Knew Too Much*

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*The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*,  
by Daniel Ellsberg, Bloomsbury USA.

SUPPOSE a grave-looking man, after approaching you on the sidewalk, announced that the government had contingency plans to annihilate the bulk of humanity and most large nonhuman species to boot. Odds are you would offer a nervous grin or grimace and pick up your pace. Imagine this same man kept track and informed you he had once served in the highest reaches of the national-security bureaucracy as a nuclear-war expert when such plans were being hatched, and not much has changed since then. At this point you might search for a convenient storefront or café to make your prompt escape. But what if your unwelcome interlocutor then grabbed you by your cuff and warned of “a catastrophe waiting to happen!” What then?

It is an uncomfortable hypothetical, although not as uncomfortable as the fact that someone like this man does exist, and everything he has to say is credible. His name is Daniel Ellsberg. In the introduction to *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, the historic whistle-blower of Pentagon Papers fame cuts to the chase:

The hidden reality I aim to expose is that for over fifty years, all-out thermonuclear war—an irreversible, unprecedented, and almost unimaginable calamity for civilization and most life on earth—has been, like the disasters of Chernobyl, Katrina, the Gulf oil spill, Fukushima Daiichi, and before these, World War I, *a catastrophe waiting to happen*, on a scale infinitely greater than any of these. And this is still true today.

The argument is straightforward, and it suggests a kind of collective madness that dwarfs the eccentricities of any pavement malcontent.

Ever since the Soviets acquired the bomb in 1949, game theorists on each end of the Cold War divide, along with eventual bomb-wielding newcomers in the United Kingdom, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea, have been preparing for one another's mutual destruction. Except they've told themselves it was just the other guy who would end up destroyed. Ellsberg divulges some of Washington's casualty estimates, and they are not for the fainthearted. During the height of the standoff in Berlin in August of 1961, for example, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were poised to launch a preemptive first-strike attack against Russia and China that anticipated 325 million deaths within six months. This didn't cover the expected one hundred million lives lost in Europe, as well as another one hundred million across Russia and China's periphery. Thankfully, as one officer at the Strategic Air Command reassured Ellsberg at the time, "less than ten million" lives in the United States risked being claimed in retaliation.

But these numbers told only the half of it. As Ellsberg and others suspected, resulting firestorms were likely to prove fatal for anyone present within two to five times the blast radius. This meant, at minimum, a billion people were at risk, a third of the Earth's population in 1961. And as climate scientists in 1983 concluded, the remaining two billion were also likely to expire from the firestorm's gargantuan billows of smoke, which would envelop the stratosphere like a mortal quilt, occluding sunlight for a decade and devastating life-sustaining crops. Such a nuclear winter is even more plausible today, now that each contemporary hydrogen bomb requires a 1940s-vintage A-bomb merely as its detonator. The notorious iconography of Hiroshima or Nagasaki only accounts, in Ellsberg's words, for "what happens to humans and buildings when they are hit by what is now just the detonating cap for a modern nuclear weapon."

Lest you believe the prospect for thermonuclear war is a thing of the past, consider this: the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has the Doomsday Clock at one hundred seconds to midnight, the closest it's ever been to apocalypse since concerned veterans of the Manhattan Project inaugurated the measurement in 1947. This calculation

derives both from increasingly reckless leadership around the globe and certain provocations in particular. The Trump administration has withdrawn from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, a response to supposed noncompliance on the part of Putin's government. This has opened the floodgates for the development and expansion of riskier weapons that can reach their destination within ten minutes, foreclosing the possibility of any fair warning or coolheaded deliberation. The withdrawal has also encouraged a new nuclear arms race, one that involves not only the United States and Russia, but China too. Such foolhardiness has been accompanied by Trump's nixing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran and by North Korea's continuing brinkmanship. The cessation of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) next year looms on the horizon. Then there are accelerated tensions between India and Pakistan, continued bedlam in Syria—a conflict embroiling more than half of the world's nuclear powers—and US investment in low-yield ballistic warheads. Embrace of the latter development is based on the premise that low-level nukes, launched by submarine, can be deployed without triggering full-scale nuclear Armageddon. But since radar has a high probability of mistaking these missiles for their larger counterparts, all this buildup does is increase the likelihood of a final judgment.

