

The Doomsday Machine

Daniel Ellsberg

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Until recently I only knew Daniel Ellsberg as the whistleblower who made the Pentagon Papers public, and for his peace campaigning over the years. I had no idea that prior to releasing a trove of documents related to the American War in Vietnam, Ellsberg had been employed by the US Air Force at the RAND corporation, as a nuclear war planner.

He had originally intended to reveal his nuclear war materials at the same time as the Pentagon Papers, even though he knew he might face life imprisonment for doing so. A bizarre series of events, recounted in *The Doomsday Machine*, put them beyond the reach of both the FBI and the author. There is much in Ellsberg's book that is bizarre, if not amusing, as he recounts what he learned about the workings of the nuclear-military-political complex. It is disconcerting reading.

Ellsberg reveals the officially stated policy – that only the President can authorise nuclear weapons use – to be a fiction. Based on what he learned reviewing nuclear armed bases for RAND, there is delegation in the use of nukes at every level. Local base commanders had discretion – or considered they had it – to launch their nuclear bombers rather than risk losing them. As in the film *Dr Strangelove*, there were envelopes aboard each plane containing secret nuclear go codes (Strategic Air Command [SAC]'s one-size-fits-all nuclear launch code was 00000000), but there were no recall orders.

As Ellsberg relates, base commanders and bomber pilots had real autonomy to use their nukes; yet there was no system in place to stop them, in the event (for example) of an error of judgment, or a presidential change of heart. His description of the plans to get nuclear-equipped planes airborne at US bases in Japan is grimly absurd. Smaller bombers were meant to take off in neat rows, with other rows of bombers following seconds afterwards. Ellsberg soon saw the possibility that a single pilot error could cause a catastrophic pile-up, and atomic explosions, on the runway. Pilots who made it out, and other US bases, would see or hear of the explosions and assume that Russian bombs had landed

Not that it mattered where the US forces thought the bombs came from. One of Ellsberg's assignments was to find areas for flexibility in nuclear weapons use. When he started working for RAND, the US Air Force had one plan – SIOP, the Single Integrated Operating Plan – which involved a massive,

concerted nuclear weapons salvo against Russia, China, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and the other 'Iron Curtain' states. President Kennedy and his defence chief, Robert McNamara, wanted some other options on the table, besides instantaneous total destruction of all foreign communists and their neighbours. Ellsberg tried hard to separate US nuclear war plans against Russia from US nuclear war plans for China, but it was tough going. The Joint Chiefs preferred one massive nuclear strike ('general war' or 'central war') to a piecemeal one.

All the while, Ellsberg writes, he was morally opposed to the bombing of cities, with the inevitable unnecessary loss of human life. In a brief aside he recounts his friendship with Sam Cohen – another RAND specialist who liked to be thought of as the 'father of the Neutron Bomb'.¹

SIOP also worried Ellsberg since it was a plan for a first strike: all-out first use of thousands of nuclear warheads against the Soviet Union and its allies, at a time when the Russians had merely a handful of working atomic bombs. RAND and Pentagon estimates of damage from nuclear weapons use never included fire or firestorms; nor the spread of radiation into allied states; nor the likely consequences for the climate. The consequences of nuclear weapons use therefore being vastly underestimated, thousands of additional weapons were built. In presidential briefings, the Pentagon was confident of prevailing with a first strike: 'if worst came to worst . . . a preemptive attack on the Soviet Union would result in less than ten million deaths in the U.S.'

We now know that even a 'small' nuclear war – between India and Pakistan, say – could have climate impacts which would cause billions of deaths. 'General' or 'central' wars would do for just about all of us. Ellsberg was foiled when he proposed changing US targeting policy so that Moscow would not be destroyed in a first strike: at a NATO meeting, he was told that even if SAC agreed to spare Moscow, the French would not. Moscow remained a prime target for French nukes – and presumably for British ones, as well.

Over time, Ellsberg writes, the Russians and the Americans built a 'doomsday machine' very like the one Terry Southern envisaged in his script for Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*. To protect them against surprise attack, American and Russian nuclear weapons are numerous, widely dispersed, on hair-trigger alert. In case the civilian or military leadership is killed, or unable to communicate, the duty to launch those weapons has been delegated to pretty much anyone capable of doing so. If the computers say a nuclear first strike is incoming, if seismographs report massive, blast-style earth tremors, if

¹ I knew Sam Cohen, too, and he considered his Bomb to be a moral weapon, as it killed fewer people than the Hydrogen Bomb, and left most of the physical infrastructure intact and potentially usable . . . at least once radiation levels dropped. Sam was insane, of course, but most of the people Ellsberg encountered on board the nuclear weapons project appear to have been insane, in the same way.

contact with the leadership breaks down . . . someone will still be there to push the button/insert the key code/flip the switch.

Ellsberg considers the bombing of civilians – whatever the weapons used – to be a terrorist atrocity, not an act of war. He calls the ongoing nuclear standoff between NATO and Russia a 'moral catastrophe'. If you're interested in how close our silly species has come to wreaking its own imminent demise, this is a valuable and fascinating book by a committed activist and excellent writer.

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