

ELLSBERG INVESTIGATES A PERILOUS NUCLEAR STANDOFF, SEEKING A WAY OUT

We are now speeding inexorably toward a day when even the ingenuity of our scientists may be unable to save us from the consequences of a single rash act or a lone reckless hand on the switch of an uninterceptable missile. — Gen. Omar Bradley, 1957.

A Review Essay by Paul W. Rea on Daniel Ellsberg's *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.

Researcher, writer, and activist Daniel Ellsberg is internationally recognized for blowing the whistle on the outrageous violence in Vietnam. Late in 2017, as the culmination of his life's work, Ellsberg delivered another *exposé*, this one on the persistent and growing dangers of nuclear weapons. *The Doomsday Machine* presents credible, insightful insider revelations—which is no doubt a main reason why it was rejected by 17 publishers. Today, with his new book selling well, Ellsberg is finally able to articulate the alarms he has long intended to sound.

This deeply disturbing book emerges from Ellsberg's realization that the weapons systems first encountered 60 years ago remain on hair trigger—

and that a simple technical snafu or a political misunderstanding could, in less than a half hour, reduce cities to radioactive ash heaps.

The book is fully sourced and even supplemented by a website devoted to nuclear issues: <http://www.ellsberg.net>. What follows is a review essay both highlighting key concepts from *The Doomsday Machine* and providing additional evidence for them. Citations from Ellsberg appear with page numbers, while those from other sources are briefly noted.

“LOOSE NUKES”: MOMENTS OF TRUTH FOR ELLSBERG

Early in the book Ellsberg reveals the shocking discoveries that first aroused his deep concerns about nuclear weapons:

In 1959, as a military analyst for Rand Corporation on loan to the Pentagon, Ellsberg studied the command and control of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Although base and field commanders were officially forbidden to launch a nuclear attack without orders, Ellsberg soon found that many had their own ideas for unauthorized action (44–46).

Ellsberg’s investigation took him to major air bases in the Pacific, including Kadena on Okinawa and Kunsan in South Korea. At Kadena, concerns about H-Bombs going off accidentally had been keeping attack jets on the runway. Practice runs were simply deemed too dangerous. What Ellsberg rightly inferred was that if, during an international crisis, the armed F-100s

were actually launched, their pilots could misinterpret either an explosion at the base or an outage in communications as an indication that war had begun. The fact that the pilots had never flown with nuclear weapons before could only add to their belief that “this is it”—that nuclear war was under way and they should proceed, without authorization, to strike their targets (49–53).

In 1960, at Kunsan Air Base in Korea, Ellsberg experienced an even ruder awakening. There the base commander informed Ellsberg that he “felt empowered by the fundamental principles of war to violate specific and explicit directives” sent from above. Nor was this officer alone in his sense of “individual initiative.” Although communications outages were common at the base, other commanders recalled how they had interpreted “a sudden disruption in communications as a very ominous sign requiring . . . a high level of alert and perhaps a launch of planes” (54–55).

Protocol required that Air Force airborne bombers await an “Execute” message; if pilots did not receive one, they were to head back to the base. Ellsberg asked a commander what would happen if communications were cut and an airborne pilot didn’t get an “execute” message. His answer was chilling: “I think they’d come back,” the major said. “Most of them” (55).

The prospect of unpredictable or mentally unstable personalities starting a nuclear war helps explain why Ellsberg viewed Stanley Kubrick’s classic *Dr.*

Strangelove (1964) as much closer to reality than most of us—that “gung-ho” General Buck Turgidson, renegade commander Gen. Jack D. Ripper, and “cowboy pilot” Maj. “King” Kong were hardly just satiric caricatures.

ELLSBERG’S FIRST ACT OF WHISTLEBLOWING

In 1961, while still working for Rand, a young Ellsberg reviewed a top-secret Pentagon memo; it made casual mention of the projected death toll from an all-out nuclear attack on the Soviet Union: 200,000,000 dead in the Soviet Bloc alone, plus hundreds of millions of additional deaths worldwide (269–70).

Ellsberg was stunned. He arranged for President Kennedy to receive this “eyes only” memo. The president was also shocked; he later remarked sardonically, “And we call ourselves the human race” (271). Such massive overkill had even disturbed President Eisenhower, who had approved the enormous nuclear buildup that made the memo so frightening.

From that point forward, Ellsberg has devoted his life to increasing public awareness of the potential for such irrational and criminal destruction (11). Rather than quitting his job in the military establishment, however, the whistleblower continued working from inside, where he photocopied many thousands of pages. These extensive caches of government documents would become *The Pentagon Papers* (1971) and later provide strong support

for *The Doomsday Machine*. Ellsberg is credible because as an insider he was positioned to document his unsettling conclusions.

Today, after over a half century of “upgrades” and “improvements” to nuclear arsenals plus a better understanding of planetary climate, projected death tolls reach far higher. Geophysicists now estimate that a full-scale nuclear “exchange” would likely result in not only mass carnage from heat, dust, and radioactive fallout; it would also lead to nuclear winter and mass starvation. When sunlight cannot penetrate dust clouds, temperatures drop and plants atrophy, unable to produce food. Following a prolonged nuclear winter, the death count could reach billions—virtually the earth’s entire population (17–20). The fate of the planet continues to hang from a thread attached to a hair trigger.

How could humanity have reached a point of such extreme peril? Ellsberg demonstrates how this mortal danger has emerged from much earlier policy decisions, long before American and Soviet war planners first declared it “highly likely” that even a small nuclear weapon exploding on either Washington or Moscow “would lead to the end of human civilization . . .” (305).

