

Peace Magazine Book Review

By Douglas Roche

The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner, by Daniel Ellsberg (Bloomsbury, 2017)

Dr. Strangelove lives. You may recall Stanley Kubrick's 1964 black comedy about an unhinged U.S. Air Force general who orders a first-strike nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. The film (it was a high moment for the actor Peter Sellers) satirizes the Cold War fears of nuclear conflict. Pure madness, and the audience went home laughing. Well, perhaps not everybody. Those who understood that a nuclear attack killing millions of people was really possible turned into nuclear disarmament advocates. I was one of them. And time has proved that Dr. Strangelove was not just a passing figure, for his "Doomsday Machine" continues to exist in the massive nuclear arsenals and threats of the United States and Russia and the other nuclear weapons states. It is not one "evil genius" we need to fear but the whole rotten, lying system of military strategists supported by ordinary people who blindly accept policies steering humanity to unimaginable calamity for civilization.

Daniel Ellsberg brilliantly exposes the Doomsday Machine in this book, which has the tones of a memoir but is really a testament to the madness that has gripped the political machinery of the powerful states. Ellsberg is famous as the government analyst who leaked the Pentagon Papers. Those whistle-blowing revelations concerned the dishonesty of the Vietnam War.

Ellsberg was privy to far more than the Vietnam secrets. He was also a nuclear war planner serving at the right hand of the top Pentagon figures, including

Robert McNamara. The young Ellsberg wrote the questions that President Kennedy himself asked the generals: how many people would be killed in a nuclear war? The answers were staggering: hundreds of millions. Actually, when all the numbers of expected casualties from all-out nuclear war were added up, Ellsberg realized the world was facing the extermination of over half a billion people. "From that day on," he writes, "I have had one overriding life purpose: to prevent the execution of any such plan."

In addition to the Pentagon Papers, Ellsberg also copied voluminous nuclear war plans, showing the full power of U.S. nuclear armaments. He feared that if he published the nuclear material at the same time as his Vietnam revelations, the Vietnam message would be lost, so he stored the nuclear material in his brother's keeping and turned to civil disobedience. Unfortunately, the place where the nuclear files were stored was turned into ground for an apartment complex. It took many years for Ellsberg to recollect the essence of those files.

"I will always deeply regret that I did not make known to Congress, the American public, and the world the extensive documentation of persistent and still-unknown nuclear dangers that was available to me half a century ago," he writes.

Ellsberg harbours the hope that the full exposure of the Doomsday Machine he proffers in this book will finally lead to public rejection of nuclear weapons. After all, what is being discussed "is dizzyingly insane and immoral." Deliberate murderousness. Omnicide. Criminality. Evil. His language is strong in order to break through the apathy of the public.

I wish I could be optimistic that Ellsberg's book, powerful as it is, will lead to a sudden public awakening and demand for political policies that will produce negotiations for the elimination of all nuclear weapons. He himself expresses the hope that humanity can rise to the challenge, and points to the downfall of the Berlin Wall, the nonviolent dissolution of the Soviet empire, and the shift to major-

ity rule in South Africa, all unimaginable thirty years ago, as reasons to hope that sanity will, at last, prevail in the nuclear field.

But as I write, nuclear arms treaties are either being ripped up or stored in a back drawer. The modernization of nuclear weapons is going ahead full blast and the disintegration of arms control machinery is occurring. The new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, viciously rejected by the nuclear powers, is a sign of hope. But NATO, still peddling the lie that nuclear weapons are the “supreme guarantee” of security, has squelched the treaty. The Canadian public doesn’t even seem to be aware that any of this is going on. Ellsberg’s warning is powerful. But without a public clamour, the Doomsday Machine roars on..

Douglas Roche is a former Canadian Senator and former Ambassador for Disarmament. His latest book is Hope Not Fear: Building Peace in a Fractured World.

