



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

Wikileaker Is No Hero

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President and C.E.O.

After the leak of 251,000 classified government documents last November, Wikileaks founder Julian Assange cloaked himself in a mantle of righteousness. He claimed to be

exposing government duplicity and cover-ups of human rights violations, to be increasing transparency and strengthening democracy.

Here is why his assertion about the good he is doing is false. The system for keeping classified material secret is mostly self-policing. Yes, there are scanners when you enter or exit government buildings. There are random checks of offices using classified material to see whether the material is being handled properly. Classified material must be kept in locked safes when not in the hands of those using it.

But no physical security measures for information can be 100 percent effective. The ultimate responsibility for keeping classified material secret lies with the individuals who handle it. Each person with a security clearance is responsible for knowing what is secret and for not disclosing information that should be kept confidential. To obtain a security clearance, their backgrounds are checked and they swear to uphold the security of the information with which they are trusted. A person's security clearance must be in good standing for them to work for the government or its contractors. One serious security breach and they will lose their clearance and no longer have access to classified material – or to a responsible job with a government agency or contractor.

This system of personal responsibility also means that when a cleared military or civilian employee becomes aware of government activities that genuinely violate the constitution or human rights, and does everything possible to correct this situation within the organization in which he or she works, to no avail, then as a last resort, that person can choose to make the information public.

Take for example Daniel Ellsberg's 1971 release of the secret reports on the Vietnam War, the Pentagon Papers. Going public with this classified material violated Ellsberg's security clearance. He had a specific concern: that the U.S. government was misrepresenting the number of casualties in the Vietnam War. He believed this was depriving the public and Congress of the knowledge needed to make an informed decision about our strategy in Vietnam. So he decided to make the classified material on this specific topic public by giving it to *The New York Times*.

Though one can debate the ethics of what Ellsberg did, his actions and those of other leakers of conscience are fundamentally different from the blanket Wikileaks release of classified documents on every conceivable subject. There was no specific act of conscience here, no concern about a particular area of policy that was unconstitutional or violated human rights.

The negative impact of a blanket leak like this could be extraordinary. Diplomacy is extremely important to U.S. ability to function in the world, and especially to our ability to resolve problems by peaceful means. The ability to conduct diplomacy is based on diplomats' access to uncensored information about what is going on in other parts of the world.

U.S. government employees, diplomats and others must be free to send candid reports on what they are hearing and seeing, even if they are rumors, speculation or information that is potentially defamatory to U.S. allies or adversaries, or later proved to be downright wrong. Choking off the ability of these analysts to be frank can hobble our diplomacy. If officials and sources providing information to the U.S. government think their words could shortly appear on the Internet, this flow of information and opinions to our policy leaders could turn into cautious and empty communications, constricting the ability of decision makers to make good choices.

As a result of Wikileaks, several changes are needed in how the U.S. government handles classified information. First, screening procedures for security clearances need to be improved. The prime suspect for leaking the cables is 22-year-old Army Specialist Bradley Manning. A security clearance is based on a background check as a way of predicting whether a person might be prone to leak classified material. But with little background to check at age 22, the unreliability Manning demonstrated may not yet have been visible in his short life. Other kinds of tests and interviews need to be added to the typical background check, especially when evaluating those as young as Manning.

Second, no one individual, especially at Manning's level, should have access to the wide range of material he downloaded and provided to Wikileaks. We have technology and procedures that can prevent this, and they should be effectively utilized.

Finally, after one visit, I intentionally did not return to the Wikileaks site. I personally will not give Mr. Assange what he wants, the clicks and page views – and book readers – that reward him for posting this material. Ω

Column archive: commonwealthclub.org/gloriaduffy/archive.php