The Pentagon Papers, WikiLeaks and the American Way of War

By Mel Gurtov
In November, the website WikiLeaks began releasing the first batches of more than 250,000 classified US diplomatic cables, a trove of potentially embarrassing revelations about the conduct of US foreign policy. This comes in the wake of two previous releases by WikiLeaks this year of classified US documents relating to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Mel Gurtov, an author of the Pentagon Papers, a set of documents revealing official US thinking on the war in Vietnam that was leaked in 1971, assesses the differences and similarities between then and now.
DANIEL ELLSBERG, who released the Pentagon Papers to the New York Times in June 1971, has often urged government workers with access to damaging secret information related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to make the same risky decision he made. A US army private evidently did just that last July. Presumably, it was he who passed the documents on to WikiLeaks.org which, like the New York Times in the Pentagon Papers case, made them available to other news outlets and to the public — about 77,000 on Afghanistan, followed in October by nearly 392,000 more on Iraq. (As this journal went to press, WikiLeaks was attempting to release hundreds of thousands of additional documents, decades’ worth of secret cables from US diplomatic stations around the world.) The private is being prosecuted, as was Ellsberg. All the parties to these leaks had the same objective: to stop and reverse US involvement in a terrible and costly war.

Afghanistan is not “another Vietnam,” and the Pentagon Papers and the WikiLeaks documents are not of the same type. The WikiLeaks papers afford a ground-level view of war, pointing up the ways in which the US strategy in Afghanistan is not working, and the price that civilians are paying for the fighting. The papers also underscore the corruption and ineffectiveness of the Afghan government and the duplicity of Pakistan, whose intelligence service continues to have ties to the Taliban even as the Pakistani government insists it is vigorously fighting terrorism. The Pentagon Papers, on the other hand, are a collection of high-level documents by US decision-makers. Their top-secret memoranda, cables and intelligence reports form a unique historical record of escalating US intervention. While there is also a good deal of information on US relations with its Vietnamese ally and other governments, the heart of the papers is executive-level dialogue about prosecuting an increasingly unpopular and losing effort.

What binds the two collections is that they point — in one case directly, in the other indirectly — to a deeply frustrated group of US officials who, for both domestic and international political reasons, simply cannot admit defeat and let go. Specifically, the documents suggest seven essential themes that are relevant to the present and future of American foreign policy.

SEVEN COMMON THEMES

First, the public optimism of US leaders is belied by the reality of war — the “indicators” are largely negative, and US leaders are well aware of that. Thus, their optimism is false, and on many specific occasions, they lie to the American people and Congress about battlefield circumstances and the outlook for the war strategy. In Vietnam, as revealed by the Pentagon Papers, most top US officials were fully aware of the Viet Cong’s successful recruiting, high morale and spreading territorial control in the face of unprecedented US military pressure. US General (and Ambassador) William Taylor marveled at the fact that the communist side had “the recuperative power of the phoenix.” He could not explain it. But these officials dared not speak honestly about the declining fortunes of the US-supported Saigon government when they appeared before the press or Congress.

So it is in Afghanistan: senior US civilian and military officials remain optimistic about ultimate victory, while neutral observers on the ground — representatives of the UN and NGOs — point to a rapidly deteriorating security situation. The US military’s “indicators” of progress sound very much like those used in Vietnam: enlarged “ink blots” that supposedly show safe areas; increasing numbers of trained Afghan soldiers; higher insurgent casualties; more military operations. But independent sources report that Taliban numbers are rising, their attacks are more frequent, they are militarily active in almost every province, and they have made once-safe areas dangerous for officials to travel.1 As was true of Vietnam in the late 1960s, official optimism is consistently contradicted by independent reports that suggest the enemy is everywhere and unsafe conditions prevail in virtually every part of the country.

Second, unwarranted optimism about current conditions lends itself to false projections about ending US involvement. There was always “light at the end of the tunnel” during the many years of US intervention in Vietnam.
But until the fall of Saigon, the Vietnam story centered on the politics of escalation; withdrawal was never an option up to the moment of defeat, and any senior official who suggested it — and there were a few — was marginalized. “Modest” additional troop deployments plus more bombing were the rule whenever the battlefield situation took another downward turn. Afghanistan is playing out similarly. Having ordered 17,000 more troops in February 2009, Obama decided in December to support a “surge” of another 30,000 as a compromise between a much larger deployment and no new deployment at all. (There now are approximately 78,000 US troops in Afghanistan, and US casualties exceed 1,300.) The “rapid pullout” Obama wants by mid-2011 is another political compromise, one no more likely to occur than is the actual end of a US “combat role” in Iraq. (Obama himself said at a news conference last May: “We are not suddenly, as of July 2011, finished with Afghanistan.”) Like his predecessors in Vietnam, Obama knows full well that the partner military — the Afghan national Army — is many years away from being able to take over for the Americans. A good bet is that, come 2012, the United States will still have 50,000 soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan — and they won’t be simply advising from the comfort of their barracks.

