

# We must be alert to the danger of impending doomsday

By John Warnock

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

In April, Daniel Ellsberg came to Tucson.

Ellsberg is best known for having released the Pentagon Papers — the hidden account of the United States' long involvement in Vietnam — in 1970. He had been employed by the Rand Corporation and had taken the papers from the top-secret safe in his office and copied them.



John Warnock

This year, Ellsberg published another book. In "The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner," he tells us what else he had in his safe — highly classified papers about our government's nuclear war planning. Ellsberg, an ex-Marine and Harvard Ph.D., who had worked for the Rand Corporation, the Defense Department and the Pentagon, had been as deeply inside our nuclear war planning establishment as it was possible to be.

On April 24, Ellsberg and Noam Chomsky were interviewed at the University of Arizona in a session that focused mostly on Ellsberg's new book. The Star's report said that Chomsky "noted it has been 70 years since the last time nuclear weapons were used in war, and there is reason to hope that they won't be used again in the next 70 years." A lot of us nourish that hope. But that is emphatically not what Chomsky said nor is it what Ellsberg and Chomsky believe we should expect.

It is of course *possible* that nuclear weapons won't be used for another 70 years — if by "used" we mean "detonated" rather than "used like a gun in a robbery to threaten others." Over the last 70 years, nuclear weapons have been used by our leaders a lot in the second way.

In an interview at The Loft the following day, Ellsberg said he considers it "a secular miracle" that we escaped nuclear catastrophe over the last 70 years.

He isn't the only one who thinks this. Air Force General George Lee Butler, when he became head of our Strategic Air Command at the end of the Cold War and was finally able to see our operational plan for nuclear war, concluded that "this was the single most absurd and irresponsible document I had ever reviewed in my life. ... I came to fully appreciate the truth ... (that) we escaped the Cold War without a nuclear holocaust by some combination of skill, luck, and divine intervention, and I suspect the latter in greatest proportion."

Ellsberg and Chomsky both believe that in the next 70 years it is not just possible but *likely* that we will experience a nuclear catastrophe. Not just a detonation somewhere — Long Beach Harbor or Washington D.C., say — by a terrorist. That would be a catastrophe, sure enough, much more of one than is usually imagined. Former Secretary of Defense William Perry believes

an attack of that kind is likely in the next 10 years.

The nuclear catastrophe Ellsberg says we are still very close to experiencing — despite the end of the Cold War — would amount to doomsday.

Studies have now confirmed that if only 100 nuclear weapons were detonated on cities, the fires that followed would propel enough smoke and soot into the stratosphere to cause a nuclear winter that would last so long as to kill almost everyone on Earth.

Even if those nuclear weapons detonated were all ours and the cities they fell on were all in another country.

We still have 450 land-based ICBMs on Cold War alert. More than three doomsdays worth. The warhead on each has a yield of more than 20 Hiroshimas.

We could make some not-so-big changes that would greatly reduce the likelihood of this particular doomsday being in our future, Ellsberg argues. One would be to take our land-based ICBMs off Cold War alert. Because of the Trident submarines we have on patrol, doing so would reduce any supposed deterrent effect not one iota. Ellsberg's book sets out other changes in the status quo that would reduce the risk.

What would motivate our leaders to make these changes? A nuclear catastrophe short of doomsday might do it. An awakened public would be a better way to go.

John Warnock is a faculty member at the University of Arizona.