

Remarks at University of Massachusetts Amherst Event Conferring Honorary Doctorate on Daniel Ellsberg

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BY ROBERT POLLIN

It is a great privilege and thrill for me to be here today, to celebrate the conferring of a University of Massachusetts Honorary Doctorate degree to Daniel Ellsberg.

Dan is a truly heroic moral figure for our times. I can say this without resorting in the slightest to hyperbole. Dan put his career, his personal freedom, and even his life on the line to stop the insane slaughter to which the U.S. government was committed with the Vietnam War. There were millions of us protesting the Vietnam war when Dan undertook the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. But from his positions as a high Defense Department official and consultant, Dan gave depth, credibility, and moral force to the anti-war movement that nobody else had come close to providing.

There were probably other people in high government positions similar to Dan, who held views on the war similar to Dan, who could have had an equivalent impact had they spoken out. But that is the point. They did not speak out. Dan did. I will never forget being an undergraduate student, sitting at the University of Wisconsin student union building, watching Dan being interviewed by Walter Cronkite on the CBS Evening News about the release of the Pentagon Papers. The impact on me, and on the hundreds of other students watching with me, was profound. Dan gave us affirmation and confidence that what we were doing was right. And that, if this man, Ellsberg, was willing to risk everything to stop the war, we all needed to redouble our own puny efforts as well.

Dan's subsequent dedicated work over the past 50 years on behalf of peace, justice, and sanity itself have been equally important. His 2017 book *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* could not be more persuasive in explaining exactly how, we, the human race, are playing Russian roulette with the very prospects of continuing life on earth through building and expanding nuclear arsenals. Dan is also clear on the only sane path forward, i.e. to abolishing nuclear weapons altogether.

In November 2018, it fell into my lap to have the opportunity to connect Dan with UMass. At that time, I was told by two friends, the journalistic team of Paul Jay and Sharmini Peries, that they had been out at Dan's home in California to interview him on a project of theirs. They told me that Dan and Patricia's basement was stuffed

literally to the ceiling with thousands of historically significant documents, including original copies of the Pentagon Papers. It was obvious to them, and then to me, that these papers needed to be properly housed somewhere—i.e. somewhere other than in Dan and Patricia’s own basement.

Soon after this conversation with Paul and Sharmini, I contacted my good friend, the then Deputy Chancellor Bob Feldman about the idea of acquiring these papers for the UMass archives. It took less than a day for Bob to get back to me with the news, from Chancellor Subbaswamy, that we should indeed move into action to try to acquire Dan’s papers. Within a couple of weeks, Bob and I, along with the Head of the UMass Library’s archives, the late great Rob Cox, were dispatched out to Dan and Patricia’s home in Kensington, California.

One could say here that the rest is history. But that would not do justice to the incredible dedicated work that Rob Cox did to connect with Dan and figure out the best way to get Dan’s papers in proper order at UMass and make them accessible to everyone. It is a terrible tragedy that Rob passed away in May 2020, before he could see his work with Dan and Patricia through to completion.

It would also not do justice to the bedrock integrity shown by the UMass leadership in taking on this project with Dan and in honoring Dan today. Here I am talking about Bob Feldman, systemwide President Marty Meehan, and finally, of course, our UMass Amherst Chancellor Kumble Subbaswamy. Bob Feldman, Marty Meehan, and Swamy are all very intelligent people. They know full well that Dan Ellsberg is by no means universally regarded as a heroic figure. Henry Kissinger himself called Dan “The most dangerous man in America” who “had to be stopped at all costs.” Lots and lots of people will still agree today with Kissinger’s assessment of Dan. Many of them are in high places. It would have been very easy for Swamy to come up with lots of excuses for UMass to steer clear of Dan Ellsberg. I myself could have offered a long list of reasons why such a move would have been judicious. It certainly would have also been easy for Swamy and President Meehan to explain how conferring this honorary doctorate on Dan, off campus, all the way in San Francisco no less, was just not practical. In fact, it wasn’t really practical. But anyway, here we all are, practical, injudicious, or not.

I will close by saying that I could not be more proud to be part of UMass Amherst than I am right now—in reflecting on the great integrity demonstrated by our campus leaders, former Deputy Chancellor Feldman, President Meehan, and Chancellor Subbaswamy, to confer this fully deserved high honor today on Daniel Ellsberg.