**[Man of conscience](https://www.dawn.com/news/1760874/man-of-conscience)**

[Mahir Ali](https://www.dawn.com/authors/322/mahir-ali) Published June 21, 2023

ON Sunday, June 13, 1971, the New York Times carried a groundbreaking report across three columns at the top of its front page under a rather mundane headline, ‘Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing US Involvement’. It was a live bombshell dressed up as history, with several inside pages devoted to the topic.

It landed with a dull thud. Initially, there was almost no reaction. Then the Nixon White House stepped in. A telex from the attorney-general, John Mitchell, ordered the NYT to desist. The newspaper responded defiantly, and published more the following day. Mitchell took the matter to court and obtained an injunction. Right away, other newspapers, beginning with the Washington Post, began publishing rep­orts based on the same study. Within days the NYT, backed by its rival the Post, took the matter to the supreme court, which ruled that “prior restraint” was unconstitutional under the First Amendment.

The majority decision upheld free speech but did not protect the papers, let alone their source, from prosecution. The study, which became known as the Pentagon Papers, had been commissioned in 1967 by Robert McNamara, defence secretary in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. It laid bare the extent of US involvement in Vietnam going back to 1945, and left no doubt that successive presidents had consistently lied to the public about their nation’s obnoxious role in Indochina.

Daniel Ellsberg, the Rand Corporation consultant who had contributed to the study and eventually decided to publicise it, was once a gung-ho cold warrior whose mind was changed by the two years he spent in South Vietnam in the mid-1960s. He realised not only that the war could not be won, but also that it was wrong. As he put it in the 1974 documentary Hearts and Minds, it’s not just that the US was on the wrong side, but rather “we are the wrong side”.

Daniel Ellsberg leaves a powerful legacy.

Ellsberg, who died last Friday at 92, was a dedicated antiwar activist even before the Pentagon Papers were publicised, alongside the likes of the late historian Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky. It was in fact a speech by a draft resister who faced imprisonment that persuaded Ellsberg to reveal the secrets of which he had gathered intimate knowledge. After offering the documents he had copied to a number of senators — some of whom, notably foreign affairs committee chair William Fulbright, promised to hold hearings but went quiet — Ellsberg eventually offered the information to NYT reporter Neil Sheehan.

It was months before the NYT published anything — on the very night, it turned out, that Ellsberg, a movie buff, watched for the first time what became his favourite film, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. He expected to spend the rest of his life in prison, but considered the sacrifice worthwhile if it helped to halt the war in Vietnam. He became the first civilian to be charged under the Espionage Act 50 years ago and faced a 125-year sentence. He escaped it thanks to the Nixon administration’s overkill. Its operatives tried to burgle the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist, hoping to embarrass him, but found nothing that could help them. There were also efforts to debilitate or even assassinate Ellsberg.

The same operatives were caught out du­­ring their Watergate operations, and eventually served time, as did Mitchell and the Nixon aide John Ehrlichman, who, mid-trial, offered Ellsberg’s trial judge the post of FBI director. The judge was obliged to declare a mistrial. Ellsberg was arrested do­­­zens of times in succeeding years as an anti-nuclear activist, with his book The Do­­oms­­day Machine offering a reminder of how close the world had come — and remained — to the ultimate catastrophe. At 90, he also reiterated his knowledge of American plans for a nuclear first strike during the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis. The possibility of that particular confrontation remains alive today.

In his latter years, Ellsberg was a vociferous defender of fellow whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange — and recognised Afghanistan and Iraq as symptoms of his failure as a dedicated truth-teller to thwart the US imperialist enterprise. He was also an admirer of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and, above all, Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. His monumental legacy will endure, unlike — hopefully — the American empire.

A single column on the far right of the NYT front page mentioned at the outset is headlined ‘US urges Indians and Pakistanis to use restraint’. By then, West Pakistani forces were busy creating their own Vietnam. And the Nixon administration’s response doesn’t sound very different from how the Biden White House responds to Israeli transgressions against human rights.

From America to Pakistan and far beyond, the world would benefit from a lot more Daniel Ellsbergs.

[mahir.dawn@gmail.com](https://mailto:mahir.dawn@gmail.com)

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