Film Description

When in 1971 Daniel Ellsberg leaked a secret Pentagon history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam to the press, the shockwaves it set off may have been due nearly as much to the leaker as to the information leaked. While Americans were painstakingly digesting the documents’ long and byzantine history — which showed the nation’s leaders, both Democratic and Republican, lying about the facts of the war, proclaiming their desire for peace while seeking a wider war, declaring fidelity to democracy while sabotaging elections, and exhibiting a sweeping callousness to the loss of both Vietnamese and American lives — Ellsberg himself dramatically embodied the country’s division over the Vietnam War.

As recounted in The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers, nominated for a 2010 Academy Award® for Best Documentary Feature, Dr. Daniel Ellsberg was one of the few people who even had full access to the papers, to which he himself had contributed. Far from being an outsider, the Harvard-educated former Marine officer had worked hard, and brilliantly, in the view of his superiors, as a Pentagon analyst justifying expanded U.S. military action in Indochina. After The New York Times became the first newspaper to begin publishing “The Pentagon Papers” on June 13, 1971, National Security Advisor Henry

Daniel Ellsberg at the Los Angeles courthouse, 1973; Anthony Russo and Patricia Ellsberg to his right. Courtesy of AP photos.
Kissinger told his staff that Ellsberg was “the most dangerous man in America who must be stopped at all costs.”

To tell this gripping tale, the filmmakers have assembled a who’s-who of participants in the events surrounding the papers’ publication: Mort Halperin, who supervised the “Vietnam War Study,” as it was originally called, at the Pentagon; Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling, a fellow analyst at the RAND Corporation, a military think tank; Egil “Bud” Krogh, the Nixon White House aide who directed the “Plumbers Unit” of Watergate infamy; Anthony Russo, another RAND analyst who encouraged Ellsberg’s leak of the study and later faced charges of conspiracy and espionage; John Dean, Nixon’s White House Counsel, who ultimately broke open the Watergate case; The New York Times reporter Hedrick Smith, who wrote some of the first Pentagon Papers stories; the Times’ General Counsel James Goodale, who gave the go-ahead for their publication in the face of more cautious legal views; Leonard Weinglass, Russo’s defense attorney; draft resister Randy Kehler, whose willingness to go to jail to stop the war profoundly affected Ellsberg; John Dean, Nixon’s White House Counsel, who ultimately broke open the Watergate case; The New York Times reporter Hedrick Smith, who wrote some of the first Pentagon Papers stories; the Times’ General Counsel James Goodale, who gave the go-ahead for their publication in the face of more cautious legal views; Senator Mike Gravel (D-AK), who during a filibuster against the draft finally got the entire 7,000 pages of the Pentagon Papers into the Congressional Record.

Revelatory archival audio and film footage add the voices and images of Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon; Henry Kissinger; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara; early Congressional war critic Senator Wayne Morse (D-OR); iconic news figures including Walter Cronkite and John Chancellor, and talk-show host Dick Cavett, who all did so much to define the Vietnam War era.

Among the surprises many will find are Nixon’s desire to use nuclear weapons in Vietnam. Another surprise is that even as a civilian analyst, Ellsberg armed himself and went with U.S. soldiers into the field to learn the truth. Most astonishing is just how difficult it was for Ellsberg to get anyone to release the papers once he had leaked them — a difficulty that found him and his wife, Patricia, desperately distributing copies to politicians and news people in the final days before Ellsberg’s arrest. Their hope was that wide distribution would make the papers impossible to ignore and render irrelevant a court injunction against their publication.

The Most Dangerous Man in America is a comprehensive look at the release of the Pentagon Papers and the political firestorm that may have sealed Americans’ disenchantment with the war, and which certainly sealed the fate of the Nixon Administration. But the film is also an intensely intimate look into the conscience of a gifted and intelligent man who wrestled personally and professionally with what he came to see as the contradictions between American ideals and American power in Southeast Asia. The story is illuminated with special insight from Ellsberg’s wife of 40 years, Patricia Marx Ellsberg; his son Robert (from a previous marriage), who as a boy helped with the onerous job of photocopying the voluminous papers; historian Howard Zinn, one of a group of radical academics who supported and befriended Ellsberg; and Ghandian peace activist Janaki Tschannerl, who helped Ellsberg work through his transformation from, as newscasts of the day put it, “hawk to dove.”

Daniel Ellsberg in Vietnam as seen in The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers. Photo courtesy of Daniel and Patricia Ellsberg

There is also a love story underneath all the public turmoil: When Patricia and Ellsberg first dated, she introduced him to the anti-war movement. But her view of the work he was doing for the Pentagon led to a breakup. Years later, after his change of heart, he reunited with Patricia and together they faced the trial that might have sent Ellsberg to prison for life.
And throughout The Most Dangerous Man in America, there are Ellsberg’s own words, spoken with remarkable clarity and consistency in both old news footage and in contemporary interviews. He reveals the emotional side of what has become a life-long evolution in his work and philosophy, yet he never loses sight of the substantive issues at stake, the lives being saved or not saved, the integrity of the Constitution, the catastrophe of war. What emerges is a man of high ideals and exceptional determination who still has a keen sense of guilt for his former role in promoting war.

Identified as the probable source of the leak of the Pentagon Papers on June 16, 1971, Ellsberg was pursued by the FBI. It was a manhunt of such massive proportions that it was described as the largest since the infamous Lindbergh baby kidnapping. Ellsberg and Patricia hid out in Cambridge, Mass., for two weeks, while successfully distributing copies of the study to The Washington Post and other newspapers (resulting in its publication in 17 additional newspapers) and to Senator Mike Gravel, who tearfully read from it and entered it into the Senate record. Daniel Ellsberg turned himself in at the Federal Courthouse in Boston on June 28, 1971.

Initially under the Espionage Act, Ellsberg faced up to 20 years in prison. By the time conspiracy and other counts were added to the indictment, Ellsberg was facing 115 years and Russo 35 years. But the government case against the two men was so compromised by questionable or illegal government actions that Judge Matthew Byrne threw the indictment out on May 11, 1973 — a victory for free speech and the right of people in a democracy to know what their leaders are doing, and an event that is cited in court cases to this day. Not least of the government’s illegal actions was the formation of the White House “Plumber’s Unit,” whose first and foremost target was not the Watergate Democratic headquarters but the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist. Not trusting the rule of law, Nixon wanted to dig up dirt on Ellsberg to, as he put it, “convict the son-of-a-bitch in the press.”

The Most Dangerous Man in America is a dramatic recounting of a watershed turn not only in the struggle over the Vietnam War but in Americans’ understanding of issues of war and peace, the vitality of democracy and higher notions of duty and patriotism. Ellsberg would likely point out that it is not a new turn in American thinking. He’s fond of quoting Henry David Thoreau, America’s first theorist and practitioner of “civil disobedience,” who advised his fellow citizens to “cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence.”

“Both Judith and I had done films about people of conscience who stood up for their beliefs and dared challenge the status quo,” says Goldsmith. “And we both felt the story of Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers might have something important to say to audiences today, especially anyone under 50, who wouldn’t personally remember or even know about these events.”

“I think we, among some other filmmakers, felt that it was amazing no one had made this story,” adds Ehrlich. “It seemed like such a natural political thriller, without having to concoct anything — here was someone who had made this act of conscience that ended up bringing down a president. And we thought — those of us who lived through those times — that we knew this story, but the more we learned about it, the more we thought, ‘What a great lesson about standing up for what’s right.’”

The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers is a production of Kovno Communications and Insight Productions.