Remembering Dan – An Article in Process\*

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I am deeply indebted to Dan Ellsberg for more than his magically pulling a quarter from my young grandson’s ear. Iwas privileged to know and to work with Dan who was a mentor, a friend, and courageous passionate soul I could turn to when I needed deeper understandings of U.S. nuclear weapons policies and to serve as a speaker in conferences, rallies, and in more recent years, webinars.. The death of this intellectually, morally, and physically courageous man leaves a unique and gaping hole in the moral fabric of the universe. Dan will long be sorely missed by me and uncounted thousands whose lives he touched and changed.

Unlike Henry David Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Dan’s early commitments reflected anything but those for which he is best known and honored. A passionate genius graduate of Harvard University’s 1950s Cold War national security program, by the age of 30 he was a principal author of the United States’ SIOP, its nuclear war fighting plan. He had earlier enlisted in the Marines and served in the Middle East during the 1956 Suez Crisis. Later, at the request of U.S. Secretary of Defense McNamara, he deployed to Vietnam’s jungles and villages to evaluate the mis-named “pacification” program – a doomed campaign that that sought to drain the “sea” in which the Viet Cong could operate by isolating hundreds of thousands of innocent South Vietnamese in concentration camps.

Among my earliest engagements with Dan was in the early 1970s, when I arranged for him to give a lecture about war at Arizona State University. He stayed in our home, and being the absent minded genius that he was, he’d left his jacket in Los Angeles. I had one jacket then which fit him. The next morning, as he left for the airport wearing my jacket, I had to remind him that it was the only one I had. Among other things, that incident has served me well over the years. When your mind is focused on what is most important, other details fall away. I also remember two things from the evening of his talk which was to focus on the war. Earlier that day Newsweek had published excerpts from Woodward and Bernstein’s book *All the President’s Men*. Dan couldn’t get his nose out of the magazine as we walked to campus, and the article became the subject of his talk. And, remembering something my father had said, I asked Dan what it was like to be a Jew in the Marines in the 1950s. He turned to me and to my surprise countered that he’d been raised as a Christian Scientist. That may, I think, help us understand his early career.

Besides the model of personal and intellectual courage that Dan provided to so many of us, Dan’s greatest gift to me was helping me to understand what we later called “The Deadly Connection” between U.S. nuclear weapons policies and its wars of foreign military intervention. I had been a member of a delegation that traveled to Lebanon in December 1981 as part of efforts to encourage a two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unfortunately, while we were there, it became apparent that Israel would soon be invading the country, but on our return no one responded to our warnings. That winter and spring were also the months of planning for what became the largest demonstration, the million person June 12, 1982, march and rally for disarmament and human needs. Organizers had voted not to include opposition to foreign interventions. So, when Israel invaded Lebanon on June 6 discipline was exercised for the rally to remain silent about the intensifying war. Remembering the U.S. DEFCON alert in the closing days of the 1973 war, I went almost crazy knowing that U.S. nuclear weapons stood behind Israel, and that if Syria intervened, the Soviet arsenal would stand behind Syria. Only two rally speakers broke ranks and warned of the dangers of a nuclear confrontation.

Desperate to go deeper in my understanding of these dynamics, I was led to Dan’s “Call to Mutiny” essay in E.P. Thompson’s Protest and survive, and then I had a long personal kitchen tutorial from Dan Between the two, I learned that the U.S. nuclear doctrine had never really been based on deterrence. It had always been based on preemptive first-strike nuclear warfighting, designed to disarm nuclear-armed opponents or to intimidate adversaries. During numerous international crises and wars, U.S. presidents had used the nuclear gun in the same way that an armed robber uses a gun when he points it at the victim’s head. Whether or not the trigger is pulled, the gun has been used. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown later testified, nuclear weapons make our conventional forces credible. Or, as Noam Chomsky explained, with its first strike threats the U.S. made sure that no other nation would come to the aid of a nation we were determined to attack.

And it was on that basis that in 1983, Dan and Randy Forsberg were the keynote speakers at the first of what became thirty “Deadly Connection” conferences and forums held across the country. Dan’s tutorial and subsequent speeches also served as the initial foundation for books I subsequently edited and wrote, including my PhD dissertation. Thank you Dan!

There were at least two driving forces behind Dan’s passionate, compassionate, and steely commitment to save human lives.

