"Waking Up Someone Who Is Sleep Walking."
Daniel Ellsberg, Anti-Thought and the Nuclear Threat

By Peter Gabriel* and Howard Levine

"Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness."

Life and Fate, by Vasily Grossman

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Daniel Ellsberg was not a psychoanalyst. However, to the extent that psychoanalysis is the science of what we do not wish to know, then Daniel Ellsberg – who passed away on the 16th of June 2023 – was a person from whom we analysts have much to learn. After all, one of the topics to which he dedicated much of his life[1] - the threat of nuclear devastation – continues to be very much neglected by us today; cast out of our minds and everyday discourse, along with other existential problems, such as world hunger, massive economic inequalities, on-going wars, refugee crises, global warming and climate change and so on.

In the 1980's, in the midst of a potentially self- and world-destructive arms race of nuclear proliferation, Hannah Segal (1988) wrote that "Silence is the Real Crime." In this chapter, we wish to attempt to confront that silence and address its close ally, 'turning a blind eye' to unwanted and unpleasant threatening realities, in all of its many forms: denial, minimization, compartmentalization, foreclosure, evacuation from the psyche, etc. Together with the omnipotent, hubristic belief in the assumed perfectability of technology – the absolute conquest of nature by humankind -, these twin harbingers of mindlessness, silence and refusing to see, help comprise the foundation on which rests the dangerous anti-thought linked to the possibilities of omnicide and world destruction. However, rather than offering a metapsychological essay on the presumed basis of this culturally malignant phenomenon, we have chosen, as a tribute to the courage and humanity of Daniel Ellsberg, to illustrate their presence by presenting an account of

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In 1962, he completed his dissertation at Harvard entitled "Risk, Ambiguity and Decision" on this topic and he later worked at the RAND Corporation devising nuclear war fighting strategy for the US armed services.

his attempts to break through that denial, to preserve the space and the possibility of thought, so that the dangers of the nuclear arms race might be kept in mind and meaningfully addressed. It is our hope that this chapter will serve as a means of consciousness raising and preserver of thought for our readers, and not be read as 'just another essay' in applied psychoanalysis.

In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg publicized the secret Pentagon Papers via the New York Times and Washington Post, bringing to light the lies Americans had been told about the Vietnam War over a period of several years. Had these lies already been seen through, known and denied by some of the general public? Or were they successfully hidden by a government that wished to keep the full extent of the Viet Nam war from its people? Ellsberg's revelations considerably contributed to the end of that war. The Nixon Administration's attempts to prevent the publication of the papers were unsuccessful. The U.S Supreme Court sided against the government, strengthening instead the freedom of the press and opting to protect freedom of speech and freedom of thought. How different this was from today's culture of fake news and ideologically driven falsehoods displacing and distorting the facts of public information that serve as the elements of true thought.

Following America's withdrawal from Viet Nam, Ellsberg dedicated the rest of his lifetime to a cause lesser known, but definitely not less important. He became an activist against nuclear armaments and the nuclear military-industrial compolex – the "Doomsday Machine", as he called it. The latter was and continues to be a preparation for omnicide that could require individuals in power to make decisions, in mere minutes, for or against the continuation of life as we know it on our planet. Ellsberg's book, "The Doomsday Machine – Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner", published in 2017, documents two dozen instances generally unknown to the American public and the rest of the world, when the US threatened its adversaries with nuclear weapons. To what extent was this general failure to recognize and acknowledge the magnitude of the danger another instance of denial and the eradication of thought on a massive scale?

Ellsberg was convinced of the grave threat posed to humanity by the existence of nuclear weapons and in his activism, he searched for ways to immediately move away from the abyss – the threat of nuclear omnicide – while still retaining a capacity for nuclear defense. Two particular aspects of nuclear policy were, in Ellsberg's opinion, particularly

problematic: first, the use of land-based and therefore particularly vulnerable Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), and second, the so-called "First Strike Strategy". In both, he saw not only a dangerous potential for escalating conflict, but also the danger of triggering an explosive and deadly chain reaction of strike and counter-strike that at its most destructive would lead to years of an omnicidal nuclear winter.