When Ellsberg was still working for Uncle Sam, he conducted numerous interviews with uniformed service members tasked with one day executing a nuclear strike. What he discovered was terrifying. Pilots admitted that under a series of high-stakes circumstances, including the loss of communication with higher-ups, they would abandon protocol and launch their warheads. Communications then, as now, were characteristically spotty, and false alarms concerning enemy nuclear attacks were not uncommon. The same went for these pilots' supervisors, one of whom boasted about being willing to violate failsafe directives designed to preclude accidental or unnecessary nuclear war. Ellsberg, at the time of his investigation in 1959 and 1960, found myriad ways that bad actors within and without the military could initiate an unlawful nuclear order, in large part because

authorization had been so widely devolved and subdelegated. And he makes a strong case that military leadership and culture as a whole leaned toward “Go” in cases of ambiguity or uncertainty, while leaning against civilian veto power. If this sounds too much like the script from *Dr. Strangelove*, that’s because the book on which that film was based, *Red Alert*, was written by a former Royal Air Force Bomber Command flight officer who was appalled by the same institutional loopholes and deranged ethos. Ellsberg fears much of that ethos is still operative, and hints of its persistence have been recorded at watchdog venues like the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists.

Although the military’s successes at sealing off nuclear prerogatives from civilian control are troubling, it is not as if civilian command has been more enlightened. For decades the American political class in both parties agreed to keep nuclear-armed warships ashore Japanese ports without the Japanese government’s official approval, thus putting the country at risk of another, albeit more calamitous, Hiroshima or Nagasaki in the case of an accident or any scenario in which an enemy of the United States was set on activating a first strike. The policy toward Japan follows a long pattern of disregard for the survival of non-Americans, even America’s most trusted allies. It was standard operating procedure throughout the Cold War for all of China to be blasted into oblivion if the United States ever found itself in armed conflict with a Russian brigade or division. Eisenhower supported this because he worried that conventional armed conflict with the Soviet Union would lead to excessive inflation, depression, and bankruptcy, and figured any attempt at a quick-win nuclear closure would entail China taking the side of Russia. What’s more, since planners didn’t acknowledge Russian brigades and divisions were often undermanned, comprising fewer battalions than assumed, the threshold for setting off a nuclear exchange and wiping out humanity was lower than it should have been.

These revelations may make up the most shocking sections of Ellsberg’s memoir, but it is at its most affecting in its history of modern assault on civilians. From General Sherman’s burning of Atlanta

and terrorist march to the sea to the Luftwaffe's bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War to Japan's massacre in Nanjing to the British and American firebombing of Dresden and Tokyo. . . the basic outlines themselves do nothing but haunt. But it is in the details that the true horror resides. General Curtis LeMay's doctrine of "strategic bombing"—the mass targeting of noncombatants, specifically industrial workers, designed to decimate enemy logistics and morale—came straight from Mussolini's air commissioner, Giulio Douhet. As late as 1943 plenty of US air officers still considered Britain's indiscriminate air raids of German cities barbaric, echoing President Roosevelt's words about the savagery of targeting urban areas four years before. But by 1945, General George Marshall was itching, by his own admission, to "set the paper cities of Japan on fire." This was the same time LeMay was asking his weather officer for Tokyo how strong the wind had to be, "so that people can't get away from the flames." He followed up, "Will the wind be strong enough for that?"