Dan has reason to obsess about accidents and to envision worst case scenarios. In a small scholarly Cape Cod setting Dan shared the original source of his passion. As those gathered prepared to break for lunch, a literature professor closed her talk with words “When will the sleeping man wake?” which profoundly shook Dan. His father, he explained, was a structural engineer, and had an obligation to complete repairs at Willow Run airport, outside of Detroit. Dan’s family had planned to drive to Denver the next day, but the work took Dan’s father through the night, and when he returned home he understandably wanted to sleep for several hours before leaving. This was not to be. Unknown to the family, Dan’s mother hard opted for divorce, and she was anxious to get to Denver where her brother would be hosting a party where she could meet the men of Denver society. So as not to miss the party, she insisted that they leave immediately so that she could arrive in time for the party. Predictably, Dan’s father fell asleep at the wheel, and the sleeping man did not wake until here was a disastrous accident. Dan’s mother and sister were killed. Dan, his brother, and father all suffered major injuries. As Dan explained it, the lesson that he took from this calamity was the imperative of protecting innocent women and children, not that he was innocent.

His mother’s death also had a liberating ramification for Dan. He was freed from the enforced regimen of practicing piano six hours a day six hours a day. But later in life he could still play a pretty impressive rendition of Rachmaninoff’s Third Symphony. It was also very late in Dan’s life that he learned that before almost anyone knew of plans to build the Super, the H-Bomb, his father was asked to oversee the construction of the Hanford nuclear weapons plant where the bomb would be built. His moral concerns led him to refuse the invitation.

The second motivation, as he described in *The Doomsday Machine*, and in numerous public lectures came in In 1961, in the early days of the Kennedy Administration. Dan, as a senior advisor to the President, sent an inquiry to the Pentagon’s Joint Chiefs of Staff over JFK’s signature. If the Pentagon implemented its general [nuclear] war plan, he asked how many would die in the Soviet Union and China? The answer that soon came was 275 million, and 325 million after six months. Dan followed up with a second question: how many more would be killed in Europe and across Asia? The answer, another 200 million. As Dan wrote, “roughly six hundred million dead. A hundred Holocausts. A hundred Holocausts.” It “depicted evil beyond any human project ever… [And] From that day on, I have had one overriding life purpose: to prevent the execution of any such plan.”

Dan is best known for releasing the top secret Pentagon Papers to the press in 1971, an act which hoped to accelerate an end to the war which ultimately claimed an estimated three million lives, and for which he expected and was sentenced to life in prison. Between Dan’s book *Secrets* and hundreds, thousands?, of articles written by his friends Richard Falk, Gar Alperovitz, Noam Chomsky and journalists across the country and the allegorical four corners of the earth, there is not much that I can add about the epiphany and courage of Dan’s decision to share the Pentagon Papers first via members of Congress and when that failed, via the press. That said, knowing Dan and Randy Kehler, having helped to organize a War Resisters Triennial Conference, and having been a draft resister in part inspired by Dan’s courage, I can probably picture that moment better than most others.

While serving in Vietnam, Dan experientially came to understand that U.S. troops there were the “Red Coats” of the war (analogous to the British troops who fought to defeat the U.S. revolution in the 1770s and 80s.). While still with RAND, he anonymously joined peace demonstrations and explored the meanings and implications of nonviolent resistance. This led him, in 1969, to attend the WRI triennial conference of the War Resisters International at Swarthmore College. WRI is an international pacifist confederation establish during World War I. Dan, who was little known there, was nearly an invisible presence, but he was listening closely when 25 year-old Harvard graduate Randy Kehler took the floor and explained why he had resisted conscription instead of going to war in Vietnam and would soon be serving a five-year prison sentence. Dan, also a Harvard graduate immediately thought, if this young man is willing to go to prison for five years knowing what he knows, knowing what I know I should be willing to risk life in prison. Dan fled to a nearby bathroom where he wept for an hour as he faced and accepted his future.

Even if he didn’t spend his life in prison (tanks to Nixon’s and his plumbers’ disregard for the law) there were personal costs for his courage. For years Dan r when former friends and colleagues turned and walked away on seeing him in airports or elsewhere. And he was frequently jailed for participating in civil disobedience actions to protest U.S. wars and preparations for nuclear war. Among my most treasured memories is being arrested and jailed in an affinity group with Dan and Noam Chomsky for occupying the Boston Federal Building as part of a nationwide protest against President Reagan’s Contra War in Central America.

And Dan was there, time after time, to speak in conferences, and even fund raisers. As I write I recall him speaking at a rally I emceed in Boston Common on the most frigid February day of 1991 Everyone was literally standing on ice passionately warning about the unanticipated consequences of what became the first Gulf War. Brilliant as he was, he couldn’t foresee the hundreds of thousands of deaths and the destruction of Iraq that would ultimately follow the war’s short-lived reinforcement of U.S. Middle East hegemony.

And, of course, the way that Dan so courageously faced his death, using the last of his life’s energy to prevent a nuclear Armageddon is a model and inspiration for all who knew and were touched by Dan.

So sorely missed, but Daniel Ellsberg Presente!

\*Note. These memories are written In some haste before work-related travel. I hope that others find it helpful, and it will be improved and expanded over time.