I. HOW SUPERPOWERS CAME TO TARGET CIVILIANS

Probing the origins of nuclear-weapons policy, Ellsberg investigates the military thinking that has evolved over the last century. The questions he raises have rarely been asked, let alone answered:

- When did political leaders and military commanders come “to regard cities as legitimate military targets?”
- When did it become acceptable to bomb civilians? (225).

Ellsberg begins his quest for answers with World War I, when aircraft first made long-distance bombing possible. Initially the combatant countries sought new ways to attack industrial sites (232). But soon, hoping to diminish civilians’ willingness to support the war effort, they also undertook “terror attacks” on urban areas. By 1915, only a year into the war, German dirigibles began bombing urban areas around London, trying to “break civilian morale” (<https://www.history.com/news/londons-world-war-i-zeppelin-terror>).

Between the world wars, industrialized powers continued to bomb civilian targets. In 1932, Imperial Japan bombed Shanghai. In 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, German and Italian bombers struck Spanish cities; Pablo Picasso protested the resulting carnage in his powerful painting “Guernica” (226-28). At the time England began implementing “a much broader bombing strategy targeting industry and populations” By 1939

the British were starting to build their four-engine, long-range Lancaster heavy bomber (232, 237).

Despite these developments, at the outbreak of World War II bombing civilians was not fully acceptable. Though Churchill favored the practice, the British government initially sought to keep its attacks on civilian targets secret from the public. In the U.S., Roosevelt condemned the increasingly frequent attacks on noncombatants: “The ruthless bombing from the air of civilians in unfortified centers of population . . . has sickened the hearts of civilized men and women—and profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity” (226). Only a few years later the deliberate bombing of civilians—which the president had called “a form of human barbarism”—would become standard operating procedure for both British and American air forces (229).

WORLD WAR II: FIRST BOMBING, THEN BURNING CITIES

More than either the Americans or the Germans, it was the British who broke any remaining restraints on bombing civilians. Despite German and Italian bombing of civilians during Spanish Civil War, neither military adopted a strategy of unrestrained urban bombing (237). A few years later Nazi Germany did bomb Warsaw and Rotterdam in its onslaught, but the damage was limited compared to the vast death and destruction later inflicted by the Allies (239).

The bombing of cities increased exponentially throughout the War. When German bombers failed to hit refineries and mistakenly struck a residential neighborhood of London, Churchill ordered seven attacks on Berlin over the next ten days (238–40). Possibly playing down the damage done by German bombings of London, Coventry, and other British cities, Ellsberg contends that “the essential precursor . . . to the era of nuclear danger” began in 1942. At that time “the deliberate bombing of urban populations as the *principal* way of fighting a war” followed a new British directive (243–44).

This new bombing policy meant “the object was now to destroy as large a part of as many German cities as possible,” launching an onslaught that made the Blitz on England seem puny by comparison. “For every ton of bombs dropped on England during the Blitz, England and the United States . . . eventually dropped a hundred tons of bombs on German cities, killing more than a half million civilians” (245).

Also in 1941, Germany decided not to pursue an atomic bomb, opting instead for long-range rockets designed to strike cities. This decision stemmed from a perception that a nuclear project would require both “a terrific technical effort” and a vast commitment of resources which Germany was unable to marshal. It also likely reflected the ethical qualms of Werner Heisenberg, the famed inventor of Quantum Mechanics, who hesitated to serve the Reich (Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* pp. 130–33, 325–27,

384–85, 404). By late 1942, partly at the urging of Albert Einstein and other physicists, the U.S. increased funding for its Manhattan Project (<http://www.ushistory.org/us/51f.asp>).

Implementing its new bombing directive, the British began an intensive campaign targeting entire industrial cities in Ruhr-Rhineland. Especially at night, bombing was notoriously imprecise. When bombs struck highly-populated areas the Royal Air Force (RAF) could claim it was just a mistake (244–45). But after Operation Gomorrah, its huge, massively-destructive firebombing of densely-populated Hamburg, such claims became even less credible.

By 1943, the RAF had found the most efficient way to destroy a city was not by bombs alone but by starting a “firestorm.” This meant using incendiaries to ignite a conflagration in which smaller fires could coalesce into an enormous inferno. Temperatures could reach 1500 degrees Fahrenheit, melting steel and glass. And because a firestorm consumed most of the oxygen, civilians perished in their shelters from asphyxiation as well as from the intense heat. 44,000 people died in the Hamburg firestorm (246–47).

After the inferno in Hamburg, British and American commanders sought to start more firestorms. In February of 1945, with Germany all but defeated, they sent 900 bombers over Berlin, killing 25,000 civilians but

failing to generate another firestorm. Only a week later, this time at Dresden, waves of nearly 1000 Allied bombers dropped a combination of high explosives plus phosphorus and magnesium incendiaries; these touched off a firestorm that consumed the “teapot city,” a cultural center of little military significance. The conflagration incinerated or asphyxiated tens of thousands of civilians, refugees, and prisoners of war (249).

Author Kurt Vonnegut, who witnessed the Dresden firestorm, was deeply traumatized after witnessing both massive mechanized vengeance and an utter absence of empathy. Later, with characteristic understatement he commented on how the war had accelerated a moral breakdown and a hardening of hearts: “World War II had certainly made everybody very tough” (Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* 10).

FIREBOMBING TOKYO

Well aware of the Allies’ obliteration of Dresden, U.S. Army Gen. Curtis LeMay took charge of firebombing Tokyo. As in Germany, the American campaign targeted civilians. Using incendiaries, LeMay ordered trial runs on Tokyo, a city built largely of wood (254). However, Gen. LeMay didn’t just intend to burn the Japanese capital; he wanted to ignite another firestorm. Without clearance from superiors, LeMay ordered enormous B-29 bombers to be stripped of guns and other non-essential weight in order to conserve fuel. This would allow these behemoths to carry still more incendiaries (255).

