The political intrigues that inspired Judith Ehrlich's film about the Vietnam war are eerily familiar today, the director tells **Clarence Tsui**

Echoes of the past

Judith Ehrlich recalls being driven by a sense of urgency when, in 2005, she began working on her documentary about the revelations in 1971 of the so-called Pentagon Papers, which showed how four US administrations decided to persist with, or escalate, the Vietnam war when they knew it was unwinnable.

According to the filmmaker, the papers – leaked to the press by one of their authors, former US Defence Department strategist Daniel Ellsberg – painted a scenario that bore an eerie resemblance to what she was witnessing then. It was a year after president George W. Bush had been re-elected, his wars in Iraq and Afghanistan still raging. Ehrlich says all the signs pointed to an imperial presidency that was not receptive to the people's views, with more and more power snatched by the executive branch.

"We were actually concerned that if we didn't finish this when Bush was in office, it wouldn't be very useful – little did we know that we would expand our commitment to another war," she says, frowning. She was referring to how, two months after *The Most Dangerous Man in America – The Pentagon Papers* premiered at the Toronto Film Festival last September, President Barack Obama announced a deployment of 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, despite being advised against such a surge by the American ambassador to the country, Karl Eikenberry, until President Hamid Karzai's regime agreed on solid plans to root out corruption in his government.

But Eikenberry eventually backtracked. A month after he voiced his doubts to the White House, the retired lieutenant-general appeared at a congressional hearing and offered unequivocal support to Obama's plans. It's a volte-face that mirrors one of the most extraordinary scenes in Ehrlich's Oscar-nominated documentary, which was shown at the Hong Kong International Film Festival in March and released on DVD last week.

Former defence secretary Robert McNamara is seen on his plane expressing disapproval over president Lyndon Johnson's plans to send more troops to Vietnam, then telling the press waiting on the tarmac that he agreed with the need to boost America's military presence. "McNamara had doubts, and that's why he had to leave office," Ehrlich says. "You don't get to doubt in most jobs – you have to be responsible to your boss."

Standing behind McNamara that day, however, was a man who would defy that logic and thereby become branded as "the most dangerous man in America". A former marine, Daniel Ellsberg worked as a strategy analyst at the think tank Rand Corporation from 1959 to 1964, while also serving as a consultant to the US Defence Department. He then joined the department full time and was responsible for drafting reports on, among other things, alleged Vietcong atrocities – information the US used as an excuse to bomb North Vietnam.

He then served at the American embassy in Saigon for two years, an experience which altered his views on the war: rather than fighting on to reach a solution – whatever that could be – Ellsberg said he believed the US should get out as soon as possible.

But Ellsberg's perception of the Vietnam war took a seismic shift when he returned to the Rand Corporation in 1967, and began working on a McNamara-commissioned top-secret study about American decision-making in Indochina and Vietnam from 1945 to 1968.

Reading through the 7,000 pages of mostly confidential documents, Ellsberg realised how – as Ehrlich puts it – "nobody wants to be the guy holding the bag, and everybody wants to keep the war going and let someone else lose the war. People might think that's a very Chinese idea, of 'not losing face', but it's true in leaderships around the world."

In October 1969, Ellsberg began photocopying the documents, and circulating them to several congressmen in the hope of getting them to launch hearings into the US' conduct in the war. It was the media, eventually, that made the papers public, when *The New York Times* published excerpts of the documents on June 13, 1971. What followed was a series of events that reads like a thriller: the authorities forced the *Times* to cease publishing its stories while the FBI launched a manhunt to arraign Ellsberg, who incredibly managed to distribute the documents to 18 more publications while still in hiding.

He turned himself in two weeks later and was put on trial – only for the proceedings to descend into farce. Revelations emerged about the Richard Nixon administration's botched attempt to steal Ellsberg's file from his psychiatrist, then the presiding judge was offered the position of FBI director. All charges against Ellsberg and his friend Anthony Russo (who helped with the photocopying) were dropped and both men were freed.

Ellsberg has remained a vocal anti-war activist, and has repeatedly called for people inside the establishment to step forward and leak information about the Bush administration's war in Iraq.

Ellsberg's story has been made into a film before – but without his participation, Ehrlich says. "That was a made-for-TV movie and was not released theatrically, and they did that without any involvement with the Ellsbergs," she says, referring to the 2003 piece *The Pentagon Papers*, with James Spader playing the apparatchik-turned-activist.

Judith Ehrlich (above); Daniel Ellsberg (top right) during his 1973 trial. Photos: May Tse, AP

> Nobody wants to be the guy holding the bag ... everybody wants to keep the [Vietnam] war going and let someone else lose the war
>
> **Judith Ehrlich, filmmaker**

Ehrlich says she and co-director Rick Goldsmith set out to make a "thoroughly researched and accurate documentary", but also wanted the film to "be more dramatic, and not just dry history".

Rather than just zeroing in on the politics, the pair have made Ellsberg the film's central element, following his formative years, personal growth and marriage while depicting how the whole Pentagon Papers saga unfolded. And the filmic qualities of the saga also allowed the filmmakers to play about with re-enactments that resemble scenes from a detective thriller.

"It's playing really well to young people," Ehrlich says. "I showed it to 1,000 students at the Palm Springs Film Festival, in a pretty conservative part of California, and 100 hands went up [in a post-screening discussion]: 'What can I do to make the government responsive? What can I do to be a better citizen, to get involved?' They took it to heart."

Ehrlich says *The Most Dangerous Man* is similar to her last documentary, *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It*, as both are about people acting on their conscience. The film showed conscientious objectors during the second world war "who take tremendous risks and talk about doing something incredibly unpopular, risking their reputations and really trying hard to show their bravery in other ways, such as being guinea pigs in dangerous medical experiments and jumping out of planes to fight fires. They did that to show that they were not afraid; they just didn't want to kill people," she says.

"I think Dan is in that same tradition of people who stand up for what he calls civil courage. We are lucky to be living in a democratic society; to stand up and do the right thing, and I think not enough people exercise that right. I hope this film could encourage more people to do that."