



Once Fired, There's No Calling a Nuke Back – Daniel Ellsberg on RAI (8/12)

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PAUL JAY: Welcome back to Reality Asserts Itself. I'm Paul Jay. This is The Real News Network. And we're continuing our discussion with Daniel Ellsberg. Thanks for joining us again.

DANIEL ELLSBERG: Great to be here.

PAUL JAY: I'll just remind everyone that Daniel, in the early 1960s, worked for Rand Corporation. And as is the title of his book, *The Doomsday Machine: The Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, that's what he was. He was planning nuclear war.

And you made a discovery, if I have it correct, that once the go is given and the planes leave failsafe, even if it takes them hours to get there, there's actually no way to bring them back.

DANIEL ELLSBERG: That's in, I think, certainly the movie *Dr. Strangelove*, and perhaps also *Fail Safe*; the idea in 1964 that the planes couldn't be called back once an authenticated execute order had gone out from somewhere. In either case of those movies it was not from the president, or different circumstances. But once it had gone out, no stop order. And it was such a strange item. Some people found that absurd, you know, looking at the movie. That was the reality, because I knew from the Pacific and from SAC there was no way for a stop order to go out authenticated. And the reason that's given in, I think, the movies, or at any rate in the book, the Russians might get that stop code, might learn it, and use it to stop our attack. That was the rationale that was given.

First of all, as I said, it was so surprising to me and my boss in the Pentagon, Harry Rowland, that they knew, that the movie had that bizarre, correct detail. That's one thing that led us to call it a documentary. It turned out that Peter George, the author of *Red Alert*, which was really the basis for both of those movies, had been an RAF officer, a bomber officer, and knew that- evidently that was the situation in the RAF, as well.

Now, what was explained to me by Air Force officers was the real concern was that in the hours that it took for our bombers at that time to reach the Soviet Union- we only had a few missiles at that point- the president might get cold feet, or the Russians might surrender, supposedly, and persuade a president who had the character of- in *Dr. Strangelove* Merkin Muffley, played by Peter Sellers- a ... sane, you know, Adlai Stevenson type, who might decide that he would accept the surrender, or stop and not carry out the devastation of the Soviet Union at the cost of ours, which would lead us to prevail, and victory. So once the order had been given, they did not want the president to be able to have second thoughts, or to countermand somebody else who'd given it. So there was no stop order, just as there were no locks on the weapons.

PAUL JAY: Do you think that's still the case?

DANIEL ELLSBERG: No. Bit by bit. There are now, far as I know, locking mechanisms in the missiles, and eventually even the submarines, although that was not true until the '90s.

PAUL JAY: So something that's been given a target could be called-

DANIEL ELLSBERG: The Navy was so afraid of their subs not being able to communicate, or to get the word to stop, that they resisted having any locks on the submarines until very late after the Cold War had ended, in the '90s. But it took a long time to get them in the Strategic Air Command, even though President Kennedy- and I was one of the small people pressing that, along with a lot of others higher than me. I think one of them, Bruce Blair, as a launch control officer of a Minuteman launch control center had discovered that the supposed lock that McNamara had ordered on the missiles- after great resistance by the Air Force of having any such lock on missiles- there was a coding device without which the people at the lowest level could not launch the weapon. Except, by order of the Air Force, the code was set at 00000000, eight zeroes, and by order not to be changed for all of them.

PAUL JAY: Essentially overriding the White House.

DANIEL ELLSBERG: So when he informed McNamara of that, long after McNamara was out of office, McNamara was amazed and enraged to hear that. But that was kind of typical, the way the, the great concern with the ability to get the weapons off when, essentially, the military thought they should go, and great concern that they should not be stoppable by the president. But I think that has changed. At the lowest level there are locks, as far as I know, on all of the weapons. But the question is, at what level is the combination held? Not at the White House alone, for sure. In fact, they don't even have the code. That's not part of the briefcase. The president's involvement is not needed for this to go out. Not even in Washington, either. Again, [crosstalk] Washington would stop it. So the question is, where in the system are people able, actually, to unlock those weapons and send them? And it's not at the highest level.

PAUL JAY: But once unlocked at whatever level-

DANIEL ELLSBERG: Well, once the missiles go they can't be withdrawn anyway. [Reagan apparently] didn't understand that.

PAUL JAY: Right. That's what I'm asking. A missile cannot be withdrawn once it leaves.

DANIEL ELLSBERG: No, no, no, no. In theory, by the way, you could put on each missile an ability to explode itself, or set off by accident, or by a rogue, of some kind, a couple of officers, it could be blown up in the process, as is done with test missiles. When they test them from Vandenberg, or elsewhere, to Kwajalein, they are able to abort it. If it's going off target or something. You could do that, technically.

PAUL JAY: But they don't.