ICBMs must be fired before enemy missiles reach the silos in which they are stored; they thus function according to a "use-them-or-lose-them" principle that incentivizes instant retaliation or pre-emptive first strikes. The latter strategy catapults the enemy into a state of emergency readiness that demands immediate action, with only minutes to decide.[2] Ellsberg therefore viewed both ICBMs and First Strike Strategy as the most dangerous elements of nuclear policy.

Ellsberg was also highly critical of the 'official' communication surrounding nuclear politics. He believed that, as with the Vietnam war, the public was and continues to be misled and deceived, and the truth distorted. In the US for example, it is generally believed that only the combined, cooperative assent of the President and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff can authorize the use of nuclear weapons. The publication of Ellsberg's book, however, explained that it has long been a tenet of American nuclear war fighting policy that if a single commander of a nuclear weapons facility – say an ICBM silo, a nuclear missiles carrying submarine or a Strategic Air Command nuclear bomber – loses contact with their command center and believes that that loss has been the result of an enemy first strike, then that commander has authorization to order a nuclear attack on his or her own initiative.[3]

With Ellsberg's book and its revelations now accessible but generally ignored, we must ask the question of the extent to which the general public is unconsciously minimizing or denying recognition of the gravity of the situation in order to still an explosive emotional threat of

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Aside from the Cuban missile crisis, humanity has narrowly escaped global catastrophe on at least one further occasion: on the 26th of September 1983, the soviet defense systems registered a US attack with nuclear intercontinental missiles. Luckily, the lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, Stanislaw Petrow, correctly classified this as a false alarm. To this day, we remain in a precarious state of "hair-trigger alert".

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Readers familiar with the popular Peter Sellers film, Dr. Strangelove, will recognize the eerie similarity of this horrifying possibility and that movie's plot.

annihilation and omnicide. While government officials abet this denial by publicly declaring that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought", leading the public to believe that its risk is not that high, official statements also paradoxically speak of "defeating" the enemy in a nuclear war. However, nobody has ever defined or described in detail what that – we think pyrrhic – victory would look like.[4]

Broadly speaking, Ellsberg saw these same mechanisms – a public disavowal but government-held belief in the possibility of winning nuclear war – at work not only in the USA, but the former Soviet Union and now Russia as well. All of this puts us, as humanity, in an extremely dangerous position.[5] In order to defuse the situation, Ellsberg suggested tackling the two aforementioned issues – the use of intercontinental, land-based missiles and the First Strike Strategy – politically, collectively and in a coordinated manner. Giving up land-based missiles would not mean giving up nuclear weapons entirely, but solely relying on sea-based missiles instead and thus "...reducing them down to a level that could not produce Doomsday" (Bulletin 2023). He viewed the latter as a less threatening form of deterrence. This shift would defuse the situation and put an end to the threat of global thermonuclear winter and nuclear fallout – an event that would eradicate all life on earth in the space of a year.[6]

Ellsberg also posed the following question: "How do you move people from a totally insane plan to which they're committed? It's like waking up somebody who's sleepwalking—a

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US-General Tommy Powers may be an exception. He put it bluntly when he said: "Look. at the end of the war, if there are two Americans and one Russian, we win." (Kaplan, F. (1983): The Wizards of Armageddon. Simon and Schuster, New York, quoted from S. Kull: Minds at War - Nuclear Reality and the Inner Conflicts of Defense Policymakers (1988 p. 84) The other examples that Kull reports are generally based on splits and dissociations.

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All of this is not only relevant to US citizens; we are globally affected by nuclear politics and therefore both directly connected to and jointly responsible for them. For example, US nuclear war fighting strategy 'accepted' that millions of European civilians would be killed as 'collateral damage' by radiation fall-out of a US-Soviet nuclear weapons exchange!

