

Daniel Ellsberg



The following is an interview with Dan Ellsberg by Carl Nelson, of the College Press Service, and Frank Greer, Special Projects Director, National Student Association.

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interview

of all of us — the history by which our elected representatives and their appointed officials got us into a major war. It was something that I thought every citizen needed to know. They weren't complicated, they were facts of our experience and our decision-making — the performance of the people that had been elected or appointed. So, I felt that it was essential that Congress, in particular, make good decisions and informed decisions — that Congress should know a great deal more about the background of past decisions than the Executive had let them know.

Ultimately, I felt the same to be true for the public, especially after the last year or so which has seen two more invasions take place under what were obviously conditions of the same kind of deception and executive usurpation of authority that the earlier decisions had shown. That led me to the decision to make this information available to the public and the press.

NELSON: When did you make that decision?

ELLSBERG: The decision with respect to Congress was made really almost a year and a half ago. But I think that it was really after the Laos invasion this year that it seemed to be urgent to give a still wider audience access to this material.

GREER: There has been a question in the minds of the Congressmen that met with you recently about whether this study and its release mean that there will be substantial change in either the public's view of wars of this type or the executive steps that leads us into these wars.

ELLSBERG: I believe that the immediate change to be hoped for is in the performance and behavior of the current elected representatives, particularly in Congress. There is no one in the country who has not a great deal to learn from these papers, and by that I mean to include the President, and former presidents.

I was disappointed to hear Secretary of State Rusk a week or two after they had come out say that he had not yet had time to look at the material.

But Secretary Rusk no longer

has the power to end the war. Congress does. And I'm very anxious that the behavior of Congress change in response to the information that is in these records.

NELSON: It is obvious from the Pentagon Papers that a small circle of diplomatic and military advisers provided advice to the President on making his decisions. What alternatives could be developed to allow dissent to develop — creative forms of dissent which might save thousands of lives in the near future?

Along these same lines, what is your feeling on the mass civil disobedience during the early part of last May, the Mayday actions.

ELLSBERG: The individuals who man the posts in the executive branch are human beings much like the human beings in Congress, and outside the government. I think that the solution to the problem of the behavior that has led us so far into this war is not to find some new breed of official, or some strain of saint with which to man these positions, but it is to take very seriously the advantages implicit in the Constitution of pitting one set of individuals with certain institutional incentives, a certain power base and certain responsibilities to the public against other very comparable individuals in the executive. That's the meaning in constitutional provision of separation of powers. It's not the provision that leads to proficiency, per se, but it is meant to protect the freedoms of individuals.

I think that the answer has to be not centrally performed in the executive branch and the courts. I might add that the courts are to be criticized in their past behavior for avoiding the basic responsibility of addressing very profound legal questions connected with this war, just as most Congressmen have failed to do what they could in line with their own Constitutional functions.

NELSON: The second part of that question is could you try to relate your dissenting actions, which seem to me to be pretty much outside of that system of government, and which have gotten you into some possible trouble so far, with some other kinds of creative dissent such as the Mayday actions.

ELLSBERG: Funny, possible trouble. I guess ten years in prison

obviously is trouble, but it's not the loss of limb or the loss of life which is a risk and sacrifice that we take for granted when we send our brothers and sons off to fight in a foreign land. Nor is it any different from the trouble that hundreds of young men in this country have put themselves into in the course of resisting this war, doing what they thought was their duty to resist it. So if I end up in the company of those people it will be a crowded company that I join.

In terms of the question that you raise about the Mayday demonstrations, and the challenge that it poses to the normal processes of government and to the elected officials, I think there is a very direct challenge and connection.

Thanks to John Mitchell's action in demonstrating the willingness of this administration to suspend the Constitution, in effect, to keep traffic running in Washington and to keep the war going by jailing 13,000 people, I think he brought home to the American public more than any other action could have the fact that there were at least 13,000 people in this country who were willing to go to jail to demonstrate that this war was wrong, criminal, and not merely a mistake but a crime that must be stopped. Now, that is an example that I would like to see Congressmen take very seriously as a standard of behavior.

GREER: I think that the issue of personal responsibility in taking that kind of further action is important not only to people here in Congress, but also to people in America, many of whom have taken some resistance action in their lifetime, either by resisting the draft or by some other way of saying that they are not going to go along any longer as part of the war effort.

However, many people were looking for alternatives to Mayday, and I think many Americans are still looking for those alternatives. They feel the responsibility weighing very heavily and yet they look for other paths or avenues to express that or to somehow make an effective resistance to the war.

ELLSBERG: The example of the people who took part in Mayday, which was very creditably non-violent, should be an example and a challenge to their parents and to other older people in this country. It is obviously based on a willingness on their part to take the risks of jail, which was their experience as it worked out.

I have found over the last year a very deplorable attitude on the part of many adults and older people have been happy to see their sons and other younger people take the risks of carrying

on the war. When I asked people, even those in Congress, how they thought the war was going to be brought to an end, or what would keep President Nixon from invading Laos before that happened, or bombing North Vietnam before that happened, or destroying Vietnam before that happened, they tended to say: "the kids" will not allow it.

They might say demonstrations will not allow it, but then if you pressed them further — "who is going to do those things" — "the kids."

This really gave me the uneasy feeling that the adults in this country who are against the war were willing to see their children be cannon fodder at the barricades, go to jail, risk their career; just as "hawk" parents set their children off to die.

I wouldn't be at all happy if the burden of resisting this war continues to be on the adolescents and young men in arms while their parents and other older people stand back and regard risk-taking as totally out of the question.

NELSON: Would you describe what you feel are the factors that underlie the Nixon administration's negotiating posture, and how decisions of what our negotiating position is going to be have been determined in the past? In light of this, what do you think of the recent 7-point proposal of the Provisional Revolutionary Government?

Could a Congressman exert influence in this field?

ELLSBERG: Well, I think that our negotiating posture is what it has been in previous negotiations — so called.

The posture has not been willing at all to make the kinds of concessions that were clearly called for five years ago, ten years ago, and twenty years ago, if the war was to be avoided or ended.

You have asked a number of questions here, which are a little difficult to deal with in one answer. The question arose recently in the hearings about the volumes of negotiation in the Pentagon Study. Of course, what those reveal, I think is what I have just said. There have been no serious negotiations all this time and the famous private channels have been channels for ultimatums from this government to the other side, calling upon it to surrender, in effect. Ultimatums of which none of our intelligence estimates ever gave a president hope that they would achieve an end to the war.

I do have some hopes right now, and they are in part related to the Pentagon Papers, and the release of them. I think that the mood of the American public since the total failure of the Laotian invasion, and the disillusionment with the effect of

(continued on page 5)

