Libraries Acquire Historic Collection of Whistleblower DANIEL ELLSBERG

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Du Bois Falcons Free to Fly
Mural (R)Evolution
Daniel Ellsberg went on trial for his part in copying and distributing the Pentagon Papers in January 1973, just days after chief bibliographer Siegfried Feller first visited Brooklyn to survey a cache of papers from W. E. B. Du Bois, intended for the UMass Amherst Libraries. Facing decades of prison time, Ellsberg waged a resilient defense over the next four months, as shipments of Du Bois papers poured into Amherst from New York, California, and as far away as Cairo. As the legend of Daniel Ellsberg took root in the courtroom, the legend of W. E. B. Du Bois was being consolidated in a place of public scholarship.

This slender thread connecting the Pentagon Papers, Du Bois, and the Libraries’ Department of Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) may be little more than a curiosity, but as a curiosity, it has grabbed our archival attention. As the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Ellsberg’s famous photocopying spree looms, our archival attention. As the fiftieth anniversary of the start of Ellsberg’s famous photocopying spree looms, we have the privilege of announcing that his papers are available for research.

In the blank spaces between the busywork of counting boxes and arranging shipments, the odd symmetries between Du Bois and Ellsberg, each of whom proudly bore the label “the most dangerous man in America,” seem only to be growing. The two were, no doubt, a perfect symmetry of peril to the comfort of the powerful and a particular peril to those who would threaten freedom of speech and press. The symmetries go on. Both Du Bois and Ellsberg are profound scholars, each with an unusual breadth and depth in any subject they confront, and their dangerous sides have ensured that both would become targets of governmental reprisal. Facing that deluge, both remained true to their innate moral sense, aware of the personal cost that might ensue, and willing to accept the consequences with joy and resolution.

Although, so unlike one another in so many ways, Du Bois and Ellsberg together create an archival bulwark for the study of some of the major moral and ethical issues of the twentieth century.

Ellsberg’s career
In his singular career, Ellsberg traced an arc from Cold Warrior to antiwar and antinuclear activist. Initially, he seemed primed for the soft chair of the academy. As an undergraduate at Harvard, he produced a brilliant thesis in economics on “Theories of Rational Choice under Uncertainty,” which fed decades of further research—his own and others—on the questions of ambiguity and decision-making. A prestigious year as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Cambridge would ordinarily have led to the next logical step toward an academic coronation, a doctorate at Harvard, but with his educational deferment running out and conscription looming, Ellsberg applied to become an officer in the Marine Corps. By the time he resumed doctoral research (on game theory), he had acquired a personal understanding of the military from the perspective of a platoon leader that would in the years to come leaven his scholarship.

As he wrapped up his dissertation, Ellsberg accepted a position with the RAND Corporation, placing him in the cold heart of where Cold Warriors honed their thoughts. An analytical mind and keen insight into decision-making fit neatly into the demands of understanding the problems of command and control in nuclear war. At RAND, Ellsberg found himself drawn into assignments such as the formal review of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which he conducted as a consultant to the Pentagon. What he witnessed from the privileged perch of top-level clearance was unsettling: he saw a shocking and persistent gap between what the best intelligence indicated and what the political establishment said and did.

Vietnam emerged as a particular focal point for Ellsberg in 1964, establishing a powerful symmetrical concern with the nuclear threat that had been consuming his days. That summer, Ellsberg was attached to the Pentagon to assist in a strategic analysis to contribute to escalating the war, beginning his assignment ominously on the day of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Less than a year later, he traveled to Vietnam as a high-level official of the State Department to work under Maj. Gen. Edward Lansdale, tasked with reviewing “pacification” efforts in the provinces. This was no desk job, nor would he be a mere observer. For much of 1966, Ellsberg traveled the country, machine gun in hand, often engaging in forward combat operations with U.S. forces. By the time he returned to RAND, his experiences had led him to conclude that the war was simply not, as many had argued, a civil war in which the U.S. had intervened, but a war of foreign aggression—American aggression. Having been an official of both the Defense and State Departments for years and having had high-level, authorized access, he had a unique perspective on the backdrop of official dishonesty, of secrets and lies and pro-war manipulations on the part of the military and political establishment, and he began to find common cause with the antiwar movement.

The germ of what would become the Pentagon Papers was planted at a War Resisters League conference at Haverford College in 1969, when Ellsberg encountered a draft resister, Randy Kehler (whose papers are also ensconced in SCUA). Kehler’s deliberate, direct confrontation of the system and his unshakable, willing acceptance of the consequences were moving, and by October, Ellsberg lit upon the idea of copying the secret, and deeply revealing.

Tyger, tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?
—William Blake
reports on the war that he was reviewing for RAND. He knew well that if discovered, his actions could result in decades behind bars. For several weeks, Ellsberg and his colleague Anthony Russo surreptitiously photocopied a trove of 47 volumes and thousands of individual pages of sensitive documents that clearly revealed the extent to which four presidents over two decades had concealed and misrepresented the war and its dim prospects in the hopes, in part, of gaining electoral advantage and out of fear for being seen as the man who lost the war.