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Putin has openly stated that life without Russia is without purpose – American nationalists are sure to share similar thoughts about the USA. The implication seems to move towards an acceptance of an all or nothing, we triumph or damn all the world, strategy.

dangerous process. You may cause panic. Or they're walking on a precipice; how do you move them away from it?" (Bulletin 2023). Ellsberg added: "You can´t eradicate the knowledge of how to make nuclear weapons and delivery systems. But you can dismantle a Doomsday Machine." The enormous resistance to recognizing the resistance to doing so, of course, also poses a question for us as psychoanalysts.

We know for sure that a single individual cannot bring about the kind of change Ellsberg fought for in external reality – a problem of this scale can only be solved through coordinated, multilateral political action. But supporting the collective "waking up" and taking action as Ellsberg describes is, in our opinion, a task for psychoanalysts as well. It is not just a matter of our formulating a model that can explain the denial. There is a real problem in that the existential danger is preconsciously present, at all times in all of us, and touches our deepest fears. Perhaps in order to engage with this problem psychoanalytically, it is first necessary that we ourselves, as analysts, accept and confront the nuclear threat. This, of course, is not easy: it triggers both extreme fears of our own destruction and death, and extreme rage and helplessness; our own wishes to annihilate and destroy.

Freud (193X), discussing the inevitability of destructiveness and war in his letter to Einstein, implicated the death drive. But perhaps in doing so, he allowed us to too easily assume that if war and destructiveness are based on a biologically rooted drive, then there is little that can be done about it. We suggest that against the possibility of the death drive, humanity also has the potential for an ethical sensibility and, to some extent, choice and free will. This is how Ellsberg described his own stance on the topic: "I *choos*e to act as if it makes a difference. And it's just a choice. I can't defend that. It's just a better way to live. It's the way I choose to live. We can work to prevent the cataclysm." (Bulletin 2023, italics added)

Ellsberg's attitude was also, no doubt, influenced by his father, who, according to his son, took it further by saying: "Yes, but there is a moral cost to having this capability (for nuclear destruction) at all. It's not just a matter of a risk and a cost of blowing the world up. There is a moral cost in telling yourself and teaching your children that there are circumstances that would justify killing everything and therefore that would justify having this capability." (Bulletin 2023).

As psychoanalysts, we could see the cost of which Ellsberg's father speaks not only as *moral,* but also *psychological*. Even before the nuclear threat, Freud wrote, in "Civilization and its Discontents" (1930): "Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes *a large part* of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety." (Freud, 1930, p. 145, italics added)

It is as if we, as humans, are incapable of thought about these matters, of foresight, or even of sight itself – as if change is only possible after catastrophe has already taken place. But nuclear war – even just its beginning – could bring an end to life on earth, once and for all: It is unclear whether nuclear arms limitation is possible and de-escalation can stop an eventual spiral into all-out war.

We psychoanalysts are experts in dealing with things that cannot be seen, but nonetheless determine us – our actions, our present and our future. The nuclear threat falls into this category. Psychoanalysis, however, barely engages with the topic at all. Why do we wish to know so little of this topic – why do we shut ourselves off from it so completely?[7] Is this avoidance not the very performative essence of anti-thought?

Even just confronting the facts requires pushing through a great deal of discomfort, because they confront us with our own possible demise, and also – possibly even more overwhelmingly – the impulse to pre-empt possible attackers and annihilate them to protect ourselves. But this horror must – and can – be endured – and our collective madness can be seen and met. Doing both, as we all know, can even help us think, and lead to greater insight.

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N. Ramzy, publisher of the International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, took up the topic of the nuclear threat in 2022. This led to a few verbal responses from Europe – zero from the USA. (personal communication).