As 300 B-29s dropped enlarged payloads, most of them enhanced with napalm, thermite, and white phosphorous, ferocious fires formed “a tidal wave of flame.” Fleeing the flames in terror, residents dived into canals where hundreds slowly boiled to death. Superheated updrafts lifted the huge bombers “like ping-pong balls.” The stench of burning flesh caused crews to pull on their masks so as not to retch (257–58). *The New York Times* crowed “Tokyo Erased,” “51 Square Miles Burned Out . . . 100,000 Japanese Believed to Have Perished in Fires” (260).

The USAF “terror-bombed” over a hundred Japanese cities. Though Secretary of War Henry Stimson did little to halt the slaughter, he did tell Truman he “did not want to see the U.S. get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities.” Future Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who was then on Gen. Lemay’s staff, remarked that if the US were to lose the war, they’d all be tried as war criminals (Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick, *The Untold History of the United States* 158). After the Vietnam War, McNamara admitted to his own role in the death of two million Asians (Errol Morris, *The Fog of War* <http://freedocumentaries.org/documentary/the-fog-of-war>).

HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI: FIERY DAWN OF THE NUCLEAR AGE

Just as Ellsberg’s research challenges conventional accounts of Allied bombing, his analysis of dropping atomic weapons on Japan also critiques

the stories Americans have told themselves. The new findings in *The Doomsday Machine* call for significant revisions to American history.

Attempts to comprehend the significance of the first atomic bombs include insights from scientists and philosophers. Once the first atomic bomb was successfully tested in the summer of 1945, thoughtful Manhattan Project scientists foresaw the dire consequences of these literally earth-shaking events.

Following a blinding explosion that turned night to day, J. Robert Oppenheimer, the lead genius behind the building of the bomb, became deeply pensive and also prophetic: “We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried, most were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*: ‘Now I have become Death, the destroyer of worlds’”

(<https://www.manhattanprojectvoices.org/oral-histories/j-robert-oppenheimers-interview/>).

Other thinkers were equally prescient. The day after Hiroshima, existential novelist and philosopher Albert Camus understood that “since yesterday, we’ve been hearing from enthusiastic commentators that now any middle-sized city can be totally obliterated by a bomb the size of a football [Instead], we are now being offered a new form of anguish which may be final” (<http://www.humaniteinenglish.com/spip.php?article2842>).

Albert Einstein soon assumed a prominent role as spokesman for the celebrated scientists worried about the Bomb. As an epigraph to *The Doomsday Machine*, Ellsberg cites Einstein's prophetic insight: "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking," he asserted, "and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe" (<https://thebulletin.org/meeting-einstein's-challenge-new-thinking-about-nuclear-weapons8166>).

Despite Einstein's call for "new ways of thinking," the political and military establishments clung to the old: Gen. LeMay stuck with cold calculations devoid of feeling or ethical concerns: "We scorched and boiled and baked to death more people in Tokyo that night of March 9–10 than went up in vapor at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined" (262).

Entering a long-ongoing conversation about "the decision to drop the Bomb," Ellsberg questions whether officials ever considered its full implications: "There was no moral agonizing at all among Truman's civilian or military advisors about using the bomb on a city. . . . That moral threshold had been crossed long before" (261). He concludes that since firebombing of cities had already become standard practice, there was "no *new* decision . . . the US command had not already made when it firebombed Berlin, Dresden, and Tokyo . . . fire had already become the American way of war from the air . . ." (261–2).

By the summer of 1945, Imperial Japan was surrounded by 250, 000 American troops, Okinawa had fallen to the American forces, its other main islands were blockaded by the U.S. Navy, and the USSR was about to enter the war against Japan. Defeat was inevitable. For several months, in fact, the Japanese had been exploring terms of surrender. The main sticking point was whether they could keep their Emperor, Hirohito.

Yet neither the Truman administration nor the American military command informed the Japanese that the U.S. was *already* intending that Japan keep its emperor (261). An impulse to hold back a bargaining chip may have prolonged the war, allowing the U.S. time to demonstrate a new superweapon.

However, the historical record does suggest internal discussion about whether to “drop the bomb.” Dozens of the Manhattan Project’s physicists urged that their “gadget” never be dropped on human beings, even if such restraint might prevent additional American casualties. Celebrated physicists Leo Szilard and James Franck led a Committee which foresaw an arms race leading to “the sudden annihilation” of cities in the U.S. and other nations. Seventy of the Los Alamos scientists signed the Committee’s petition, along with colleagues at other nuclear sites. Though the Franck Committee Report was sent to President Truman, underlings in the military establishment made sure it didn’t even reach Secretary of War Stimson, let alone the president (287).

However, prominent players objected to the physicists' calls to demonstrate the power of the bomb before using it on human populations. In May, 1945, Oppenheimer expressed concern that demonstrating the Bomb to the Japanese before dropping it on them might produce an embarrassing "dud"—and, furthermore, if the Bomb weren't used, the enormous cost of building it couldn't be justified. At the top of his fame, Oppenheimer apparently allowed his celebrity and brilliant intellect to preempt his moral sensibilities. Eight years later, however, a more pensive "Oppie" opposed the H-Bomb, telling Eisenhower: "Mr. President, I have blood on my hands" (<https://www.armscontrol.org/print/1851>).

