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US whistleblower urges civil servants to leak Iraq secrets

American who disclosed Pentagon Papers on Vietnam war arrives in London to show solidarity with prosecuted peace activists

Duncan Campbell
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One of the world's best-known whistleblowers is in London this week in a mission to encourage public servants with vital information about the war in Iraq or any future conflicts to come forward. His arrival coincides with the prosecutions in Denmark and Ireland of people who took action in opposition to the war.

Daniel Ellsberg, whose disclosure of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 helped end the war in Vietnam, said he hoped to encourage people with access to official information regarding the war and questions about its legality to come forward.

"I am not saying that people should do what I did because that would seem self-aggrandising, rather I am saying that people should do what I didn't do - that is, they should come forward with information to prevent war rather than wait until years after it has been going on as I did," he said.

Mr Ellsberg was prosecuted for leaking papers to the New York Times but cleared in 1973 after it emerged how the Nixon administration had engaged in criminal acts against him and tried to influence the trial.

Now based in Berkeley, California, he has been in Denmark for the trial of the Danish whistleblower Frank Grevil and in Ireland for the trial of peace campaigner Mary Kelly who was convicted this week of criminal damage to a US plane at Shannon airport. Mr Ellsberg made statements on behalf of both the accused, although he did not give evidence.

The Truth-Telling Project, which Mr Ellsberg started, encourages "whistleblowing in the national interest".

It urges current and recently retired government officials to pass on information about "governmental wrongdoing, lies and cover-up. It aims to change the norms and practices that sustain the cult of secrecy, and to de-legitimise silence that costs lives."

Mr Ellsberg's campaign, which is supported in this country by GCHQ whistleblower Katharine Gun, has been aimed primarily at officials in the US administration. He said it had become increasingly clear that "a dominant practice of the Bush administration is cover-up on urgent matters of life and death and cover-up of the real motives for the war and of the foreseeable costs and problems of the occupation".

He said the latest example of attempted concealment was the classification of reports and photographs on torture at Abu Ghraib prison which would have remained unknown were it not for unauthorised disclosure.

Frank Grevil stands accused of leaking three classified "threat assessments" to a Danish newspaper.

The documents indicated his employer at the time, the Danish defence intelligence service, was providing inaccurate intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction before the Danish parliament joined the coalition in March last year.

The documents showed that the service was basing its threat assessments almost entirely on data from US and British intelligence agencies. In a statement to the court, Mr Ellsberg said Mr Grevil had acted "unselfishly and conscientiously in order to strengthen democracy, and government transparency, and true national security".

In court in Ennis, Ireland, Kelly was convicted on Thursday by a 10-2 majority of criminal damage without lawful excuse of a US navy plane. The peace campaigner had attacked the plane with an axe at Shannon airport in January last year, causing £800,000 worth of damage.

She said she had taken the action "to protect lives and prevent crimes".

Kelly, 52, was alleged to have caused £1.5m damage to the plane, which was en route from Fort Worth, Texas, to Italy.

She told the jury: "I wanted to stop the daily slaughter that is going on."

Judge Carroll Moran told the court: "The law does not allow us to take the law into our own hands because we disagree with what our government is doing. People act frequently to take actions on principles of conscience and if they break the law they take the consequences."

He added: "There is a certain self-opinionated element to the stance she is taking. No one can stand above the law. I dare say that you have a lot of sympathy for Ms Kelly but I would ask you to deal with the matter as dispassionately as you can. Be ruled by your head and not your heart."

Kelly has not yet been sentenced.

Mr Ellsberg, who has been arrested around 70 times in peace protests in the US, said he believed that whistleblowing was a patriotic activity which should be encouraged. "It is an expression of the higher loyalty officials owe," he said. "It is courageous, patriotic and effective."

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