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The Ethics (or lack thereof) of the Wikileaks Controversy

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Classified reports from our embassies are the oil of US diplomacy, enabling our Government to make informed decisions on events around the world. And being the only nation with universal global interests, these reports are essential for protecting our country and promoting our international goals. Having authored the types of classified Department of State reports which have been highlighted in the recent WikiLeaks disclosures, I am not an objective or a disinterested observer of this issue; in fact I'm disgusted that the material has been made available to the entire world on the internet.

What bothers me as much, however, is that so many intelligent people have responded to the whole issue with either a "no big deal" or even a "good for WikiLeaks" attitude. That sounds so noble in theory, but I suspect few of those folks have ever seen conditions in a third-world prison, or talked to anyone who's been brutally tortured by a dictatorial regime. Yet that is exactly the fate that will no doubt befall a number of people who have already been, or will be identified in the leaked documents as discussing "sensitive" subjects with US diplomats, or even for speaking to American Embassy contacts. Beyond that, some of the most heinous regimes in the world – such as Robert Mugabe's in Zimbabwe – are using the information gleaned from WikiLeaks to discredit potential opposition figures. (Mugabe's government-controlled media is highlighting certain character flaws in his main rival, Morgan Tsvangarai, which were discussed in some of the classified reporting.) So that is ethics issue one.

The second ethical aspect concerns those who have made the information available outside classified channels. Motivation for an action is impossible to know for sure aside from the person involved. But even if the motivation of the soldier alleged to have downloaded the 250,000 cables was the purest, transcending narrow national interests to some higher calling, he broke his oath. Every member of the military, prior to starting duty, takes the following oath (and they know they will be taking this when they first sign on):

"I, _____, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God."

I know from my own familiarity with US Government regulations that downloading classified information and then disclosing it in an unauthorized manner breaks that oath – and that is unethical. As far as WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is concerned, the law is murkier concerning receiving classified information, and, since he is Australian and physically outside the US, there is a question as to what government may have jurisdiction. Even if Assange personally detests the U.S., there is still an ethical issue about publicizing information that could potentially bring great harm to those who believed that their conversations would remain secure. How would you weigh the benefits of “transparency” against the real harm to real people which will result when classified information is released?

I have to confess that I’m closely following the documents which are being released to see whether any I wrote show up: at least I will know which of my writings ends up in the public domain and who could end up greatly upset by them. I also have a certain satisfaction that the American public is learning that diplomats do more than attend fancy cocktail parties and drink Champagne; and that our analysis and forecasting tends to be right on, providing our top government officials with the information that they need to lead our country in an ever more dangerous world.