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Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers, The

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The Untold Story of a War, and the Story of the Man Who Told It

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Correction Appended

As “The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers” begins, a sonorous voice describes American actions during the Vietnam War. It sounds a bit like that of Peter Coyote, a frequent narrator of documentaries with a liberal bent. Then the voice says “I,” and you realize that it’s Daniel Ellsberg, narrating his own story.

There’s no doubt where “Dangerous” stands when it comes to Mr. Ellsberg, the man who leaked the secret history of the war, known as the Pentagon Papers, to newspapers, including The New York Times. On the spectrum from heroic patriot to craven traitor, this detailed, clearly told and persuasive film, directed by Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith, is firmly on the side of heroic. It conscientiously notes the viewpoints of those who believe that Mr. Ellsberg betrayed his country or his former colleagues at the Defense Department, which prepared the report. But when the two sides are represented by the formidably intelligent, reasoned, now grandfatherly tones of Mr. Ellsberg on the one hand, and the taped, heavily bleeped rants of President Richard M. Nixon on the other, it’s not much of a contest.

One problem the filmmakers have, in fact, is that the narrative of Mr. Ellsberg’s disillusionment and of the subsequent First Amendment battle after he leaked the papers is so familiar, and its lessons regarding government malfeasance so accepted, that it has become an official story in its own right. Ms. Ehrlich and Mr. Goldsmith try to jack up the tension with moody Errol Morris-style shots of telephones, safes and briefcases, but they’re just distracting.

Yet there’s still sufficient drama in the details to keep you hooked — like Mr. Ellsberg’s account of the many nights of surreptitious photocopying required to get the 7,000-page study out into the world, or James Goodale’s memories of how, as general counsel of The Times, he pushed the newspaper’s management to publish it.

As the documentary progresses, the parallels between the events it describes and subsequent behavior by American administrations during conflicts in Central America and the Middle East are mostly left unspoken. Many viewers, however, will come away with a depressing sense of history repeating itself, and Mr. Ellsberg sounds that note himself, asking why the lessons of Vietnam and Watergate seemed to fade so quickly.

The filmmakers, meanwhile, concentrate on their portrait of Mr. Ellsberg, who emerges as a complex and difficult man whose principles, whether you agree with them or not, can’t be denied.

THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN AMERICA

Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers

Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.

Produced and directed by Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith; written by Lawrence Lerew, Mr. Goldsmith, Ms. Ehrlich and Michael Chandler, based on the books “Secrets” and “Papers on the War” by Daniel Ellsberg; narrated by Mr. Ellsberg; director of photography, Vicente Franco; edited by Mr. Chandler, Mr. Goldsmith and Mr. Lerew; music by Blake Leyh. At Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, West Village. Running time: 1 hour 33 minutes. This film is not rated.

Correction: September 21, 2009

A review on Wednesday of the documentary “The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers,” about the man who leaked a classified history of the Vietnam War, misstated the source of that history. It was prepared by the Defense Department, not the RAND Corporation, where Mr. Ellsberg, a former Pentagon analyst who had contributed to the history, went to work.