

WIKILEAKS - DECEPTION AND DISINFORMATION?

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It seems, perhaps, that, as in Shakespeare's Hamlet, "the (government and media) doth protest too much" regarding disclosures by Wikileaks of alleged sensitive information. There has been insufficient consideration of the possibility that these disclosures are, at least in part, deliberate, and represent classic "deception and disinformation" tradecraft.

The U.S. intelligence community was crippled by the scandals and abuses of the 1960s and early 1970s, culminating in the community's tangential involvement in Watergate during the Nixon administration. Subsequent administrations were forced to operate with their intelligence hands tied. The U.S. (and, by extension, other Western nations) were unable to engage in activities - however necessary or desirable, albeit unsavory - that offended the sensibilities of domestically free societies effectively governed by the rule of law. These politically correct constraints proved unrealistic in a world largely governed by Hobbes' "state of nature."

In 1982, Margaret Thatcher, recalling Churchill's wisdom that, "the truth is so valuable it is often protected by a bodyguard of lies," resurrected a vigorous deception and disinformation capability in the U.K. intelligence community. (This initiative, not surprisingly in the U.K., quickly became known as "dee dee.") She successfully convinced Ronald Reagan and the U.S. intelligence community to develop comparable expertise. After all, it is often possible to achieve indirectly that which cannot legitimately be achieved directly.

As Paul Nitze observed in an op-ed piece in the Wall Street Journal yesterday (December 1, 2010), the documents disclosed by Wikileaks damage weak, authoritarian regimes much more than they damage the U.S. (to the extent that they damage the U.S. at all). Most of the Wikileaks documents simply confirm what any reasonably knowledgeable international affairs analyst already knew. In his concluding paragraph, Nitze - for the record - condemned the Wikileaks disclosures, but his condemnation rings hollow.

The possibility that the diplomatic cables disclosed by Wikileaks are simply part of a sophisticated disinformation campaign - particularly in the U.S., where "leaks" of sensitive information on domestic matters by politicians has become a legitimate public policy debate technique - should not be summarily dismissed.

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