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WikiLeaks, Ideological Legitimacy and the Crisis of Empire

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While empires try to maintain their hegemony through economic and military prowess, they must also rely on a form of ideological legitimacy to guarantee their rule. Such legitimacy is often embedded in the geopolitical reputation of the empire among its allies and reluctant admirers. Once that reputation begins to unravel, the empire appears illegitimate.

The establishment of the US empire in the aftermath of World War II built upon its economic and military supremacy. That empire created an architecture of financial and geopolitical institutions that served not only its own interests, but also those of global capital and international legal and democratic structures. There were, of course, myriad contradictions that materialized throughout the earliest cold war period, but much of the West accepted the general framework and ideological legitimacy of the empire. While a crisis of legitimacy emerged around the Vietnam War and the undermining of the Bretton Woods agreement by the Nixon administration, it was not until the end of the cold war and the development of reckless unipolar geopolitics over the last decade that a real decline in US hegemony became apparent.

Given the battered economic and military standing of the United States over the past several years, the hysterical reaction of the American political class over the recent release of State Department cables by WikiLeaks is not surprising. However, it is instructive to note the response of those in the West to such "displays (of) imperial arrogance and hypocrisy" as reported by Steven Erlanger in The New York Times. Erlanger cites an important editorial from the Berliner Zeitung that underscores the question of ideological legitimacy: "The U.S. is betraying one of its founding myths: freedom of information. And they are doing so now, because for the first time since the end of the cold war, they are threatened with losing worldwide control of information."

Commenting in The Guardian on the hypocrisy of the United States, British columnist John Naughton points to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's January 21, 2010 address

about Internet freedom and the remarkable subsequent about-face in denouncing such freedom as practiced by WikiLeaks. Naughton does not spare other officials in the West who have been clamoring for curtailment of such freedom of information on the Internet. As alleged by Naughton: "What WikiLeaks is really exposing is the extent to which the western democratic system has been hollowed out. ... And when, finally, the veil of secrecy is lifted, their reflex reaction is to kill the messenger."

The abuses heaped on Julian Assange and the threats against him, especially, but not exclusively, from politicians in the United States, reflects this hollowing out of democracy and a fear of the new virtual world of free speech. Writing in the December 11, 2010 issue of the Melbourne Age, Assange's Australian attorney, Peter Gordon, opines:

The sight of the most prominent politicians in the world inciting either the prosecution, incarceration or assassination of Assange, or the persecution of his family, is a form of barbarism that demeans us all. Moreover, the phenomenon of companies as big as MasterCard and Visa being gangpressed into anti-trust violations of their commercial relations with WikiLeaks is truly frightening.

Beyond the critical matter of freedom of information, however, is the erosion of alliances by stalwart supporters of US global hegemony in the aftermath of the WikiLeaks publication of some of the hundreds of thousands of diplomatic cables. When The Guardian released some of the documents dealing with Poland, even its conservative prime minister, Donald Tusk, declared that, "we have a serious problem ... not with image, as some countries do, and not reputation, like the US does. It's a problem of being stripped of illusions about the nature of relations between countries, including such close allies as Poland and the US."

The Australian government has been buffeted by a series of revelations that surfaced when the United States rejected an appeal by that government to see all of the cables relating to US-Australian relations before WikiLeaks released them. Beyond the embarrassment to members of the Labor government, there is a growing sentiment that the US is both arrogant and incompetent.

Perhaps the drive to shut down WikiLeaks and prosecute Julian Assange is the last gasp of a dying empire to shore up its fading legitimacy in the world and among its own citizens. Hence, the hyperbolic criticism by US Attorney General Eric Holder that WikiLeaks has put "the lives of people who work for the American people at risk; the American people themselves have been put at risk." As the WikiLeaks publications make clear, the diplomatic corps is just another instrument of the US empire. Indeed, it is the empire itself that is putting its own citizens at risk through the reckless, illegal and immoral actions perpetrated around the globe.

In their desperation to retain the empire, the US political class is undermining the remaining vestiges of the empire's legitimacy over the WikiLeaks affair. They may also be preparing to expand the definition of treason to include those who are dedicated, as is Assange and WikiLeaks, to freedom of information, especially when it reveals the duplicities of empire. Beyond WikiLeaks, the crisis of empire, according to Filipino scholar-activist Walden Bello, "bodes well not only for the rest of the world. It may also

benefit the people of the United States. It opens up the possibility of Americans relating to other people as equals and not as masters."

Given the panic of the US masters, it might be time for the serfs at home to revolt under the banner of "Treason to Empire is Loyalty to Humanity." If that seems a little too provocative, we should remember the first American struggle for independence from the British Empire. In defense of his anti-British Virginia Stamp Act Resolution, Patrick Henry is alleged to have declaimed: "If this be treason, make the most of it."