Third, the US is essentially the lonesome sheriff in these wars, always looking for a posse but never willing to give up absolute control of political and military strategy. The governments whose troops fight on the US side are mere sideshows, consulted (pressured, actually) only when more of their soldiers and money are needed. Such coalitions never stay the course: the British and Dutch have left Afghanistan, and the Canadians and Germans are withdrawing soon. But if reports from a recent NATO meeting are accurate, the US will soon gain a partner. Russia is said to be considering sending helicopter gunships and other military assistance to the very country it invaded and occupied from 1979 to 1989.1

One can only imagine how such a development would be viewed by most Afghans.
Fourth, official US rhetoric about the war’s objectives — democracy, defeat of terrorism (or communism), providing a better future for ordinary people — fails to have lasting credibility. The governments the US supports are autocratic, corrupt, isolated from their citizens, faction-ridden, and unreliable — so much so that in Vietnam, US leaders decided to fight on despite them, not with any confidence in them. From Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower to Richard Nixon, every US administration tried and failed to push the South Vietnamese leaders to “reform” so as to counter the enemy’s appeal. “Nation-building” became an obsession under President John F. Kennedy. The same cycle seems to be occurring in Afghanistan. US leaders are fully aware that corruption is endemic in the Afghan governing structure at every level, starting with Hamid Karzai’s own extended family. Political reform is often mentioned, and “development” projects (many quite effective) may be found everywhere; but these efforts are always placed second to security concerns and winning the war — a reality that Karzai knows how to exploit. US officials have therefore reportedly decided to shift the focus of responsibility for corruption to lower-level leaders so as not to weaken Karzai even further. Confidence in his administration has long since vanished, replaced by the mantra that, “well, he is the president.” What this means is that the Americans will carry on without Karzai while pretending that he is effective and beyond reproach. (Here, one may substitute “Pakistan” for Afghanistan and come to the same conclusion.)

Fifth, secret warfare is always a key component of US strategy. The Pentagon Papers highlight a long history of secret US ground and air operations against North Vietnam and neighboring countries dating back to just after the 1954 Geneva Accords. Few in the US Congress knew of these operations, yet they played a major role in prolonging, widening and intensifying the war. The WikiLeaks documents likewise reveal previously unknown assassination and paramilitary actions by army, navy and CIA operatives. Americans may consider these
actions justified by the enemy’s brutishness, but the consequences in popular support abroad for US intervention and democratic policymaking back home are significant.

Sixth, the gap between US interests and ideals grows steadily wider as the wars go on. In Vietnam, US officials, privately losing faith in prospects for defeating a communist insurgency, talked of the war as a test of America’s will. As early as November 1964, one of President Lyndon Johnson’s principal advisers, Walt W. Rostow, argued that the key to winning the war was presidential “determination and staying power,” with the understanding that “at this stage of history we are the greatest power in the world, if we behave like it.” McGeorge Bundy, another senior adviser, in February 1965 proposed “sustained reprisal” bombing of North Vietnam with the notion that even if it failed, it was still worth doing as bombing would “set a higher price for the future” of guerrilla warfare. And John McNaughton, a senior aide to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, wrote in March 1965 that 70 percent of the US war aim was “to avoid a humiliating US defeat;” only 20 percent was “to keep [South Vietnamese] territory from Chinese hands,” and 10 percent to help the Vietnamese “enjoy a better, freer way of life.” Preserving great-power reputation — the US as global hegemon and “Free World” leader — had replaced support of the Vietnamese as the main reason for intervention.

There is every reason to believe that reputation — image, credibility and leadership — is just as important today in Obama’s Afghanistan policy. Now, no matter how badly Karzai performs, how many payoffs are made to ensure that trucks deliver their goods and the Chinese get access to Afghanistan’s mineral riches, or how much evidence accrues about the Pakistani intelligence service’s support of the Taliban, defeating them remains the overriding and inescapable mission. The May 2010 National Security Strategy paper is clear on that. As was true for so long in the Vietnam War, few members of Congress have risen to challenge this mission by refusing to vote to continue funding it. Obama is trapped into a long-term commitment just as Johnson felt trapped.

