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The Domsday Machine: confessions of a nuclear war planner

Ray Acheson

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BOOK REVIEW

The Doomsday Machine: confessions of a nuclear war planner, by Daniel Ellsberg, New York, Bloomsbury, 2017, 420 pp., US\$21.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-60819-670-8

The Doomsday Machine provides an inside view of the 'institutionalised madness'¹ of the US nuclear war machine. Unlike the fictional system featured in the film *Dr. Strangelove*, Ellsberg argues, the Doomsday Machine already exists in the apparatus, practices, and policies of the United States and Soviet Union/Russia. While revealing disconcerting details of command and control systems, devolution of authority to launch a nuclear weapon, and the nature of plans for nuclear war, Ellsberg shows how human beings, not monsters, have constructed systems and doctrines that put the whole world at risk.

Ellsberg uses classified materials and personal notes to describe the seven decades of US nuclear war planning as 'immoral,' 'insane,' and 'a chronicle of human madness'.² In the era of Trump, we need to look no further than Twitter. His threats of 'fire and fury'³ and of 'totally destroying'⁴ North Korea or giving it a 'bloody nose'⁵ signal a recklessness not seen before in public. 2018 more or less began with Trump taunting the North Korean president about the size of his ... arsenal.⁶ A few weeks later, the wrong push of a button led to residents of Hawaii being terrified by a notification that there was an incoming ballistic missile.⁷ The Doomsday Clock has been set, as of the end of January, at two minutes to midnight – the closest it's been since 1953. But as Ellsberg carefully documents in his important book, the risks we face of nuclear did not begin with Trump. Far from it.

Compiling evidence from his time as an analyst with the Research and Development (RAND) Corporation and a consultant to the Department of Defense and the White House, Ellsberg catalogues a number of shocking policies and practices that have held the United States – and the world – on the brink of nuclear war throughout the atomic age. He explains how the original plan for 'general nuclear war' – which he had a hand in redrafting in the 1960s – targeted essentially every single Soviet and Chinese city, with no way to separate out the targets by country. He exposes how nuclear weapons were stationed in submarines off the coast of Japan without the Japanese government's knowledge, even though the United States knew this was a red line for their relationship after the Second World War. Travelling throughout the Pacific Command fleet, he explores how diffuse the delegation of authority for the use of nuclear weapons had become – and how simplistic and ineffective the procedures for preventing unauthorised launches of nuclear weapons were. The procedure for the authentication of a 'go' code, for example, relied on bomber pilots simply not opening the envelope of their own volition, while at the same time there seemed to be no way to authenticate a 'stop' or 'return' code.

The insanity of the policies and practices that their designers purport to be for *preventing* the use of nuclear weapons actually increase the risk of their use, whether by accident, miscalculation, or on purpose. The Doomsday Machine, as Ellsberg calls it, is

¹Daniel Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 332.

²Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine*, 20.

³Jim Sciutto, Barbara Starr, and Zachary Cohn, 'Trump Promises North Korea "Fire and Fury" Over Nuke Threat', *CNN*, August 9, 2017.

⁴Amanda Holpuch, 'Speech at UN Sees Trump Threaten Pyongyang – As It Happened', *The Guardian*, September 19, 2017.

⁵Gerald F. Seib, 'Amid Signs of a Thaw in North Korea, Tensions Bubble Up', *Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2018.

⁶Michael Crowley, 'Trump's North Korea Tweets Shatter Decades-old Nuclear Taboo', *Politico*, January 3, 2018; Carol Cohn, 'The Perils of Mixing Masculinity and Missiles', *The New York Times*, January 5, 2018.

⁷Adam Nagourney, David E. Sanger, and Johanna Barr, 'Hawaii Panics After Alert About Incoming Missile Is Sent in Error', *The New York Times*, January 13, 2018.

a very expensive system of men, machines, electronics, communications, institutions, plans, training, discipline, practices, and doctrine – which, under conditions of electronic warning, external conflict, or expectations of attack, would with unknowable but possibly high probability bring about the global destruction of civilization and of nearly all human life on earth.⁸

Any social system, Ellsberg writes, that creates and maintains the apparatus and system to destroy the world ‘is in its core aspects mad.’⁹

Yet, as Ellsberg carefully articulates,

the creation, maintenance, and political threat-use of these monstrous machines has been directed and accomplished by humans pretty much the way we think of them: more or less ordinary people, neither better nor worse than the rest of us, *not* monsters in either a clinical or mythic sense.¹⁰

Hannah Arendt’s theory of the ‘banality of evil’ applies well to the nuclear war machine of every government that chooses to possess these weapons, and of those governments that choose to assert the importance of these weapons for their ‘security’.

These policies, Ellsberg argues, grew out of the justifications for bombing cities and civilians during the Second World War. The willingness, and even desire, to incinerate civilians and destroy civilian infrastructure as part of the war campaign resulted in the practices of firebombing and blanketing wide areas with explosive violence. This approach characterised the latter part of the war, with major civilian centres being deliberately targeted by allied forces long before Hiroshima and Nagasaki were met with the ‘fire and fury’ of Fat Man and Little Boy.

