

# A dying Daniel Ellsberg talks about Discord and the power of leaks

Confronting terminal cancer, the man behind the Pentagon Papers sees new dangers in the Ukraine war



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Daniel Ellsberg, right, shakes hands in September 1971 in Washington with future senator and secretary of state John F. Kerry, then head of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. (The Washington Post)

Daniel Ellsberg, the person responsible for perhaps the biggest leak in U.S. government history — the Pentagon Papers — said the latest disclosures of classified information show that the world still faces some of the same dangers that spurred him to act more than 50 years ago.

Ellsberg, who is 92 and dying of pancreatic cancer, said he is struck by the similarities between the Vietnam War and the current war in Ukraine — two conflicts in which a superpower, he argued, could be tempted to use nuclear weapons.

He pointed to some of the classified U.S. government documents posted on social media in recent months indicating that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has become something of a military stalemate likely to drag into at least next year. Ellsberg has said he was trying to end the Vietnam War in 1971 when he leaked a huge cache of government secrets showing that multiple U.S. administrations knew the war was going badly while publicly declaring their optimism for victory.

"I'm reliving a part of history I had no desire to live again. And I hoped I wouldn't. And by the way, that makes it easier to leave — this is where I came in," Ellsberg said in a video interview, his voice increasingly raspy as he spoke surrounded by books in his California home.

The war in Ukraine, he said, "feels very similar to Vietnam. The war is stalemated, that seems so obvious now except for the fact that both sides totally deny it. What these new leaks show is what the Pentagon Papers showed, that the insiders all know that. They know that they are fighting a stalemate."

Ellsberg argued that Ukraine "is not just another war" because of Russia's nuclear arsenal. "It's not Iraq, Iran or Afghanistan. None of those had any real possibility of blowing up the world. This one really can."

Like many intelligence experts, Ellsberg sees big differences between the suspected leaker in the recent social media case — 21-year-old Jack Teixeira, a member of the Massachusetts Air National Guard — and his own role in transmitting the Pentagon Papers, a case that redefined legal precedent on matters of a free press and the First Amendment.

Authorities have arrested Teixeira for allegedly posting classified documents to a social media group of like-minded young men interested in video games and guns.

To Ellsberg, that sounds like a young man who was trying to show off to his friends, a way of saying, "Look who I am, look what I have access to."

But Ellsberg scoffed at the notion that Teixeira has done any serious harm to the country.

"There is no reason to believe that it harmed American national security in any measurable way," he said, blaming what he called a government "mystique of secrecy" for overstating the potential harm. "At the Pentagon, top secret is like toilet paper, it's nothing."

Ellsberg's leak, on the other hand, is generally regarded as having changed American history.

A former Pentagon staffer who became increasingly disillusioned with the Vietnam War, Ellsberg secretly copied thousands of pages of government documents about the conduct of the war through four administrations. He had access to the documents through his work as a Pentagon consultant over the years at the Rand Corp.

In 1971, the New York Times printed the first in a series of stories based on the Pentagon Papers, but the Nixon administration got a court-issued restraining order to halt publication. The Washington Post proceeded to publish a raft of stories based on the documents, setting up a legal showdown at the Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled in the newspapers' favor — a series of events depicted in the Stephen Spielberg film "The Post."

Ellsberg hoped his leaks would end the war. But the fighting continued, and — for a time — the public seemed to approve of President Richard M. Nixon's handling of the war, reelecting him in a landslide in 1972.

Nixon's fury over Ellsberg's disclosures led to the creation of the "plumbers," a covert group directed by White House officials in the hope of stopping leaks. That group was responsible for breaking into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist, hoping to find information to discredit him. They also broke into the offices of the Democratic National Committee, setting the stage for the Watergate scandal that ultimately drove Nixon from the White House.

Ellsberg said he could never have predicted the course of events, in which the Vietnam War came to an end not because of his leak, but because the leak-hunting obsession of senior officials brought down the president overseeing that war.

"If it hadn't been for the plumbers caught in the Watergate, the war would have gone on," he said. "My desire was to see the war ended, but I didn't dream of seeing that happen by having Nixon out of office. It's an amazing coincidence that it did happen that way."

Steven Aftergood, who for two decades led the Federation of American Scientists' Government Secrecy Project, said Ellsberg has a special place in history as the "archetypal" leaker of government secrets, though he differed in important ways from leakers who followed him.

"He actually read and understood all of the material he released. He knew what he was doing. And he acted with thoughtful discrimination by withholding four volumes of material on diplomatic negotiations that he considered particularly sensitive," Aftergood said.

"Government officials had told the public lies before, but rarely had they been exposed with such merciless clarity as they were in the Pentagon Papers."

While many of the documents themselves are dull, Aftergood argued that a key part of the Pentagon Papers history was the example Ellsberg set. He was charged with crimes by the Justice Department and put on trial, but the case was ultimately thrown out when the extent of government wrongdoing against him was exposed.

"His personal courage is astounding. He took real risks, including the risk of long-term imprisonment. But he also took responsibility, and did not try to evade the consequences of his decisions." And that, Aftergood said, "won the respect even of his adversaries and critics."

Facing death in a matter of months, Ellsberg is loquacious but low-key about his legacy. He said he is still trying to decide whether to be buried or cremated. "If I had a tombstone, I've always thought what it would say is: 'He became a member of the antiwar and anti-nuclear movements,'" he said, adding that he doesn't believe in the afterlife.

"I'm not going to be looking down on all this," he said. "I have no concerns about how I'm remembered, or whether I'm remembered at all."