In Washington and at the Potsdam Conference (July 23—August 2, 1945) the talk within the Truman administration was much less about ending the war with Japan than about having developed a big bludgeon to hold over the Soviet Union (Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision of Use the Atomic Bomb* 147). It's often remarked that the atomic bombings were less the final shots of World War II than the opening volleys of the Cold War.

When nuclear fission bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they killed about 175,000 residents outright, irradiating and badly burning legions of the survivors. Tens of thousands of these *hibakusha* ("survivors") perished by the end of 1945. Though both blasts were massively destructive, today such "small" fission bombs serve as "triggers" for far larger, immeasurably more destructive H-bombs (48, 287).

A year after the A-bombings, journalist John Hersey published *Hiroshima*, a searing account which has sold 3 million copies over ensuing decades. Drawing on survivor accounts of the overwhelming explosion and its aftermath, Hersey covered an excruciating subject avoided by other American journalists (<https://www.newyorker.com/books/double-take/eighty-five-from-the-archive-john-hersey>).

II. USING NUCLEAR WEAPONS: A LONG LITANY OF NUCLEAR THREATS

While it's often assumed that nuclear weapons have not been used since World War II, Ellsberg illuminates their repeated use as threats to intimidate, dominate, or prevail over other countries.

1945–1953: HARRY TRUMAN AND ALBEN BARKLEY: Early in the Cold War, the U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC) was formed to threaten or execute a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. This was a country devastated by the Nazi onslaught in World War II, in which it had lost well over 20 million of its citizens. Ellsberg indicates that SAC's only mission in this period was "to threaten a nuclear first strike . . . not to deter or retaliate for a nuclear attack": after all, the Soviets had not tested their first nuclear weapon until 1949 (347). Over several decades, SAC increased the size and range of its bombers as well as the explosive power of its weapons.

In 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was also formed; under American direction, it too relied on threats of nuclear attack by U.S. bombers to protect its access to Middle-East oil and to deter further Soviet expansion (347).

1950–1953: Truman: When North Korea, supported by the Soviet Union, invaded South Korea, President Truman warned that nuclear weapons were “under active consideration” if China were to enter the Korean War (320). Over the next three years, prominent U.S. generals—notably Douglas MacArthur and Curtis LeMay, head of the Strategic Air Command—pressed for ever-more-destructive bombing of North Korea (<https://www.airspacemag.com/military-aviation/how-korean-war-almost-went-nuclear-180955324/>).

The casualty figures in the Korean War—37,000 Americans soldiers killed vs. over 4,000,000 Koreans killed—followed a pattern of extreme asymmetry in American interventions: a heavy reliance on bombing and burning non-military targets. The Korean conflict extended the tactic of bombing cities first used in World War II. The U.S. was making such massive use of incendiaries that in 1953 Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of England, sent a cable to Eisenhower: “When we invented napalm, we had no idea it was going to be splashed all over civilians.” About 70 percent of those killed in the Korean War were noncombatants

(https://www.democracynow.org/2018/6/12/prof_bruce_cumings_us_bombing_in).

1953–61: DWIGHT EISENHOWER AND RICHARD NIXON:

When President Eisenhower took office, the Korean War had stalemated. Although Truman had made nuclear threats, these had not halted the flow of Communist Chinese troops and weapons into Korea. Within weeks receiving additional threats, the Chinese agreed to a truce. (320, 311).

The 1953 Armistice Agreement included a clause with considerable relevance to today's Korean conflicts. The Armistice mandated that all parties refrain from introducing nuclear weapons onto the Korean peninsula. In 1956, however, Eisenhower's National Security Council decided to abrogate this provision by proposing to introduce nuclear weapons into South Korea. North Korea protested such violations of the Armistice. After the U.N. ignored the protests, North Korea began to seek its own nuclear weapons

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00963402.2017.1388656>).

Nor were American nuclear deployments simply symbolic. In 1954, embattled French forces in Vietnam became desperate to quash the Viet Minh, the revolutionary precursors of the Vietcong. In response, the Eisenhower administration offered the French nuclear weapons to help them crush the insurrections and cling to their colony (*Washington Post* 9/22/1982).

1958: Eisenhower: Following communist Chinese shelling of tiny Quemoy and Matsu islands, the U.S. moved nuclear weapons into Taiwan and Korea (49–50, 318). Hoping to intensify the pressure on China, the U.S. broke the Armistice Agreement banning nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula. While claiming the tiny islands “weren’t worth the blood of a single American boy” (<https://adst.org/2016/08/chinas-fight-for-tiny-islands-quemoy-matsu-taiwan-straits-crisis-1954-58/>) the Eisenhower administration violated an important treaty and threatened to start a nuclear war over a few square miles of disputed territory.

During most of the Cold War, in fact, the U.S. stationed 950 nuclear weapons in South Korea (PBS “News Hour” 7.5.2018). When the U.S. finally withdrew its nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991, it replaced them with a “nuclear umbrella” using nuclear-armed bombers and submarines to keep North Korea in the crosshairs.

1961-1969: JOHN KENNEDY AND LYNDON JOHNSON: Since 1948, the U.S.S.R. had been attempting to restrict road access to West Berlin, a city surrounded by communist East Germany. Working for Rand Corporation as an analyst, Ellsberg was tasked with articulating the Kennedy administration’s threats to the Soviet leaders (169-76). Himself a dedicated Cold Warrior at the time, Ellsberg drafted a blunt response to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev: “You can drop all this bullshit you’ve

been putting out about [nuclear] ‘parity’ and ‘superiority.’ We know what you’ve got and where it is. . . . So stop giving us trouble on Berlin” (170).