DANIEL ELLSBERG: But again, what if the Russians got it? You know, or whatever- they don't have that. They do not have it.

PAUL JAY: So someone outside the White House, in independent judgment, can fire a missile. It can't be brought back, and a president couldn't override it.

DANIEL ELLSBERG: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. That's almost certainly true for the Russians, as well.

By the way, General Scott- I mean, George C. Scott, who plays Buck Turgidson in the movie, points out to the President that since some were on the way, in the end one in particular, they might as well all go and get the Russians with their pants down, not expecting an attack. It's the best opportunity possible to disarm them, and they might as well all go, since the war is going to come anyway.

Now, I heard that, actually, from a major in a small base in Korea, South Korea, which was closest to Communist radar, probably, of any base in the world, in Kunsan, South Korea. And he acknowledged, first of all, that against his own orders- sorry, the orders to him- he was not supposed to launch his planes on positive control, or failsafe, like other bases, because he was too close to enemy territory. And he wasn't even, in theory, he was under no circumstances to launch his ten planes, each of which had a 1.1 megaton bomb slung under the single pilot plane. So he had five World War II's under him. World War II was 2 million tons equivalent that we dropped; 2 million tons, actually, that we dropped. He had some 11 million tons of explosive power under him. Five times that.

He told me that, although we both knew what his orders were, as commander of the base, he would launch those planes if he felt they were in danger. He said, that's one of the fundamental rules of war; I have to protect my own men. And he would get them up in the air. Well, what would happen then? He said, well, you know what they're supposed to do, right? I said, yes. They're supposed to go to a rendezvous place, having only been launched, but not sent forward; to circle until and unless they got a positive message from him to launch. If they didn't get that positive message, they would come back. So I said, how quickly would they be possibly out of communication with him, out of high frequency- well, very often, you know. Within minutes, actually.

Suppose they didn't get the order to go ahead. Suppose it had been a false alarm. What would happen? He said, oh, I think they'd come back. Most of them. And before he'd said most of them, I was already thinking, you think they'd come back? This is their commander in charge of their training, their discipline. And then the words registered with me, most of them would come? He said- and then he went on to say, and of course, if one broke out and went to a target, they might as well all go.

And those, those were the words reproduced years later, essentially, at the highest level, by the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. So I came back with stories like that because of course what had, might have set that all off, as he agreed, was, let's say, a false alarm at some earlier measure. Like the Hawaiian alert that went out by mistake this year, which scared people into jumping into manholes, sitting in their bath tub- which would not have done a lot for them- fleeing along freeways, this year. But that was in Hawaii. It wasn't the Forces.

Alerts like that have come at the highest level, that we were being attacked. One, in fact a very convincing one, in 1979, where Zbigniew Brzezinski was awoken at 3:00 in the morning and told that 50 missiles were on the way, and then minutes later that 200 were on the way. That happened a few years later, in the Soviet Union where Stanislav Petrov, a colonel in charge of early warning satellites, learned from his satellites that American missiles were on the way, and he had the job of deciding whether this might be a false alarm. Which it was, but his subordinates all felt, no, this is it. Tell them that we're under attack. Which would almost surely have led to a Russian preemption, as in our case, and we wouldn't be here at all. He chose to say it was a false alarm, and then spent ten minutes hoping he had been right. And he was right. He was reprimanded for not following the protocol on this and reporting that there was a high chance that there was an alarm coming.

The point is these alarms do occur. I said in '79 Brzezinski was on the point of calling the president and telling him that 200 missiles were on the way when he was called by a third call, and said it's a false alarm. Now, he hadn't awakened his wife, who was lying next to him in bed when he got this call. He was about to call the president without awakening his wife, because what's the use? You know, it was all going to go. No one has asked the question on that story, why didn't he let the president sleep? What use would it do to tell Jimmy Carter that 200 are on the way? Well, we could fire our weapons. To what effect? No effect, in terms of either American culture or most human life on Earth. It would make no effect. We are on both sides basing our deterrence, subject to false alarms such as this one- someone by the way, had put a training tape into the operational warning system which entirely mimicked a complex Russian attack. It wasn't just a few weapons are on the way by mistake, but submarine missiles are coming in. Planes have launched, other missiles are coming. It was an entire Soviet attack. It couldn't have been more convincing. And they discovered that just in time. Two years later, or rather one year later, two separate attacks from a faulty computer chip led to similar alarms on this.

Our existence as a species, and certainly civilization, not just American democracy, have depended for more than half a century on discovering in time the mistakes of our radar systems and our satellites, and of our subordinates, in the course of this. The world has depended, has rested on the good luck that our system failures have not persisted long enough by minutes to result in the hair triggers on our true doomsday machines from destroying most life on Earth.

PAUL JAY: Please join us for the continuation of our series of interviews with Daniel Ellsberg on Reality Asserts Itself on The Real News Network.