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As we continue our in-depth conversation with Daniel Ellsberg, the famed Pentagon Papers whistleblower talks about his lifelong antiwar activism and responds to the more recent leak of Pentagon documents about the war in Ukraine. Ellsberg also reflects on the many people who inspired him and says others who look up to his example should know that the sacrifices for building a better world are worth it. “It can work,” he says. Ellsberg, who was recently diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer and given just months to live, spoke to Democracy Now! last week from his home in Berkeley, California.

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#). I’m Amy Goodman, as we continue our conversation with Pentagon Papers whistleblower Dan Ellsberg, who recently announced he’s been diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer. This is another excerpt from the 2009 documentary *The Most Dangerous*

*Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*

. The clip looks at how the Nixon White House responded to the Pentagon Papers leak. You’ll hear White House counsel John Dean; Egil Krogh, who went to prison for his part in Watergate; but first, President Nixon.

**PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON:** Just because some guy is going to be a martyr, we can’t be in a position of allowing the fellow to get away with this kind of wholesale thievery, or otherwise it’s going to happen all over the government. I just say that we’ve got to keep our eye on the main ball. The main ball is Ellsberg. We’ve got to get this son of a bitch.

**JOHN DEAN:** The leak of the Pentagon Papers changed the Nixon White House. It really is what some of us have called the beginning of the dark period. I mean, it was rough and tumble before, but it got down and dirty. So it’s really a defining event for the Nixon presidency. And this is when Egil Krogh, Bud Krogh, was selected to head up the so-called Plumbers unit.

**EGIL "BUD" KROGH JR.:** I was summoned to the Oval Office by the president. John Ehrlichman and I met with him. There was some suspicion that Dr. Ellsberg had access to the more recent war plans that had been developed by the Nixon administration, and would be able to release those documents. I came from that meeting feeling very strongly that I was dealing with a national security crisis, and I was to take any means necessary to respond to it.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Again, that's a former Nixon official, Egil Krogh, an excerpt from *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*

. Dan, I'm sure this is bringing you back, though you live it every day, them breaking into your psychiatrist's office. Talk about what that meant to you, and if that was any worse than facing a hundred years in prison.

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** I think it's been misunderstood. Again, another aspect of the Pentagon Papers, it's been misunderstood this whole time. It's almost always described as an attempt to smear my reputation or to stigmatize me in some way. Now, I was already an American citizen facing 12 felony counts, a possible 115 years in prison. So they weren't working with a new surface here entirely. I had been stigmatized quite a bit by that time. But that wasn't the aim, actually, at all of their sending it in.

As Krogh indicated — and people miss this — what they were worried about was what else I knew — namely, what else I knew and could document that went beyond the Johnson administration into the Nixon administration. The Pentagon Papers themselves ended in 1968, before Nixon came in, so they didn't incriminate him, except for his role in the '50s supporting the French — and proposing nuclear weapons at that time, by the way. But he wasn't mainly involved. And so, when they came out, in fact, he was very calm about it, and properly so. "This will show," as Kissinger said, "that it's really the Democrats' war, after all." And they realized it didn't constitute a real threat for them. And then they realized that they had these terrific secrets that had to be kept secret from the American public because they were so criminal and dangerous — namely, that they were threatening North Vietnam with nuclear weapons, the same way that the criminal threats that are being made against Ukraine right now by Vladimir

Putin. Nixon was making those threats through the Russian ambassador, Dobrynin, and then directly at that time. And that had to be kept secret from the American people at that time, because the American democracy would not have stood for that. So they had to shut me up.

And the problem then was to find out whether I had documents that could document, prove, what I was saying, because people were very reluctant to believe that a president could lie to that degree or could be so criminal to that degree and reckless, unless they had documents to prove it, which I didn't have and really never did convince the public on this point. So I failed, in a way, in my name — my major project, which was to convince the public that a lying campaign, an imperial campaign against Vietnam, that had been carried on by four previous presidents, was being carried on by a fifth. I said it, but no one believed it. They didn't want to believe that the president was lying to them, just as they had allowed themselves to be misled by Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Kennedy, Kennedy and Johnson. So, that part did not succeed; however, they had reason to feel, and to fear, that I might turn up with documents that would demonstrate — which did exist.