Today Ellsberg acknowledges that if the Soviets had attempted to block access to West Berlin, “they would have been taking an unacceptable risk of U.S. first use of nuclear weapons . . . to disarm and destroy the Soviet Union itself.” In short, the U.S. threatened not only to “decapitate” Soviet command and control in a first strike, but also to kill an estimated 200 million bystanders in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (173–74).

In short, nuclear weapons have been used as existential threats to intimidate the Chinese and the Soviets as well as other countries. Decades later Ellsberg came to realize that the Soviets “had never been threatening nuclear first use, over Berlin or anywhere else. *We* were” (175). Since these were high-stakes bluffs, it’s very fortunate the other side didn’t try to escalate them.

1962: Kennedy and Khrushchev Approach the Abyss: After having to back down over Berlin, Khrushchev sought to achieve nuclear parity with the U.S. (177). Fearing the Soviet Union might “lose” Cuba, Khrushchev inadvisably decided to install medium-range missiles there (202). The ensuing standoff would escalate into a major showdown endangering the very survival of civilization.

When U.S. satellite photos revealed the installation of 38 intermediate-range missiles, it appeared the Soviets might be building the capacity to decapitate the US nuclear arsenal. Kennedy announced an immediate naval “quarantine” of Cuba—and, should even a single missile be fired, threatened “a full retaliatory response against the Soviet Union” (186–87).

One might imagine that Soviet leaders would back down when confronted with an all-out nuclear attack, but they did not. Though Khrushchev didn’t protest the U.S. blockade, he did insist the U.S. both remove its own close-in missiles in Turkey and also pledge not to invade Cuba. Hoping to gain concessions, both sides delayed resolution. Thinking he could up the ante, Khrushchev ordered his forces in Cuba to “continue the installation of the missiles.” Dangers spiked to levels unprecedented in human history (202–04).

As if this brinksmanship were not enough, Kennedy demanded that Khrushchev remove the missiles *before* they become operational. Since an American invasion of Cuba would likely follow a strike on the Soviet missiles, Khrushchev’s gamble nearly ended up initiating the very loss of Cuba the Soviet missiles were intended to prevent (202–03).

Along with remarkable leadership from Kennedy, who resisted intense pressures from Pentagon hawks, including Gen. LeMay, a courageous decision by the commander of Soviet submarine helped avert nuclear Armageddon: his submarine surrounded by U.S. warships, Capt. Nicolai

Shumkov, resisted firing a nuclear torpedo (211-214). If this one Soviet commander had not exercised restraint, many of us might not be alive today.

This Cuban Missile Crisis came much closer to a full nuclear “exchange” than the public has ever realized. Only later did it emerge that the Soviet missiles *were* equipped with over a hundred nuclear warheads. However, these were *tactical* (battlefield) weapons intended to repel an American invasion; they could not reach the U.S. mainland (209–10). Had the presence of armed nuclear missiles become known in Washington, they might have made it impossible for the Kennedy administration to resist strident calls for war from the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

While superpower giants lurched toward nuclear war, the leadership on both sides remained committed to averting catastrophe. The father of small children, Kennedy was especially committed to avoiding nuclear war; Nikita Khrushchev later wondered “what good would it have done me in the last hour of my life to know that although our great nation and the United States were in complete ruins, the national honor of the Soviet Union was intact?” As Ellsberg remarks, this perspective “deserves to be studied by all those whose fingers hover over the trigger to a Doomsday Machine” (222).

In 1962 Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara posited the Doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), but Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson dialed back the levels of confrontation between the U.S and U.S.S.R. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17026538>). And although Johnson prosecuted the Vietnam war with evangelical fervor and apocalyptic destructiveness, unnecessarily killing over a million Asians, he did not rely on nuclear threats. Activating the MAD ideology, Richard Nixon more than made up for lost time.

1969–74: RICHARD NIXON AND SPIRO AGNEW:

Although Nixon campaigned on a “secret plan” to end the war in Vietnam, his plan remained secret because it called for still more bombing—even atomic bombing—of North Vietnam (311). A key element in Nixon’s plan was to intensify the American threats. When the president came up with his “madman theory,” he wanted the North Vietnamese to believe no one can “restrain him when he’s angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button . . .” (310). Having worked for the Nixon administration, Ellsberg is able to lay out these machinations in stark detail.

However, Nixon did much more than try to play the madman. In 1969, hoping to demonstrate his readiness “to go beyond what LBJ had ever been willing to do,” he ordered a secret global alert of nuclear-armed Strategic Air Command bombers. Though this “high alert” was kept from the American public, as the bombers “buzzed” the edges of Soviet airspace

it became fully visible on Soviet radar (314). To the Soviets, the airborne B-52s signaled that an American nuclear strike could be imminent—and that the warning time would be greatly reduced.

Nixon's scheme was apparently intended to deter any Soviet response to his escalations against North Vietnam. His message to Moscow was, "We really are preparing to hit your ally with nuclear weapons [but] don't think of making any nuclear response We're poised to meet that immediately with a preemptive attack (on you)." Underscoring this key point, Ellsberg points out that Nixon's trick exemplifies "the main purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons since the early fifties: to deter with confidence [any thoughts of] Soviet *second*-use retaliation to U.S. first use . . ." (314).

Like other presidents, Nixon used nuclear weapons without actually exploding any. Beneath the "cover" afforded by Nixon's cunning gambit, the president could vastly step up American aggression throughout Southeast Asia. Nixon ordered the mining of Haiphong harbor, unrestricted bombing of North Vietnam, and massive attacks on alleged enemy "sanctuaries" in Laos and Cambodia (313). These carpet bombings exacerbated the turmoil, contributing to the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s. In it, the Khmer Rouge slaughtered two million civilians on "the killing fields" (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-10684399>).

