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WikiLeaks and War Crimes

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Four months before WikiLeaks rocketed to international notoriety, the Robin Hoods of the Internet quietly published a confidential CIA document labeled "NOFORN" (for "no foreign nationals")—meaning that it should not be shared even with US allies. That's because the March "Red Cell Special Memorandum" was a call to arms for a propaganda war to influence public opinion in allied nations. The CIA report describes a crisis in European support for the Afghanistan war, noting that 80 percent of German and French citizens are against increasing their countries' military involvement. The report suggests that "Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the [International Security Assistance Force] role in combating the Taliban because of women's ability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory."

On July 25 WikiLeaks published its massive cache of classified documents on the war in Afghanistan. Four days later, *Time* magazine posted on its website its August 9 cover story, featuring a horrifying image of a beautiful young Afghan woman named Aisha with a gaping hole where her nose once was, under the headline "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan"—echoing the strategy laid out in the Red Cell report [see Ann Jones, "Our Afghan Demons," page 4].

These two media events unfolded in starkly different ways. While *Time* has been praised for telling Aisha's story, WikiLeaks has been characterized as a criminal syndicate with blood on its hands. Former Bush administration speechwriter Marc Thiessen called for the United States to use whatever means necessary to snatch WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, including rendering him from abroad. Others have called for the United States to shut down WikiLeaks and prosecute its members. Michigan Republican Congressman Mike Rogers has called for the alleged leaker, 22-year-old Army intelligence analyst Bradley Manning, to be executed if he is convicted.

Time managing editor Richard Stengel drew the contrast with WikiLeaks in an editor's letter accompanying the story, claiming that the WikiLeaks documents, unlike the *Time* article, fail to provide "insight into the way life is lived" in Afghanistan or to speak to "the consequences of the important decisions that lie ahead." Actually, the documents do exactly that. WikiLeaks may not be a media outlet and Assange may not be a journalist, but why does it matter? The documents provide concrete evidence of widespread US killings of Afghan civilians and attempts to cover up killings, and they portray unaccountable Special Operations forces as roaming the country hunting people—literally. They describe incidents of mass outrage sparked by the killing of civilians and confirm that the United States is funding both sides of the war through bribes paid to the Taliban and other resistance forces.

There was a brief moment when it seemed the contents of the WikiLeaks documents would spark an inquiry into what they say about the war and the way the United States is conducting it. "However illegally these documents came to light, they raise serious questions about the reality of America's policy toward Pakistan and Afghanistan," said Senator John Kerry, chair of the powerful Foreign Relations Committee, on the day the documents were revealed. "Those policies are at a critical stage, and these documents may very well underscore the stakes and make the calibrations needed to get the policy right more urgent."

But two days later, the official meme about WikiLeaks was in full swing: the leaks had endangered American lives. Kerry swiftly changed his tune. "I think it's important not to over-hype or get excessively excited about the meaning of those documents," Kerry said at a hearing on Afghanistan.

But what if what Daniel Ellsberg says about the leaker being a heroic whistleblower is true? What if, like Ellsberg with the Pentagon Papers, Manning really was motivated by conscience to leak documents he believed the American people and the world deserved to see?

Then again, Manning—who has been charged only in connection with the release of the "Collateral Murder" video of a helicopter assault in Iraq—might not even be the leaker. Assange has not confirmed any dealings between WikiLeaks and Manning. In Manning's online chats with Adrian Lamo, the hacker turned government informant who turned him in, Manning claimed to have access to 260,000 classified State Department cables exposing "almost criminal political backdealings." Lamo asked Manning to list the

"highlights" of what he gave to WikiLeaks. Among those described by Manning are documents on the US Joint Task Force at Guantánamo, which Manning called the "Gitmo papers," a video of an airstrike in Afghanistan that killed civilians and State Department cables—the information, Manning said, would cause Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to "have a heart attack." Curiously, there was no mention of Afghan war documents. We may never know whether Manning leaked those documents. But what is clear from the chat logs is that Manning believed he was performing a public service by leaking what he did.

In one chat, Manning and Lamo are discussing Manning's passing of documents to WikiLeaks. Lamo asks Manning what his "endgame" is. Manning replies, "god knows what happens now," and adds, "hopefully worldwide discussion, debates, and reforms if not... than [*sic*] we're doomed as a species."

In one of his last chats with Lamo, reportedly on May 25, Manning says, "what if i were someone more malicious i could've sold to russia or china, and made bank?"

"why didn't you?" Lamo asks.

"because it's public data," Manning responds. "information should be free it belongs in the public domain...if its out in the open... it should be a public good." He adds: "im crazy like that."

Within days, Manning was arrested.