My friend, Roger Morris, who was the deputy to Henry Kissinger at that time, had the documents, saw the documents, for the fall of 1969 that listed North Vietnamese targets, transshipment points in the jungle, a mile and a half from the Chinese border, and which were figured they would kill only a handful — literally, they had a figure, three — of civilian casualties. Don't worry about that. And they would send a strong signal to the Chinese. We were prepared to use nuclear weapons right on their border, in the hopes that it would bring Chinese air defenses into the border, and we could pursue them, in hot pursuit, into China and use nuclear weapons against China. So, the provocative aspects of this were very deliberate. When I asked Roger later why they didn't just reveal these documents, which is what Nixon and Kissinger were afraid that I had, and with reason — I knew all the people who were working on this and who resigned over the Cambodian escalation. Yes, they should have given me these documents. And when he — I asked him why they hadn't, and he said, "We should have thrown open the safes and screamed bloody murder, because that's exactly what it was."

**AMY GOODMAN:** What about the latest Pentagon leak, the leak of the Pentagon documents, and what they say about the war in Ukraine, and what people understand who are most knowledgeable, who are insiders, about this war?

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** It's shown from the reaction to these leaks, the major leak being, once again like the Pentagon Papers, that when a war appears to be stalemated, it may be stalemated from the inside just as well. That's what the Pentagon Papers showed, that there is no real prospect for progress and that killing people is, on either side, unjustified by any prospect of any humane result.

Intelligence estimates have shown that a year from now we will probably be in pretty much the same positions — a stalemate — and will not be willing to negotiate. What does that say about our — the people who are making our foreign policy? If that doesn't define a crisis and emergency, what would? Well, yes, I suppose the prospect that we're about to lose within a month, and that's not what either is facing yet.

I don't want to test how either side reacts, if they're facing that, if the U.S. were to do what Biden is urged to do by many, which is direct U.S. participation in the war, shooting Russians, as I say, for the first time since 1920. A year after, two years after the First World War ended, we were still shooting at Russians, against Bolsheviks, in 1920. Every Russian knows that. How many Americans know that? Any? So, they have that very much in their memory.

When Biden is urged to send direct planes, that Ukrainians can't yet operate, like the F-16, tanks that they cannot yet operate, the tendency to send Americans to operate those tanks and get them right away into business will be very strong along with that. I can only hope that Biden will be pressed by a large part of the public, pressed not to involve the U.S. directly in that war, and to be pursuing negotiations, which it is currently absolutely eschewing, is rejecting the idea of negotiations.

There's increasing information that one year ago, in early April 2022, Zelensky and Putin essentially had an agreement, were within very close to an agreement, on prewar *status quo*, returning to a prewar

*status quo*

in Crimea and the Donbas, in relation to NATO

and everything else, but that the U.S. and the British, Boris Johnson, went over and said, "We are not ready for that. We want the war to continue. We will not accept a negotiation." I would say that was a crime against humanity. And I say that with all seriousness to the idea that we

needed to see people killed on both sides in order, quote, “to weaken the Russians,” not for the benefit of the Ukrainians, but for an overall geopolitical strategy, was wicked.

And however the war started, and, I think, with both incredibly bad judgment by Putin, and aggression and atrocity, and, on the other hand, provocation by the United States, in the sense of policies that were consciously foreseen to increase the probability of a Russian crime of this sort, tells me that I think there were a lot of Americans who wanted this war. And they got exactly what they wanted, even better than they could have imagined — huge arms sales to our allies, the U.S. again having an essential role in Europe with an indispensable enemy, an enemy that we could not run the world without, Russia. And Russia stepped into that role very willingly. To say that Russia had no choice but to do what they did do is fairly absurd. That’s like saying you can provoke a person to shoot themselves in the foot or, in this case, to kneecap themselves. Putin had no choice but to kneecap himself and to give himself 800 more miles of adversarial border with Finland and to resuscitate NATO and get these arms sales and so forth — is just absurd.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I also wanted to bring up China, because in 2021 you revealed that the government had drawn up plans to attack China with nuclear weapons over a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Can you talk about the relevance of that today, and when you got that information?