The seventh point of commonality is that freedom of the press is taking a hit, again. Officials in the Nixon administration were fond of saying that the Pentagon Papers were simply history — while at the same moment surreptitiously carrying out black-bag operations, convening grand juries and trying to suppress publication of the papers, all in a failed effort to undermine Ellsberg and other critics. These days, some in the Obama administration are dismissing the WikiLeaks documents as old news while also trying to discredit the character of both the army private and the key figure behind WikiLeaks. (The private’s psychological makeup and sexual orientation have been subjects of newspaper speculation; and WikiLeaks’ leader only recently emerged from hiding in the UK to face extradition to Sweden.) But US officials know better: The news in these collections is as current as yesterday. Rather than fess up, today’s officials are looking to reframe the debate, just as Vietnam-era officials did, presumably to divert the public’s attention. They want to focus on the harm to national security supposedly caused by the leaks — thus the Pentagon’s request that WikiLeaks return the documents it holds and that newspapers refuse to publish them — rather than on the harm done by the policies themselves. To be sure, there is harm in revealing the names of Afghan informants; but that mistake should not be allowed to obscure the same realities that prevailed in Vietnam.

Trying to silence policy objectors is a government practice with a long history. It goes beyond efforts to suppress leaked documents. In the early years of the Vietnam War the Kennedy administration sought to remove reporters in the field (David Halberstam of the New York Times was one) whose articles raised questions about official claims of progress. Finding compliant journalists who could be relied on to faithfully report the government’s view was commonplace throughout that war and since — nowadays, by “embedding” reporters with military units, for instance. Under Obama, press censorship is again on the upswing. Although the Bush administration’s highly restrictive policies on Freedom of Information Act requests have been revised, oth-
er restrictions have been introduced in the name of national security. Besides the army private, two other whistleblowers with access to intelligence are being prosecuted under the Espionage Act. The Pentagon is seeking to buy up all copies of a former intelligence officer’s war memoir on Afghanistan, even though the army had approved publication. When the first military trial opened in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, four reporters were initially expelled on spurious grounds. Even though they were reinstated, the Pentagon placed new conditions on news coverage (which now are also being revised).

DIFFERENCE
Truth is not the only casualty here. One category of information that separates the WikiLeaks documents from the Pentagon Papers is reporting on the human casualties of war: the citizens caught in the middle, and the soldiers who die or are injured. In Vietnam, war-making often involved “destroying the village in order to save it.” The “cratering” of Vietnam with the equivalent (as one study determined) of one Hiroshima bomb a week, and the use of chemicals such as Agent Orange to defoliate jungles, made that war arguably the most destructive in history. Anywhere from 400,000 to a million South Vietnamese civilians died between 1965 and 1975—not to mention Laotians, Cambodians and North Vietnamese, for a grand total of perhaps 2 million—as the result of military actions by all armies. US war dead amounted to over 52,000. Afghanistan is different only in degree. The errors of military judgment revealed in the WikiLeaks documents made during drone aircraft strikes, secret commando operations and the actions of private military contractors have resulted in around 20,000 civilian deaths over a six-year period (2004-2009)—many more than previously reported. These operations have surely helped turn many Afghans against their presumed liberators, even though the Taliban and al-Qaeda may be responsible for just as many civilian casualties. As for the soldiers themselves, the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan wars have caused immense psychological as well as physical damage. As just one example, the US military has acknowledged that more active-duty soldiers—160—in Iraq and Afghanistan committed suicide between September 2008 and September 2009 than in any previous American war.

The Pentagon Papers did not end the war in Vietnam, and the WikiLeaks documents will not end the Afghan adventure. What the Pentagon Papers did was to ratify the correctness of the anti-war movement—that the war was at least unwinnable and mistaken, and at most immoral and illegal. In the absence of a widespread anti-war movement today, or even public focus on the Afghanistan war as a national priority, the WikiLeaks documents may still be consequential. For they tell the same story as the Pentagon Papers: There is no light at the end of the tunnel, nation-building has failed, security is fragile, the US has overstayed its welcome and US-supported governments are desperately hanging on to power. The best option for the United States in Afghanistan is a negotiated settlement between Kabul and the Taliban. But let’s be realistic: the odds are against any agreement actually bringing peace and economic opportunity to the Afghani people.

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