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Daniel Ellsberg, and the 'Good' and 'Bad' Whistleblower (/archives/featured-articles/2023/june/21/daniel-ellsberg-and-the-good-and-bad-whistleblower/)

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The massive obituaries to Daniel Ellsberg at the weekend in both [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/16/us/daniel-ellsberg-dead.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/16/us/daniel-ellsberg-dead.html>) and [Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2023/06/16/daniel-ellsberg-pentagon-papers-dead/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2023/06/16/daniel-ellsberg-pentagon-papers-dead/>) were proof of the status he held in the United States.

Only Presidents get that size of obituary.

His name was not nearly so widely known in the UK. I first met Dan on 3 May 2006 when we were giving a joint presentation at Berkeley. The large hall was full to overflowing, and to my surprise there were young students queuing outside and striving to listen on stairways through open doors.

The large majority of the audience were not born when Dan leaked the “Pentagon Papers” in 1971. But his star status endured.

I know the date because we went afterwards for a marvellous dinner at his Californian home, replete with excellent wine. We talked long into the night, and he signed – and dated – me a copy of his book [Secrets](https://www.hive.co.uk/Product/Daniel-Ellsberg/Secrets/27455296) (<https://www.hive.co.uk/Product/Daniel-Ellsberg/Secrets/27455296>), which tells the story of his path to whistleblowing on the lies that kept the Vietnam war going.

I am looking at his message now. It reads “To Craig Murray – with greatest admiration for your conscientious truth-telling! and looking forward to a friendship”.

In 2010 we were again on stage together in London, at a massively attended Wikileaks press conference on the release of the Iraq war logs. We jointly presented Julian Assange with his [Sam Adams Award](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Adams_Award) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Adams_Award).

It was at this event that I first realised that something had gone disastrously wrong in the relationship between Wikileaks and the Guardian.

They had been cooperating closely, and I myself had published frequent articles in the Guardian over the past four years. Arriving at the press conference, I ran into David Leigh, Deputy Editor of the Guardian, whom I viewed as a friend. We had lunch together a couple of times in the previous few months.

I said "Hello, David" and he simply stared at me. I thought he was lost in thought or somehow had not recognised me. I waved my hands in front of his eyes to get his attention. He stared at me, turned on his heel and walked away.

It was from that day that the Guardian's coverage of Assange entirely changed and he was treated as a bitter enemy – and that the Guardian became a servile channel for security service propaganda.

For me the Guardian [smashing of \(https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jan/31/footage-released-guardian-editors-snowden-hard-drives-gchq\)](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jan/31/footage-released-guardian-editors-snowden-hard-drives-gchq) the Snowden hard drives therefore came as no surprise. I had already witnessed them turn. David Leigh, incidentally, never spoke to me again and the Guardian stopped accepting my articles.

At the time of that press conference, the publication of Leigh and Harding's book on Assange – which gave away the location and password of the Chelsea Manning cache – was two months away, so it must already have been written.

There had been a massive row between them all over Assange's biography, which at that height of his fame was worth millions. Julian had decided he did not want the Guardian journalists involved after all, and I think a large part of the bitterness of the break was largely the sordid matter of money.

Which brings me at last to the thought behind this article.

Dan Ellsberg maintained until the last his "respectability" in society as the "good whistleblower".

Yet the publication of papers from Chelsea Manning and others, similar in so many ways to Ellsberg's Pentagon Papers, became demonised, then criminalised, and Julian became the "bad whistleblower", or more accurately publisher of whistleblowers.

Now Dan Ellsberg totally rejected this characterisation. It infuriated him and he actively fought against it, including at Julian's extradition hearing, on which see below.

But how did this process of characterisation happen?

To me, the fundamental point is that the United States achieved consensus that the Vietnam War had been a terrible mistake. It was fought in the interests of colonialism, for the suppression of a nation, and was ultimately unwinnable.

The USA went through a cathartic rejection of the Vietnam War, which included recognition of the atrocities perpetrated by their armed forces on civilian populations. Portrayal of the Vietnam War, in Hollywood, in popular fiction, or in the "serious" media, portrayed it unflinchingly as a bungle and a disgrace; notably often relieved by comic treatment.

We have never really been through that process with the Iraq War. Although it is now generally accepted that the war was started on lies about Weapons of Mass Destruction, a very significant

number of the political class – and quite possibly a majority of MPs, for example – do not accept that the Iraq War was a mistake.

There has been a serious failure to accept and process the fact of the numerous atrocities committed by British troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

In Oslo last week, Jeremy Corbyn told me that, when he stood up as Labour leader to apologise (https://www.holyrood.com/news/view,jeremy-corbyn-apologises-for-iraq-war-on-behalf-of-the-labour-party_12026.htm) for the Iraq War, he was very conscious that he did not have the support of the vast majority of his own MPs.

It is extraordinary how many politicians, and how many high profile “journalists”, cleave to the view that the Iraq war was justified because it saved the Iraqi people from a dreadful dictator. It killed or maimed millions, displaced millions more, blasted the entire infrastructure back forty years, destroyed the economy, and set off unending civil war, but somehow the devotees of “liberal intervention” see all this as “better”.

Precisely the same, of course, can be said of Libya or Afghanistan or of Western backed Saudi organised wars in Syria or Yemen. Not only have those countries been completely devastated, the resultant mass refugee crisis has politically destabilised Europe.

Yet, astonishingly, there is no Establishment consensus that the attacks on the Middle East and Central Asia were a terrible mistake, in the same way that Vietnam is acknowledged as a terrible mistake. The doctrine of “liberal intervention” retains a deep hold on the political and media classes.

“Liberal intervention”, of course, is simply “imperialism”. The notion that non-European people would be better off if their rulers were deposed and replaced by western mandated puppets is precisely how the British Empire worked. The justification was always the same – it was always for the good of the conquered people themselves.

The reason Dan Ellsberg attained a folk hero status denied to Assange, Snowden or Manning is that Vietnam has full Establishment acceptance as an error, but the 21st century invasions, interventions and the population mass surveillance are viewed as “justified”.

In the Assange hearing, counsel on behalf of the United States government openly stated that the New York Times – could have been prosecuted under the Espionage Act for the publication of the Pentagon Papers, but that US Executive had chosen not to do so.

Read the whole article [here \(https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2023/06/daniel-ellsberg-and-the-good-and-bad-whistleblower/\)](https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2023/06/daniel-ellsberg-and-the-good-and-bad-whistleblower/).