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** Yes. I revealed that information right after *The Economist* magazine had a cover with Taiwan on the cover and a big bull’s mark, bull mark, on the front of it, showing that it was, quote, “the most dangerous place” in the world at that point. And what was at stake was a U.S. intervention in the politics of China, namely, supporting a secession movement, an independence movement, by a portion of China regarded almost universally by Chinese as part of China, supporting it in a way which the Chinese were totally forecasting would lead to war, that they would not accept it any more than Lincoln accepted the secession of the Confederacy, in this case.

And we were pressing for that in a way that I have to say I can’t entirely understand. People act as if they want war with China. How can that be? Selling them arms? Yes, I see that. But why they — why they want to change the relation of Taiwan, which has been pretty much the same since 1979, right now in a way that the Chinese guarantee us will lead to war is inscrutable to

me. But anyway —

**AMY GOODMAN:** And you said that these nuclear war plans over the Taiwan Straits were made in 1958?

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** '58, yeah, that's right. And by the way, there was almost a corresponding crisis earlier, in 1954, '55, so this was known as the second Taiwan crisis in the '50s. But the idea there was that we would initiate nuclear war if the Chinese successfully bombarded by artillery islands that were within artillery range, actually within visual range of the mainland, very easy. A couple of them are just a mile or mile and a half off from the mainland. To keep those rocks from control by Beijing, we were prepared to send in U.S. planes to block that blockade — send in U.S. ships to break that blockade. And if the artillery kept that off or there was a danger of losing U.S. ships, we would hit Chinese targets as much as — as far away as Shanghai, which would certainly, in Eisenhower's terms, and who okayed this, if necessary, if necessary to get through to those islands, we would initiate nuclear war. And he foresaw that as leading to Russian — the ally of China — attacks on Taiwan and on Okinawa, on Guam, even on Japan, which, in turn, guaranteed, in terms of our planning, all-out nuclear war, hitting every city in Russia and China, killing, as our estimates were at that time, 600 million people, a hundred kilowatts —

**AMY GOODMAN:** And their relevance today?

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** — over Taiwan. And that was what they — that's what they were planning to do then. The number of targets in China has not reduced since then. That was a time when any fighting with the Russians, under Eisenhower, even if it started over Berlin, was guaranteed to include targeting China as a whole, as well. That may have changed to some extent, but to a large extent, at various times, we've still continued to say, "Shouldn't we have a plan for war with Russia that doesn't include destroying China?" To which the answer is, "Well, do you really want to destroy Russia and not China also? We'll be destroyed in the process. That would leave China ruling the world." In short, Russia and China have to be regarded as a joint target complex. OK?

This is insanity. This is a form of insanity as a kind of myth and hoax that has taken over the public. It is as insane as QAnon or as the belief that Trump is the president currently of the United States. And yet, the belief that we can do less bad by striking first than if we strike second is what confronts us in Ukraine with a real possibility of a nuclear war coming out of this conflict — in other words, of most life on Earth — not all, most life on Earth — being extinguished as a matter of the control of Crimea or the Donbas or Taiwan. That's insane.

Who is going to face up to that? I call again to the young people that Greta Thunberg has mobilized on us to say, "The adults are not taking care of this, and our future absolutely depends on this changing somehow fast, now." The picture I was looking at, which I'll — I can show you here, I guess — I just happen to have it by me here — was when I was in Norway. I was getting an Olof Palme award. And we went over to where this girl had just started Fridays for the Future and a Strike on Climate — at first, days and weeks entirely by herself. And then, eventually, she was joined by a few others, as you can see in that picture. This was, I think, in early January, after she had started. She had 50 or 60 people in the snow on Friday morning, not Saturday morning, not Sunday morning, but instead of going to school. People said — her teacher said, "This is all very well, what she's doing, but she needs to be studying in school." And her attitude was, "What is there going to be to study about, or what use will that make, if the climate has changed the way it's going?" The reason I admire her so much is not only the brilliance of this movement, her acting on her own initially, taking the initiative, advising others, doing it in the form of a general strike, which is — I think, is a really important way of demonstrating nonviolent action, their withdrawal of support, the withdrawal of support.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Dan, I don't want to exhaust you. We've spent more than an hour talking. But I did want to ask you about what is most helpful to you, after revealing that you have inoperable pancreatic cancer, for friends, for people who care about what you've done, for ways people can be helpful to you.