In 1971, when Ellsberg learned about the secret yet extensive bombings of Laos and Cambodia, he made a decision to publish the Pentagon Papers, a secret history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Once the classified documents began to appear in major newspapers, the masters of threat felt threatened themselves. Nixon's Secretary of State Henry Kissinger labeled Ellsberg "the most dangerous man in America," someone who "must be stopped at all costs" (312-313).

After repeated escalations of violence failed to subdue the North Vietnamese, the Nixon administration sought other ways—including "the nuclear option"—to kill or maim even more civilians. During his first year in office, Nixon searched for a "savagely brutal blow" that would bring North Vietnam to its "breaking point" (312). Such tactics are documented in the much-discussed "White House Tapes":

NIXON: "I still think we ought to take out the dikes now. Will that drown people?"

KISSINGER: "About two hundred thousand people."

NIXON: "No, no, no . . . I'd rather use the nuclear bomb" (309).

If one of the traits of a pathological personality is a deficit of conscience and compassion, perhaps there was no need to feign mental problems.

After the war, the former North Vietnamese negotiator reported that in 1972 alone Kissinger threatened nuclear attacks twelve times (314-15). For nearly a decade, and especially under Nixon, American prosecution of the war involved long-distance killing tactics against enormous numbers of civilians. The world had seen genocides, but never before one largely executed from the air, far from the eyes and ears of the perpetrators (Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*: Chapt. 2 “Kill Anything That Moves”:
<https://archive.org/details/pursuitoflonel00slat>).

1977–81: JIMMY CARTER AND WALTER MONDALE: Although former President Jimmy Carter has, in recent decades, become an advocate for disarmament and peace, his presidency often took an opposite stance. In 1978, Carter proposed deployment of the new neutron bomb—really a small H-bomb—in western Europe (292).

In addition, the Carter Doctrine of 1980 proclaimed the U.S. would use its full military force, if necessary, to defend its interests in the Persian Gulf. Such power projection was not just a bluff. A study done under Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz proposed “delivering tactical nuclear warheads by cruise missiles fired from ships in the Indian Ocean” (326). In strong disapproval, large U.N. majorities passed resolutions condemning the first-strike policies on which the U.S. and NATO had for many years based their war plans (325).

Later that year, the White House and the Joint Chiefs discussed possible use of nuclear weapons “if a secret Soviet buildup on the Iranian border led to a Soviet invasion of Iran” (321). Under the Shah, Iran had been a key American oil supplier and power-projection point in the Middle East. Carter’s Press Secretary Jody Powell later described this little-known showdown as “the most serious nuclear crisis since the Cuban Missile Crisis” (321).

1981–1989: RONALD REAGAN AND GEORGE H.W. BUSH:

From the outset, the administration of Reagan and Bush alarmed many Americans concerned with peace. During the campaign, Reagan had contrasted Americans with Soviets, claiming that “we have a different regard for human life than those monsters do” (Lifton and Humphrey, *In a Dark Time* 27). Reagan’s rhetoric raised doubts about whether he could recognize the citizens of a rival superpower as fully human beings.

Even more disturbingly, a top official in Reagan’s administration expressed that embarrassingly ignorant belief that “with enough shovels,” everyday Americans could survive a nuclear attack (Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush and Nuclear War* 18-26). Since the administration had already announced plans to enlarge the stockpile of nuclear weapons, this statement was also alarming.

Reagan continued to use nuclear weapons as the ultimate threat. When the new president openly extended the Carter Doctrine’s threats of a first strike

to the Persian Gulf, another U.N. “Declaration on the Prevention of Nuclear Catastrophe” challenged “any doctrine allowing the first use of nuclear weapons and any actions pushing the world toward a catastrophe . . .” (325). Eighty-two countries signed the U.N. Declaration.

1983: Reagan Takes Humanity to the Precipice

By 1983, Reagan had both greatly increased military spending and also announced his “Star Wars” anti-ballistic missile initiative. Seeming to draw on his Hollywood background, Reagan had characterized the Soviet Union as “the Evil Empire.” When a Soviet fighter shot down a Korean airliner that had strayed into Soviet airspace, Reagan characterized the tragedy as a “wanton, barbaric act [that] violated the most basic principles of international law and morality” . . . “a crime against humanity”

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=41847>).

If all this weren’t provocative enough, the U.S.-led Able Archer ‘83, a NATO exercise the Soviet Union saw as an elaborate charade intended to cover a sneak attack. Moscow became increasingly concerned about Washington’s militaristic actions and rhetoric. Terrified by American threats, Soviet leader Yuri Andropov became irrational, his finger quivering above the nuclear button. Only later did the world learn just how terrified Soviet leaders were—and just how close to nuclear war it had come (Marc Ambinder, *The Brink: President Reagan and the Nuclear War Scare of 1983*).

Though Reagan was one of the most conservative, nationalistic, and hawkish of presidents, over eight years Reagan actually relied less on *direct* nuclear threats than many of his predecessors. Instead, the Reagan/Bush administration let technology do the talking: they pushed for new weapons systems such as the MX (“Peacekeeper”) missile, a first-strike weapon which carried a dozen warheads. For the Soviets, the greatly expanded capabilities of these systems obviously posed new threats—which was exactly what they were designed to do.

Although peace activists laughed at the Orwellian irony of calling a first-strike weapon a “Peacekeeper,” the new threat of an even more devastating first strike was no laughing matter. Adm. Stansfield Turner, a former Director of National Intelligence, warned that this new ICBM could be “a destabilizing factor because its capabilities could threaten Soviet counterstrike response capabilities (<https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/lgm-118-peacekeeper-mx/>).

