The Wiki Paradox: The Leaks Erode Transparency

By Gregory F. Treverton

THE WIKILEAKS AFFAIR, so far at least, brings to mind the old Soviet story about a teacher asking the class to give an example of a tragedy. Two students try, but the teacher demurs, labeling their examples “accident” and “disaster,” not tragedy. Dmitri raises his hand and offers: “A tragedy is when Comrade Brezhnev dies suddenly and unexpectedly in the middle of the night.” The teacher smiles and says: “Yes, Dmitri, that is a tragedy. It is neither an accident nor a disaster.”

Surely, the leaks were no accident, and their immediate effect was no disaster. The way Robert Gates, the US Defense Secretary and a wizened Washingtonian, put it was a nice antidote to some of the sky-is-falling commentary: “The fact is, governments deal with the United States because it’s in their interest, not because they like us, not because they trust us, and not because they believe we can keep secrets ... some governments deal with us because they fear us, some because they respect us, most because they need us. We are still essentially, as has been said before, the indispensable nation. So other nations will continue to deal with us. They will continue to work with us. We will continue to share sensitive information with one another. Is this embarrassing? Yes. Is it awkward? Yes. Consequences for US foreign policy? I think fairly modest.”

Yet the important effects of the leaks are likely to be less the immediate embarrassment than the effects on how US diplomats and other officials communicate, especially about foreign leaders. In some ways, those consequences are all the greater because the WikiLeaks — perhaps “WikiHemorrhage” is more apt — show US diplomats doing their job and doing it well, better than many observers, myself included, would have expected. They are out on the street; their reports are thoughtful, and candid, and the writing sometimes verges on the elegant. The cables display a kind of political reporting that I feared had become a lost art given both modern communications technology and the pressure the State Department felt to cover many new posts with not much more money in the aftermath of the Soviet empire’s disintegration.

The first teaser that arises is how a private on a very tactical assignment in a war zone had at his fingertips a trove of classified State Department documents. On that score, there is irony and money. The leaked cables came from the military’s backbone classified network, SIPRNet in acronym (Secret Internet Protocol Router Network), and pronounced “sippernet.” The irony is that SIPRNet was expanded after 9/11 to allow classified information to be shared more easily, thus reducing the risk of communication failures between different intelligence agencies.

The money in question is the State Department’s perennial shortage. In the spirit of improved information sharing, the Director of National Intelligence and the Defense Department agreed to fund, in 2005, a new State Department database, called Net-Centric Diplomacy. The point was to make State Department cables available to other agencies by making it easier to put them on SIPRNet. All it took was for an official to add “SIPDIS” to the cable’s routing. In practice, it appears that SIPDIS became the norm for a wide range of cables, with no one asking whether
If officials resort to more targeted e-mails, or don’t risk any trail of bytes by using the phone, there will indeed be a loss in information-sharing. That is all the more so because we now face a terrorist threat that makes it harder to know who needs to know what.

The leader of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, does not seem to have a coherent argument for his actions. In that he contrasts with most who leak in an effort to advance a desired policy or practice outcome. Assange appears to see conspiracies everywhere and betrays a distrust of virtually all institutions anywhere. He seems only to want to make it harder for the US government to operate. Yet the cables reveal no conspiracies. British newspaper The Guardian, one of the original recipients of the leaks, wrote to its readers: “The cables are unlikely to gratify conspiracy theorists. They do not contain evidence of assassination plots, CIA bribery, or such criminal enterprises as the Iran-Contra scandal in the Reagan years.”

Others have suggested that the leaks strike a blow for transparency in government. In the short run that is surely the case: The leaks give us material to grade the performance of US diplomats more highly than we might have otherwise. Yet the concern is that the leaks will lead to precise information-sharing. It will be a shame if WikiLeaks succeeds in making foreign policy less effective but through a mechanism that is the opposite of Assange’s apparent intentions — not displaying the government’s follies but rather pushing it to become less transparent.

Gregory F. Treverton directs the Center for Global Risk and Security at the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit institution that seeks to improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis. In government, he has served the US Senate, the National Security Council and the National Intelligence Council. His most recent book on intelligence is *Intelligence for an Age of Terror* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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