It’s a disturbing story of how practices previously held abhorrent become normalised in the course of the conflict. How what was once held as anathema to ‘civilised engagement’ becomes entrenched in doctrine and strategy. This is how, according to Ellsberg’s account, nuclear war policies became what they are today: plans to destroy the world. Contrary to public understanding, he explains, the doctrine that has shaped the buildup of the US nuclear weapon forces over the past seven decades has *not* been about deterring a nuclear attack on the United States. It has in fact been about improving a *first-strike capability*: of ‘limiting damage’ to the United States in the event of a US preemptive strike against Russia. It is this policy that Ellsberg recommends the US government and military abandon, along with the dismantlement of its Doomsday Machine.

But the apparatus and the systems of this machine are strong. They are embedded within the economics and the philosophy of the US military, government, and even its citizens. ‘We are the only country in the world that believes won a war by bombing – specifically by bombing cities with weapons of mass destruction, firebombs, and atomic bombs – and believes that it was fully justified in doing so,’ writes Ellsberg. ‘It is a dangerous state of mind.’¹¹

This state of mind, coupled with lack of understanding of, communication with, or respect for those the US government has determined to be its ‘opponents’, is leading the world down an increasingly dangerous path toward destruction.

Ellsberg’s account of the process of decision-making for both the US and Russian governments during the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrates clearly how much hinged on the blind interpretation of each other’s motives and next moves. He shows how communication with the ‘opposing side’ is crucial to avoid catastrophe. This lesson, of course, is important in today’s emerging crises, where lines of communication between the leaders of nuclear-armed states seem not what they used to be. But even more alarming than the current lack

⁸Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine*, 339.

⁹*Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 348.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 27.

of diplomatic engagement is that the leaders of the two 'nuclear superpowers' during the crisis of October 1962 seemed to have an excellent grasp on the consequences of the risks they were taking and understood the immorality and insanity of what their systems had become – and yet still could not or would not dismantle those systems.

In a letter to US President Kennedy during the crisis, Soviet Premier Khrushchev eloquently described the 'knot of war' that their two countries had tied and urged both sides to 'untie the knot'. He wrote of the risks of pulling the knot so tight 'that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it'.¹²

What we have seen in the ensuing years is that even amongst leaders that have indicated their desire to 'untie the knot', they have not been able to do so. When anyone – from government officials creating policy or scientists developing weapons or activists raising the alarm – has spoken out against the nuclear war machine, mainstream media, academia, or politicians have suppressed their views. Ellsberg accurately describes the practices employed by those controlling the dominant narrative around nuclear weapons to maintain an 'objective', dispassionate discourse, and to dismiss those who want to talk about nuclear weapons for what they really are as 'emotional rather than rational', as 'non-expert', and as 'irresponsible'.

This patriarchal approach, which discounts and refuses to engage in discussions about the physical, legal, or moral consequences of nuclear weapons and nuclear war, has for decades effectively precluded the development of 'credible' alternative narratives. But in recent years, this has changed.

Recognizing the failure of the leaders of nuclear-armed states to 'untie the knot' – that they cannot or will not take the necessary steps to eliminate or even reduce the risks generated by their Doomsday Machines – the vast majority of countries have revolted. They joined forces with activists within the transnational, intergenerational civil society coalition the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to construct a new narrative about nuclear weapons – one in which the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences of the use of these weapons is front and centre. From this vantage point, this team, led by governments primarily of the global south together with ICAN, developed a new international agreement banning nuclear weapons. On 7 July 2017, 122 governments voted to adopt the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. While this Treaty is only given one sentence in Ellsberg's book, possibly because of the date of writing, this development presents a very significant challenge to nuclear weapons and to the nuclear war machines of the most 'powerful' countries in the world.

Borne of frustration but also of courage, the nuclear ban treaty shows what the world can do in the face of grave injustice and incredible risk. The countries and the activists leading the way in this initiative understood the urgency of dismantling the Doomsday Machines their neighbours and allies had built up. They conceived of a role for themselves in this history, of helping to 'untie the knot' by working to change the legal, political, economic, and social landscape in which nuclear weapons exist. By affecting economic investments in nuclear weapon production, as well as social and political discourse around the reality of nuclear war, and the legal standing of these weapons relative to other weapons of mass destruction, the Treaty offers tangible impacts that could very well undermine some of the key institutions and incentives for maintaining nuclear weapons.

Ellsberg concludes the introduction to his book by pondering,

Whether Americans, Russians, and other humans can rise to the challenge of reversing these policies and eliminating the danger of near-term extinction caused by their own inventions


¹²ibid., 219.

and proclivities remains to be seen. I choose to join with others in acting *as if* that is still possible.

The process of banning nuclear weapons has shown that at least some of the world – most of the world – can and will rise to this challenge. What really remains to be seen is how those trapped in the ‘institutionalised madness’ of the Domsday Machines will respond. The prohibition of nuclear weapons opens an opportunity for leaders of nuclear-armed and nuclear-supportive states to step back from the brink, loosen the knot, and engage in the process of dismantling their Domsday Machines. This is our chance to survive.

Ray Acheson

Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Reaching Critical Will, New York, USA

 ray@reachingcriticalwill.org

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