Reagan’s trademark project, however, was the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, or “Star Wars”). By proposing a space-based anti-missile system relying on satellites and lasers, his administration opened itself to critique from many quarters, including the American Physics Society (<https://www.aps.org>). The Soviets, however, were less persuaded that SDI wouldn’t work. To counter it, they sought to develop more advanced offensive missiles, expensive weapons they could ill afford.

Although Reagan professed to reject the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) and proposed to “render nuclear weapons obsolete,” his solutions did not include, at least initially, either negotiation or détente. Instead, the president touted “peace through strength,” meaning yet more deployments for “deterrence.” Since both the MX and SDI threatened the Soviets’ ability to strike back, both weapons made an American first strike seem more advantageous. Like other American presidents, Reagan refused to make a “no-first-use” commitment (324).

The Reagan administration did not build either of its favored new weapons, however. Its most bellicose tendencies were mitigated not only by the rising strength of the Nuclear Freeze movement of the 1980s but by the ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev, the thoughtful, well-informed new leader of the Soviet Union. As soon as Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he was struck by the vast overkill capacity built up over three decades of the nuclear arms race. He concluded that a mere “one thousandth of this” could “destroy all living things on earth” (356–57). In the U.S., Carl Sagan, Paul Ehrlich and other prominent scientists popularized the results of studies on the frightening prospects for Nuclear Winter brought on by a nuclear “exchange.”

Such chilling realizations propelled Gorbachev to propose that he and Reagan meet in Reykjavik, Iceland, to reduce nuclear tensions. The 1986

Summit failed to produce an accord, largely because of Reagan's insistence on continuing research on SDI, which openly violated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty the U.S. had signed with the Soviet Union (357). However, this first meeting did eventually lead to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987 between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

<https://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm>).

1989–1993: G.H.W. BUSH AND DAN QUAYLE: The demise of the Soviet Union, Ellsberg notes, reduced U.S. nuclear threats but did not eliminate them. When Saddam Hussein's Iraq allegedly committed "unconscionable actions" during Operation Desert Storm, the massive American-led invasion and bombing of Iraq, the Bush administration made predictable threats of a nuclear attack (321).

1993–2001: BILL CLINTON AND AL GORE: In 1995, as North Korea continued its nuclear reactor program, the Clinton administration made explicit threats against the Pyongyang government (322). In 1996, the Clinton administration also threatened catastrophic consequences if Libya continued to operate an underground chemical weapons plant (322). The problem, though, was that the U.S.A. itself possessed vast stores of chemical weapons.

2001–2009: GEORGE W. BUSH AND DICK CHENEY: In 2002, attempting to replace an "Evil Empire" which no longer existed after the

demise of the Soviet Union, President G. W. Bush designated Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the Axis of Evil. Given the prospect of a surprise attack by a nuclear superpower, it's not surprising that Iran and North Korea would redouble their efforts to develop a nuclear deterrent

[\(https://kpfa.org/episode/upfront-june-12-2018/\)](https://kpfa.org/episode/upfront-june-12-2018/).

2003: G. W. Bush: Using NATO participation for political cover, the U.S. led a massive bombing campaign and then an invasion of Iraq kicked off by huge explosions in Baghdad Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld touted as “shock and awe.” As in the First Gulf War, U.S. ground forces made extensive use of depleted-uranium weapons which produced long-lasting radioactive residues. Both the rhetoric and the reality of the Iraq War seemed intended as warnings to other countries.

2005–2006: G. W. Bush: In 2006, after Vice President Cheney announced readiness for a “large scale air assault on Iran employing both conventional and tactical nuclear weapons,” President Bush was asked whether these plans “included the possibility of a nuclear strike?” Echoing his predecessors in Washington, Bush emphasized that “*All options* are on the table” (328).

2007–2009: G. W. Bush: Having demonstrated a willingness to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration likely felt less need to make explicit nuclear threats. However, the administration hardly promoted

nuclear non-proliferation. Instead, it scuttled the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), opposed extending the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

Not only did the administration resist reductions in nuclear weapons and continue to pursue missile-defense schemes; it also concluded a nuclear deal with India (<https://www.nature.com/news/2009/090114/full/457250a.html>).

2009–2017: BARACK OBAMA AND JOE BIDEN:

President Obama's urbane and rational style was often at variance with his policies. While it may seem inconceivable to imagine Obama resorting to bellicose rhetoric, personal insults, or blatant threats, an examination of his administration's policies paints a different picture. While Obama would not have threatened "fire and fury," his administration's policies, whether toward North Korea or regarding nuclear weapons more broadly, were hardly progressive, often not that different from those of Bush-Cheney.

Under Obama the extensive military exercises ("war games") continued on the Korean Peninsula. The Americans and South Koreans were practicing aggressive moves to replace the North Korean regime. These exercises not only included landing Marines at the port of Wonsan; they also simulated atomic attacks. Nuclear-capable B-1 bombers repeatedly flew near and sometimes over North Korea, and B-52s dropped dummy nuclear weapons on South Korean islands (<https://www.thenation.com/article/trumps-madness-chance-peace-korea-bruce-cummings/>).

In a country once devastated by U.S. bombing, such exercises would have to be experienced as highly threatening. These war games became dramatic counterparts to the verbal threats of Nixon, Reagan, Bush and Trump. When Trump acknowledged that such war games are indeed intimidating and provocative, he acknowledged that decades of nuclear posturing were also intended, at least in part, to intimidate Pyongyang.