Ellsberg's preoccupation with megadeaths, which occurred during his work as a nuclear war planner, helped him stay engaged with the topic. In the prologue to his book, he describes the feeling that overcame him when, in 1961, he saw a "Top Secret-Sensitive"-diagram, created by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and meant "For the President's Eyes Only". Here, the total number of deaths expected from a nuclear first strike was estimated at approximately 600 million. "From that day on", he writes, "I had one overriding life purpose: to prevent the execution of any such plan." (Ellsberg 2017, p. 3).

We psychoanalysts do not possess the direct (albeit very limited) influence Ellsberg had on nuclear politics. But we can learn from him and his story – namely, that confronting an issue as threatening as this does not necessarily have to paralyze us and lead to resignation, despair and doom. Instead, if we can manage to keep it in mind, we can learn to think about the problem and engage with it in productive ways. Isn't this possibility the essence of what Freud (1913) had in mind when he wrote his Two Principles of Mental Functioning? And what Bion (1970) described when he said there were two possible reactions to frustration: one was to bear it and keep awareness of it in mind as thought and the other was to evacuate it or destroy our capacity to know about it – i.e., thought or anti-thought. Bion's K or minus K. We must also ask ourselves this next question: How can we – or do we want to – deal with this topic in our clinical practice?

Aside from taking political action, we can (and should) constantly ask ourselves, while in practice, from where the largest part of our patients' unrest *actually* stems (Gabriel 2022). We will then be prepared for the question of the degree to which anxiety and other symptoms may be linked to the nuclear threat – and we must have faith that we will (at some point) find the proper words for addressing the issue, even if we may fail in the moment.

This is illustrated by Martin Wangh (1988) – himself a survivor of a catastrophic event, the Shoah – in a rare clinical example linked to the threat of nuclear war.[8] He presents a possible interpretation for a patient who had dreamed of nuclear catastrophe. When recalling

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The number of published clinical examples of nuclear war threat anxiety are relatively rare in the analytic literature. For exceptions, in addition to Wangh and Segal, cited above, see various authors in Levine et al (1988).

the dream in his session, the patient was unable to remain lying on the couch and sat down opposite from his analyst. Later, Wangh comments: “I might have interpreted: ‘you feel so isolated recalling your physical experience during the terrible events to which the dream relates, … and the frightening times of the nuclear bomb drills in kindergarten that you had to pause in your routine psychoanalytic pursuit and reassure yourself, by facing me and staring at me, that I am still present and tangible.” (1988, p. 220). Wangh was so affected by the experience that he was only able to formulate these words at a later point in time, not directly in the moment. Aside from this, we can and must have faith that, as long as we ourselves are politically aware, our patients will pick up on this attitude – our awareness and recognition of real, external, existential threats – without us necessarily having to spell it out.[9]

Not only was Daniel Ellsberg a person who took intelligent and brave action, who fought with integrity for the good of humanity – he was also a person who embraced life to the fullest and had the capacity to face and accept the reality of his own impending demise. Only a few weeks before his death, which he anticipated due to his diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, he said, when asked by a friend how he was doing: “Other than dying, I’m okay.” He then added: “Well, we’re all dying. I’m in very good shape. For my best friends, I would not wish better than to have the last month I’m having with my wife and my friends like you.” (Bulletin 2023).

Now this man, who was an activist up to the very end, has passed at the age of 92 years, surrounded by family and in peace, despite not having achieved his goals of abolishing ICBMs and the First Strike Strategy. “This is not a species”, he said, “to be trusted with nuclear weapons”. This comes close to what Freud (1915) wrote in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” where he compared our unconscious with the “Urmensch” or primitive man.

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This may be a bit of a bold statement considering the fact that some of our patients even end up supporting autocrats. - Most likely even reading such books as Timothy Snyder’s “On Tyranny – Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century” (2017) won´t help them either.

And this is particularly why we as analysts have so much to thank Ellsberg for. The very best way to show our gratitude is by continuing his fight: to think and to act, and to move away from the abysses – nuclear and ecological – at which we stand.

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