Initially, Ellsberg sent copies of the Pentagon Papers to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and sympathetic members of Congress in the hope of creating a political momentum against the war from within the system. None spoke up. Only when the strategy of drawing congressional support failed did Ellsberg leak copies to the media—nineteen newspapers in all. To make a long (and frequently cinematized) story short, The New York Times struck first, publishing excerpts from the papers beginning on June 13, 1971, leading to the first four injunctions in American history constituting prior restraint against publication, and ultimately to prevailing in the Supreme Court by the end of the month, voiding those injunctions. To make another long (and frequently cinematized) story short, Ellsberg set off a chain of events that played a catalytic role in the Watergate scandals and the undoing of President Richard Nixon.

All of this returns us to those first months of 1973, when Ellsberg was on trial and Du Bois was entering the archive. Having survived the full force of the governmental onslaught, Ellsberg, like Du Bois before him, persisted. With the charges against him dismissed on the grounds of governmental misconduct, he returned to the front lines of opposition to tackle nuclear weapons, war, and governmental secrecy. He speaks, writes, and educates in the cause almost continuously, and he has taken part in protests and civil disobedience at sites such as the Pentagon, the Department of Energy, the Rocky Flats Nuclear Production Facility, and the Lawrence Livermore Laboratories.

The papers
If the holdings in the Libraries’ Special Collections have not already been called the Songs of Experience, they ought to be. SCUA’s focus on the history and experience of social change in America has led us to document a broad community of organizations and individuals enmeshed in the cause of improving the world, each using their particular understanding of justice, democracy, and civil society to create real change. Although the Ellsberg Papers are still in transit, and many details may change, we know already that the collection is massive and exceptionally rich. If you will bear with a shift to a metaphor, archivists, like
paleontologists, are excavators, and thoroughly used to digging up materials that, at the end of the day, we know to be incomplete. We may hope to unearth more than just an incisor or claw, but it is a rare day that we find the full skeleton of a fossil tyrant.

Dan Ellsberg is that tyrant. His home office is like an archival tar pit, lined with an extensive library of heavily annotated books and filled with box upon box of archival materials that can be reassembled into a fully fleshed-out record of a long and varied career. He kept student papers from his Harvard years, and letters and photographs from his time in the Marines, in Vietnam, and since. His research files from his analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis are gold to anyone interested in how decisions were made in those heated days, and his voluminous files from his years in the antinuclear movement are primary testimony to a powerful grassroots resistance. A habitual notetaker, Ellsberg kept reams of notes on legal pads that reveal the evolution of his raw thoughts on subjects of interest, and drafts of speeches and articles add further flesh to the bones of those ideas. There are, of course, voluminous legal files assembled during his defense in 1973. For a person indelibly linked to purloining archival materials (at least in the mind of the government), there is something satisfying in seeing how much he is contributing back to the archive.

With remarkably generous support from the Chancellor, an anonymous donor, and the Libraries, SCUA will make the Ellsberg Papers public as soon as they arrive, opening the way for years of research to come. In a nation still hesitant to embrace the vision of W. E. B. Du Bois, and still reluctant to follow the logic and heart of Daniel Ellsberg, we can see that both are as dangerous now as ever. Ellsberg has garnered public praise with honors such as the Right Livelihood Award (2006) and Sweden’s Olof Palme Prize (2019) for “his profound humanism and exceptional moral courage,” and he has been “rehabilitated” in the minds of some of his onetime critics who cite him as an example of a whistleblower who did things right. But the work remains. As the names of Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, Occupy, and Black Lives Matter suggest, and as even a casual glimpse at the state of American politics demonstrates beyond doubt, the fundamental issues that these two most dangerous men confronted have never been more dangerous. The radical ethical commitments that Ellsberg and Du Bois represent and the fundamental issues they engage, remain as vital in 2019 as they were fifty or a hundred years ago—and as discomfiting to those in power.

View a glimpse of the archive.
L to R: Janaki Natarajan, Daniel Ellsberg, Gar Alperovitz, Patricia Ellsberg in Gordon Hall at the screening of the documentary *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*. A panel discussion followed the screening. It was the first time Ellsberg and Alperovitz appeared publicly to discuss their Pentagon Papers experiences.

An enthusiastic audience of more than 700 students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends gave the father of whistleblowing two standing ovations bookending his personalized history lesson on nuclear invention and armament, and the tactics of modern wars. “My wife, Patricia, and I and were very impressed when vice chancellor Bob Feldman flew across the country almost immediately after hearing the possibility of getting my archive here,” said Ellsberg. He said that to have his legacy at UMass Amherst “feels wonderful,” and in reading 500 boxes of materials, “one thing I realized is that it covers my life history, and that my life is coextensive with the nuclear era. Thinking that, I’m surprised I’m still here.”

Ellsberg’s address on the threat of nuclear omnicide, as outlined in his book *The Doomsday Machine* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), was a moving capstone to a weeklong series of events heralding the arrival of his expansive personal and professional archive to Special Collections & University Archives in October.

In his introduction, Chancellor Subbaswamy explained how the papers came to UMass, beginning with a rumor on the economics grapevine as to their existence to engaging an anonymous donor to help UMass with the purchase. “Given this university’s longstanding commitment to social justice and accessibility, and our fundamental mission as a stronghold for freedom of expression, it is our deep privilege to receive the papers of Dan Ellsberg,” said Subbaswamy. “As guardians of this exceptional collection, the university is committed to making the work of Dan Ellsberg’s life broadly accessible, ensuring it remains in the public sphere, informing our discourse for decades to come.”