

WikiLeaks: the Problem Is America's Imperial Foreign Policy

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The WikiLeaks disclosure of U.S. diplomatic cables has stirred a storm of outrage in Washington, generating apparently serious calls to execute individual leakers and bomb media organizations. Yet despite the abundant egg over the faces of many American officials, there's little evidence of significant harm to U.S. security.

In fact, not much in the documents is new. Suffering the biggest embarrassment are foreign dictators, particularly in the Middle East, whose deceits have been exposed for all to see. But Washington has better things to do than worry about the political well-being of such corrupt oligarchs.

The U.S. government would have far less to fear from unauthorized disclosures like those from WikiLeaks if

American foreign policy was less intrusive and interventionist. Most of what U.S. officials are desperate to hide is their interference in the affairs of other nations.

Obviously, there are cases when secrecy is legitimate, even vital. The clearest instance is the operational details of military and intelligence activities. However, these days, at least, most of the former, and at least some of the latter, don't serve the nation's interest and should not be



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undertaken. U.S. officials have moved from defending the security of Americans to promoting the influence of American officials, which are very different objectives.

Randolph Bourne presciently warned that "war is the health of the state." That's true in many areas, including government secrecy. America's aggressively interventionist foreign policy has inevitably spawned a national security state. The more wars, the more attempts to overthrow or influence foreign regimes, and the more threats against other countries, the more secrets must be kept, and the more draconian methods must be employed to prevent unauthorized disclosures.

Is a mass, undifferentiated document dump the best way to inform the American people about what their officials are up to around the world? No, but with presidents claiming that they can arrest and detain citizens, potentially forever, without legal recourse and conduct widespread surveillance activities without congressional or judicial oversight, accountability for Uncle Sam is limited, at best. Expecting the federal government to police itself reflects the triumph of hope over experience. It is not clear there is an alternative to organizations such as WikiLeaks.

Anyway, virtually none of the WikiLeaks disclosures appear to endanger ongoing operations. Rather, the leaked documents mostly reveal what U.S. and foreign officials said to each other. Most of which was unexceptional.

Instead of complaining that Americans are learning more about government policy, U.S. officials should reconsider what the government is doing. After all, attempting to run the world ain't for the faint-hearted. If advocates of quasi-imperialism don't believe they can justify their activities in a blaze of publicity, maybe they should adopt a different policy.

Robert Scheer has reported some of my favorite disclosures. For instance, the State Department noted the corrupt reputation of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's half-brother, pointing to "one of our major challenges in Afghanistan: how to fight corruption and connect the people to their government, when the key government officials are themselves corrupt." It's a good question, which the president and his appointees should answer for the American people. Just what is the U.S. doing in Afghanistan?

The malign consequences of the Iraq invasion also are discussed, with the Saudis complaining that America has enhanced Iran's influence. Then the Saudis urge Washington to attack Iran. Americans should ask how the Bush administration made such a tragic mistake in Iraq in 2003, and whether the Obama administration is considering making a similarly tragic mistake in Iran now.

There's also the question: why does Washington listen to the Saudis, who run one of the world's most repressive regimes, about anything? After all, we can count on Saudi Arabia's oil shipments not because we do Riyadh's bidding in foreign policy, but because otherwise the Saudi royals would have to work

for a living. And there's not much chance of the latter happening.

Might future disclosures do more genuine harm? Yes. In fact, in previous downloads WikiLeaks did not fully redact informant names. But the best way to plug Washington's many information leaks would be to shrink America's international ambitions.

First, U.S. policy should be tailored to protect the lives, freedom, wealth, and territory of the American people. While doing so would necessitate regular intelligence gathering and occasional military action, the scope of U.S. foreign policy would be far narrower. Washington no longer would be constantly attempting to dictate to reluctant allies and remake recalcitrant adversaries.

Indeed, if the Clinton and Bush administrations had not turned war into a just another policy option, foreign governments would not be urging America to bomb their adversaries. If Washington did not routinely prop up weak, unpopular, and unstable regimes, the quality and character of foreign leaders would not be as hot a topic in State Department cables home.

Second, policymakers should shrink America's footprint abroad. Virtually every embassy has become a huge fortress, damaging America's image. Worst of all is the Vatican-sized facility in Baghdad, planned back when the Bush administration thought Iraq would be a permanent puppet state.

When foreign relations can be conducted via telephone, capital-to-capital, embassy functions and staffs could be much reduced. Especially since the U.S. doesn't need to collect compliant political puppets any longer.

Moreover, it is not the job of diplomatic personnel to sell U.S. products and promote educational exchanges. Important consular tasks, such as issuing visas, would remain, but even many of them could be streamlined. American officials waste inordinate time and energy limiting visas to potential visitors who pose no security risk. Fewer officials on station would mean fewer activities and conversations to be shielded from public view.

Third, federal officials need to draw the security curtain less broadly but more tightly. Over-classification is a huge problem. Access to documents sometimes is restricted more for political than security reasons: the easiest way to limit politically embarrassing leaks is to stamp a document secret. While in the White House working on the Law of the Sea Treaty negotiations a quarter century ago I had to get a four-drawer safe to hold all of the materials generated by one task force, even though the Soviet Union would have had no interest in purloining any of them. When government officials misuse their authority in order to hide mistakes and impede accountability, leaking may be seen as a necessary and perhaps only corrective.

At the same time, as government has expanded it has become harder to protect genuinely important information. Today hundreds of thousands of

people have access to classified material in America's sprawling national security bureaucracy. Apparently a 23-year-old army private is the source of the WikiLeaks disclosures. If he could purloin so many supposedly vital diplomatic documents, the federal government obviously does not treat security seriously.

Today Washington is filled with bipartisan denunciations of security leaks. The American people would be better served if U.S. policymakers instead criticized costly and unnecessary interventions around the world. America's imperial foreign policy has given rise to the massive militarized state which has so much to hide.

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