LeMay continued to lead from the highest reaches of the US government under presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, all of whom had faith that such a man would carry out his responsibilities with utmost excellence as commander of the Strategic Air Command and then chief of staff of the US Air Force. But LeMay's extraordinary tenure as America's top-dog executioner was a symptom of a larger problem, the same problem that has propelled American complicity in the destruction of places like Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Iraq, and Libya; genocide in places like Indonesia, East Timor, Cambodia, and Yemen; oppression in places like Iran, Guatemala, Congo, Chile, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia; and occupations in places like Palestine and Afghanistan. It is the problem of the gradual normalization of extreme systematic violence, a normalization cheered on by ostensible scientific improvements. Humans have been normalizing such violence for well over a century now, at least since mass killing and policing machines first came on the scene. Americans, however, seem to have forged a proud identity around it. If the rest of the international community isn't trying hard enough to pull back from the brink, US officials behave as if there is no brink, or as if, in the words

of Pangloss, we are still living in the best of all possible worlds. The refusal of the United States and NATO to adopt a no-first-use policy regarding their nuclear arsenal, combined with their recent acceleration of the nuclear arms race, speaks to a deeper moral rot that has been decades in the making, and a rot that, if left untreated, jeopardizes everyone and everything.

Such a death drive may not have reached its natural end quite yet, but it hasn't lain dormant either. The problem is not only that the bellicosity behind America's unhinged nuclear policies is the same bellicosity informing so much of the national-security state's interventions and collusions abroad. It is that the two are connected in more material ways. Henry Kissinger, in his capacity as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under Nixon, threatened North Vietnam with a nuclear strike twelve times as a means of gaining the upper hand in various deadlocks. Ellsberg asserts that such a threat has been employed or discussed with the Joint Chiefs of Staff no less than twenty-five times, and he documents all twenty-five cases in *Doomsday Machine*, in situations ranging from the Berlin crisis to the Cuban missile crisis to the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the last of which effectively warded off Soviet assistance to beleaguered Egyptian troops. This gun-to-the-head tactic, in Ellsberg's reckoning, has probably been used in numerous other classified instances, and it has always played a central role in maintaining the US-led global order.

Ellsberg has spent half a century exposing and opposing the underbelly of that order, and since the initial glow of the Pentagon Papers, political and media elites seem to have become progressively uninterested in what he has to say. He might not be demonized like Edward Snowden or Julian Assange, or held in contempt like Chelsea Manning, but it's fair to say his jeremiads through the years have often been politely ignored, whether they've related to the harrowing costs of America's wars or its surveillance state. Such is the fate of those who dare to challenge rather than reinforce status-quo power relations. For those who go the route of reinforcement, or whose whistle-blowing takes that form whether they intend it or not, inordinate attention or

plaudits are inevitable. This helps explain the lavish praise heaped on the CIA employee responsible for disclosing Trump's notorious phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, or the corroborating witness testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman. The very fact their labors heralded impeachment was enough to make them heroes in the eyes of most Democrats. But it was also how their disclosures came to launder otherwise questionable American meddling alongside Russia's borders, or the supposed nobility of the US intelligence agencies and broader national-defense leviathan, that made their public service especially valuable.

To regret the absence of any serious mention of subjects like no first use, New START, low-yield nuclear weapons, or the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in the mainstream discourse, including the presidential debates of late, constitutes a reasonable and necessary response. Such an absence is mad. To find the relevant discourse reduced to the sole hazards of darker-skinned, "third world" governments in the global South, namely Iran and North Korea, acquiring or utilizing nuclear capabilities is equally maddening. So are attempts to portray those who have sought de-escalation between the world's two great nuclear powers as somehow anti-American, as the *New York Times* attempted not long ago with regard to Bernie Sanders's participation in a sister-cities program with the Soviet Union in the eighties. But the most maddening fact of all is the popular failure to see the nuclear lunacy fleshed out by Ellsberg within a wider living history of domination and bloodshed. Or even to see those lives and societies already dying or barely surviving all around us, all amid the so-called American peace.