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** Well, first of all, that revelation, which I was dubious about making, but my sons thought, well, my friends ought to know this, and then it got larger, has proven to get me a just flood of responses, all positive, essentially, thanking me for what I've done and recalling times we've worked together, and making every indication that that was a — that was a tradition of working together that people wanted to see continued. And that's, above all, what I would like to see.

I'm smiling because I'm thinking of a friend named Julia Butterfly Hill. She was called that because she chained herself to major, prime, boreal redwood trees to keep them from being cut down —

**AMY GOODMAN:** Her tree Luna.

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** — and scaled up in the tree for a long time. What's that?

**AMY GOODMAN:** Her tree, she named Luna.

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** Yeah, right. So, she mentioned once, when I heard her say, when somebody asked her, they said — she said, "People tell me, 'You inspire me.'" And she said, "I say, 'Really? To do what?'"

And so, I am hearing from a lot of people that I've been inspirational. And I am confident, God knows, without people like Bob Eaton and Randy Kehler and, before them, people going back to Randy — to Rosa Parks, very much so, and Martin Luther King and Thoreau, others, I wouldn't have thought of doing what I did. I've been very, very proud that Ed Snowden has said, "Without Daniel Ellsberg, no Ed Snowden." And he was impressed by the movie, *Most Dangerous Man*

. It helped him strengthen, he said, what he thought he ought to do.

The key thing in all these cases, all these people who are writing me — and I would like the occasion to say I'm reading all of those, and with the other things up 'til now, I've been able to answer very few of them, even the best, even the most inspiring ones. And I hope to have time to do that. I don't know how much time I have. If it's weeks or a month, they may not hear from me. If it's longer than that, there's nothing I'd like better to do than pursue the interaction I have with my family.



And my family, the larger family, my extended family, are the people who do regard what we're going through as an emergency. And we're working together, nonviolently and truthfully, to change it. And the people who've been arrested with me, but also just the people who take a chance with their jobs and their associations and their work to focus on, to teach themselves what's going on, and to act effectively, all one can say is, it can work.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You know, one of the things you've enabled people to do by sending out this letter that says you don't know how much time you have left is they're talking about all that you have done. And I'm wondering what you want people to focus on, what you are proudest of.

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** Well, my pride at this point is not my dominant emotion. At this point I'm much more aware of, as Greta would put it, how little has changed in these critical aspects of the danger of nuclear war, and how — how limited the effectiveness has been to curtail what we've done. It is possible to see, to think it is not reasonable to say, "We've done all this, and it has made no difference." And it's important to see that it hasn't made more difference than it has, and to ask why and what we can do better.

Looking at this war, for example, that's going on now, the Cold War is incompatible. God knows it is not. The U.S. didn't just cause this by itself, and Russia didn't cause it by itself. There are people all around the world who want Cold War, who find it better to run the world with an adversary, like Russia or the U.S. or China, to explain why we have to do what they say, and we have to make the controversies. So, I think to study and perceive that this is not in the hands of people who have our interests or the interests of survival, of human survival, high in their priorities is essential. It's an awakening, that's in many ways painful, but hard to imagine our escaping our own activities without that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg. He was recently diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer. Fifty-two years ago today, on May Day 1971, he took part in a protest against the Vietnam War in Washington, D.C., along with Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. Four years later, the Vietnam War ended, April 30th, 1975. Visit [democracynow.org](https://democracynow.org) for all our [interviews with Dan Ellsberg](#).