Beyond the expanded war games, Obama's record on nuclear weapons was hardly stellar. Despite having won a Nobel Prize for pledging to abolish them, Obama initiated the current trillion-dollar nuclear "modernization" program, which has included hundreds of billions to continue Bush's Stockpile Stewardship "upgrades" plus billions more for the "new and improved" B61-12 nuclear bomb (<http://www.trivalleycares.org/new/Spring14CW.html>). Under Donald Trump, the U.S. remains on course to spend over \$4 million *an hour* over the next 30 years to make its nuclear arsenal deadlier and more "useful" (<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-op-0614-nuclear-dismament-20180613-story.html>).

Ellsberg ends his survey of U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons by exploring questions of effectiveness and legitimacy: "several presidents *believed* their threats had succeeded; and *all* of them believed that current or future first-use nuclear threats would be legitimate, could be effective, and might be necessary" (323–24). Clearly pressures were brought to bear on

these presidents, including “pressure from foreign-policy elites,” meaning bankers, corporate executives, and conservative think tanks (324). But Ellsberg may underplay the foreign-policy establishment’s belief in a mandate to dominate—the self-righteous belief that “America must prevail because its mission is to promote democracy.”

III. THE PERILS OF PREEMPTION AND FIRST USE

After many years of pursuing a first-strike strategy aimed at “decapitating” an enemy’s ability to strike back, a superpower stalemate now puts the entire planet under a mushroom cloud. Planners cling to a single strategy for preemption, somehow hoping to paralyze the other side’s retaliatory capability “so as to avoid total devastation to itself . . .” (305).

Yet if one superpower were to attack the other’s command and control centers, doing so could risk touching off an all-out nuclear apocalypse. Even if a preemptive first strike did effectively decapitate an enemy’s command and control capabilities, the nuclear explosions could expose themselves to radioactive fallout drifting over vast distances and even triggering a nuclear winter. This is “blowback.” In response to the prospect of seeing their ability to respond preempted, military planners have gone to a “use-‘em-or-lose-‘em” posture, one that increases the chances of errors and calamitous decisions (305-308).

Yet although a first strike could be suicidal, after all these years “launch-on-warning” still remains official U.S. policy—as well as that of NATO, which it has long dominated (https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1999_07-08/jmja99).

IV. MYTHS, MISCONCEPTIONS, AND A WAY OUT

While decentralization of command and control reduces the risk of decapitation, it also brings additional humans into the loop. This places more fallible fingers near more hot buttons.

While the superpowers worry about the itchy trigger finger of a reckless third-world leader, the threat could just as well lie with a rogue functionary under their own command. Early in his career, readers will recall, Ellsberg came to understand how decentralization carries enormous risks of both pathological personalities and unauthorized launches (306–07). Decentralized or loose controls also run risks from rogue individuals such as those depicted in *Dr. Strangelove*. The title character was based on prominent proponents of nuclear weapons (Werner von Braun, Edward Teller) as well as on actual close calls with catastrophe (the Cuban Missile Crisis) (64-65). This classic film may be even more relevant today than when it was made, over a half century ago.

In the late 1950s it was the shocking degree of delegation to commanders in the Pacific that first alarmed Ellsberg. At that time President Eisenhower had secretly delegated authority to initiate nuclear attacks to subordinates

who in turn empowered their underlings (15). Although the Pentagon has tightened its control since that time, Ellsberg and other experts still wonder whether the presidential “football” actually controls the country’s arsenal—or whether ultimate control might reside with subordinates or even in computers.

The Doomsday Machine also presents a cogent critique of the time-honored but mostly mythic doctrine of nuclear “deterrence.” It’s true, as we’ve seen, that nuclear threats have likely deterred some military actions, possibly making it seem too risky for the Chinese or the Soviets to proceed. But nuclear threats soon lose their potency and become bluffs when there’s no follow through. Making threats without consequences renders them increasingly less effective, but delivering the consequences threatened would risk Armageddon.

Contrary to popular mythology, contends Ellsberg, American nuclear strategy has never been about “defense” or “deterrence.” The closest thing to “defense” was the effort “to limit the damage to the U.S. from Russian retaliation to a U.S. first strike,” argues the former weapons planner. Deterring or responding to a surprise Russian attack “has *never* been the only or even the primary purpose of our nuclear plans and preparations.” Despite decades of official propaganda to the contrary, the intent of ongoing American nuclear preeminence is not to deter but to insure

domination in non-nuclear conflicts traditionally involving Russian or Chinese interests (12).

For psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, co-author of *Indefensible Weapons*, “psychic numbing” is the great challenge: to escape its paralysis, “we must look into the abyss to see beyond it.” Concurring with his friend of many decades, Ellsberg observes that because of a “secular miracle” over the past 70 years “we have been saved by very, very good luck, but that is not likely to continue without a major shift in our policies.” Change is essential. Without it the odds are not good, for “this is not a species to be trusted with nuclear weapons” (Pacifica Radio “Democracy Now” 5/18/18).

To make change happen, we’ll need to evolve and expand those “new ways of thinking” Einstein famously urged. Ellsberg points out that there’s a huge difference between a relatively few states possessing “*some* nuclear weapons” and two superpowers doggedly clinging to their “doomsday arsenals.” While it’s true that “you can’t uninvent nuclear weapons, you can *dismantle* a Doomsday Machine” (340).

If we untrustworthy, often irrational humans hope to have a future, we have some long-overdue work to do.

Paul W. Rea, Ph.D., is a writer, researcher and longtime activist who has taught a course on The Politics of the Nuclear Age. When he first saw *Dr. Strangelove*, the film sailed over his head like a runaway B-52.