



“THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN AMERICA: DANIEL ELLSBERG AND THE PENTAGON PAPERS”

By Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith

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Filmmakers' Statements

I remembered vividly (or so I thought) the Pentagon Papers events from 1971, when I was 20. And I knew Dan Ellsberg, whom I had interviewed on camera for a previous documentary film. Then, in 2002, I read Ellsberg's new book, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, and I was struck by what a phenomenal drama this story was — a personal transformation of epic proportions, set against the backdrop of the most important events, personalities and issues of that time: the war in Vietnam, Richard Nixon and a landmark First Amendment battle that pitted national security concerns against the people's right to know.

I approached Dan with a short outline for a film, but the project didn't get off the ground at that time. Then, in late 2004, Judy Ehrlich approached me with a proposition, "What about doing a film on Daniel Ellsberg?" By then America was immersed in two wars, at least one of which we'd been lied into, and the parallels, resonance and relevance of the Ellsberg/Pentagon Papers saga were unmistakable.

Thematically, I felt I was on comfortable and invigorating ground. My first feature doc — the one Ellsberg was in, "Tell the Truth and Run: George Seldes and the American Press" — focused on a dissenter (a muckraking journalist) who stuck out his neck on matters of principle. The several films I'd been involved with since then, dealt with ordinary Americans who took risks and exhibited courage in order to try to change their world for the better. This film was, for me, in that tradition, but it was also something more — grander, perhaps, in the sense that it took place on a bigger stage and involved characters with whom the audience could identify as they asked themselves, "What would I do in that situation?"

During production, I discovered how much I *didn't* know about the story, including the contagious crises of conscience experienced by so many of the principals involved. Ellsberg was inspired by a draft resister who was risking years in prison; Ellsberg's leak of the top-secret McNamara study had many people — his "co-conspirator" Russo, reporters and lawyers for *The New York Times*, a Senator, a Congressman, Dan's own son, his wife and even members of President Nixon's White House staff — asking themselves variations of the same question: "Will I be breaking the law and, if so, should I still take part in what I have before me?"

One great irony of this production is that Judy and I tried to get the film finished while the Bush administration, which had started the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was still in office, as we thought it might be less relevant after a change of administration. We finished the film post-Bush, but — fortunately for the film, unfortunately for the country and the world — the film remains all too relevant, with those wars still raging and, in the case of Afghanistan, even escalating.

But of course the film is about more than any one particular war; it's about our attitude towards war as a solution to political or social conflicts. (Patricia Ellsberg says that our country needs the same kind of political transformation that her husband went through personally.) The film is also about democracy and what it takes to make it work — do we play "follow the leader" or do we insist that Congress, the media and the public have their rightful input into the big issues and matters of life and death that affect all the peoples of the world? And finally, it is about what each of us can do, might do, when confronted with a wrong, big or small, perhaps among friends or at work. Do we go along to get along, or do we act to right the wrong, perhaps at great personal risk?

— Rick Goldsmith, Director/Producer, May 2010

I met Daniel Ellsberg when he acted as an advisor on my earlier ITVS film, "The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It." A mutual friend suggested I *had* to meet with Ellsberg to get his perspective on World War II. I took Dan out to breakfast, which continued through lunch; in fact, he kept me spellbound until 3 p.m. I filled two legal pads with notes and decided at that moment that I would have to make a film about him after I finished the one that was in production. That was in 2000. In the meantime, Dan wrote his autobiography, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, and I read it and realized just how rich his story was.

A few months into researching the subject, I wandered down the hall at the Fantasy building in Berkeley and asked Rick Goldsmith if he might be interested in working with me on a film about Daniel Ellsberg. Dan and Patricia happened to be scheduled to give a talk at a local high school at just about that time. Seeing them together — Patricia's warmth and dramatic retelling of the earth-shattering events they had lived through decades before, combined with Dan's intellectual prowess and ironclad memory and their obvious affection and respect for one another — I perceived an unbeatable basis for a film that would not be a dry polemic on political events, but instead had the makings of a love story and a political thriller.

During production, the film continued to evolve dramatically from a solid but standard history film to a film that had emotional content, suspense, drama and a personal voice — a film that drew on the broader toolbox of documentary filmmaking, including recreations and animation. The composer of the HBO series "The Wire" composed the soundtrack. Michael Chandler, our final editor, had edited "Amadeus." This film has given me the chance to stretch creatively and to experiment with new approaches; that is a thrill.

In the last six months we have screened our film around the world to audiences of all ages, and that has been a phenomenal experience. In Palm Springs, 1,000 students cheered at the film's end and then swarmed the stage to ask how they could make their government more transparent. The head of the Orange County American Legion pledged to show it to all his members. In San Francisco, Major General J. Michael Myatt screened it at the 600-seat Marines' Memorial Theatre and asked for copies to distribute to top brass at the Pentagon; in Hong Kong, a young Vietnamese woman wept uncontrollably, thanking me for telling the story of her people's suffering in the war.

The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers provokes strong reactions and spirited conversation about loyalty to country versus conscience and about the need for secrecy to protect states. In Eugene, Oregon, a young woman cried as she described her own experience of whistle blowing and the fear she felt in the face of the large corporation she was challenging. She told me Dan Ellsberg gave her courage to pursue the lawsuit she had started. We continue to correspond.

Somehow this story of a courageous whistleblower who, after a painful spiritual transformation, risked everything to tell the truth strikes home across the political spectrum. I believe people are looking for models of principled behavior. Across the globe, we are sick of crooked politicians, arms dealers and bankers setting our national agendas. The Dan Ellsbergs are too few and far between, but their very existence gives us hope and courage.

There are some criticisms. We have been accused of hero worship. So be it. We need more heroes and Dan Ellsbergs. I don't pretend to be objective about the need to reduce militarism in the world.

I started my career as a teacher, a teacher of teachers and a school principal. I see my job as a documentary filmmaker as opening hearts and minds to new perspectives the same way I did in my classroom and still do at the community college where I teach documentary film. I don't apologize for having a point of view. I am an advocate for non-violence as a powerful force in the world and I hope my films have made a tiny dent in propagating that idea. Thanks to POV for helping us reach millions of viewers with the message that war is not inevitable, that one man and each of us can make a difference and that our democracy can be responsive and healthier if we demand the truth.