

The New York Times and the Afghan documents

By Bill Van Auken
28 July 2010

The posting by WikiLeaks of some 92,000 secret documents on the Afghanistan war, together with the coverage of this material in the *Guardian*, the *New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*, has sparked widespread comparisons with the leaking nearly 40 years ago of the Pentagon Papers, which provided a devastating exposure of US policy in the Vietnam War.

Some of these comparisons are made by defenders of Washington's war policy, who cynically argue that the WikiLeaks material—most of it battlefield reports by US military personnel—do not, like the Pentagon Papers, provide specific evidence of top US officials having lied to the American people about the origins and conduct of the war.

This is pure sophistry. The thousands of reports relating to US operations and atrocities against Afghan civilians expose the systematic manner in which both the Bush and Obama administrations, abetted by a compliant media, have lied to the American people about the character of this war.

As for the lies used to launch the war, they are even more evident than in Vietnam. Osama bin Laden is an afterthought, and Pentagon and intelligence officials acknowledge that there are less than 100 members of Al Qaeda in all of Afghanistan, even as US troop strength rises to 100,000.

The real difference between the present exposure of official secrets on Afghanistan and the Pentagon Papers is exemplified by a media institution that has played a principal role in both episodes: the *New York Times*.

In 1971, when Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers, the *New York Times* was the first to publish them, defying the demands of the Nixon administration that the classified material be kept under wraps, and then fighting successfully to overturn a court injunction obtained by the Justice Department to censor the newspaper.

In the case of the Afghanistan documents, it was WikiLeaks, an Internet organization with a tiny fraction of the resources of the *Times*, that made them public, with the so-called newspaper of record playing a subsidiary and thoroughly contemptible role.

Since the posting of the documents on Sunday, it has emerged that the *Times* Washington bureau chief, Dean Baquet, accompanied by the two main reporters assigned to the story, Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, made a visit to the White House last week to brief the administration on the material in the possession of WikiLeaks and to discuss what the newspaper would do with it.

"I did in fact go to the White House and lay out for them what we had," Baquet told Michael Calderone of Yahoo News. Baquet added that the Obama White House "praised us for the way we handled it, for giving them a chance to discuss it, and for handling the information with care. And for being responsible."

In a blog answering questions from readers on Tuesday, the newspaper's editor, Bill Keller, wrote: "The administration, while strongly condemning WikiLeaks for making these documents public, did not suggest that the *Times* should not write about them. On the contrary, in our discussions prior to the publication of our articles, White House officials, while challenging some of the conclusions we drew from the material, thanked us for handling the documents with care, and asked us to urge WikiLeaks to withhold information that could cost lives. We did pass along that message."

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs, responding to a reporter's question Monday, confirmed these claims. "The *Times*, who, I will say, came to us, I think handled this story in a responsible way. I passed a message through the writers at the *New York Times* to the head of WikiLeaks to redact information that could harm personnel or threaten operations or security."

Gibbs added, however, "I will say this, had only the *New York Times* had this story, would we have made a case and an effort, as we have with them and other news organizations, not to compromise security? Yes." He went on to explain that, as WikiLeaks was posting the documents, and the material had also gone to the *Guardian* in Britain and *Der Spiegel* in Germany, such an appeal was useless.

Had it been a *Times* exclusive, there is no reason to doubt that the newspaper's editors would have acquiesced to any such request from the Obama White House. After all, there is a clear precedent.

In 2004, at the request of the Bush administration, the *Times* withheld for over a year a story on Bush's authorization of the National Security Agency's illegal domestic spying program, which subjected the telephone conversations and emails of Americans to surveillance. Discussions with the Bush administration dragged on until the very eve of the 2004 election, with Keller and others in the *Times* top management deciding to withhold a new draft of the exposé until after Election Day (November 2). Bush succeeded in gaining a second term, in no small measure thanks to the *Times*' self-censorship.

Given the circumstances in this case, the White House clearly supported the *Times* in running a story, so long as it dealt with the material—to use the word chosen by both the newspaper and the administration—in a "responsible" way.

The obvious question is: responsible to whom? Clearly, it was not to the newspaper's readership or the American public, but rather to the ruling elite and its government, and their pursuit of a dirty colonial war that the *Times* has strongly supported.

Rather than exposing the crimes of US imperialism, the *Times* has worked to spin the evidence of these crimes into a justification for an even greater escalation of the war, while acting as the messenger of

the White House in demanding that WikiLeaks engage in the newspaper's own brand of self-censorship.

The overriding significance of the tens of thousands of documents posted by WikiLeaks is their detailed exposure of the atrocities carried out by the US occupation against the people of Afghanistan. The cumulative impact of one report after another is a portrait of a ferocious war against the civilian population, the aim of which is neither combating terrorism nor promoting democracy, but annihilating an entirely legitimate popular resistance to foreign occupation.

WikiLeaks' senior editor, Julian Assange, made this point forcefully at his press conference in London Monday. "The real story of this material is that it is war, it's one damn thing after another," he said. "It's the continuous small events, the continuous deaths of children, insurgents, allied forces." He went on to say that the classified reports contained evidence of literally "thousands" of war crimes that merited investigation and prosecution.

In its treatment of the documents, it is precisely this essential element that the *Times* has worked to suppress. The stark contrast between the content of its articles and the ones published by the *Guardian*, based on their respective reviews of the same material, was not lost on the American newspaper's readers.

"The difference between the Guardian and NY Times reporting of the Afghanistan War Logs documents is absolutely astounding," one reader wrote in the question and answer blog. "[T]he information in the documents relating to civilian deaths are hardly mentioned in the NY Times reporting, and this is shameful."

Keller gave an arrogant, yet defensive reply. "I can't speak for the Guardian," he wrote, "but all the major episodes of civilian deaths described in the War Logs had been previously reported in the *Times* ." He then included a series of links to articles on various air strikes and other atrocities.

While Keller insists that there was no news in the documents' depiction of the slaughter of Afghan civilians, the *Guardian* managed to find quite a bit. It produced a major article on the details revealed by the war logs on the special forces "black unit," Task Force 373, assigned to extrajudicial killings of supposed Taliban and Al Qaeda suspects. The *Guardian* noted that the activities of Task Force 373 had previously been "hidden behind a screen of misinformation."

It produced two other articles on the killing of civilians by US, British and other occupation forces, exposing how many of these crimes had gone unreported or been covered up by the military.

The *Times*, however, focused overwhelmingly on evidence of support from within the Pakistani state apparatus for Afghan factions fighting the US-led occupation forces. It followed up on Tuesday with an editorial entitled "Pakistan's Double Game," which stressed the need for Obama to persuade the Pakistani government to "cut its ties to, and then aggressively fight, the extremists in Pakistan" as essential to "defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan."

To bolster its position, the newspaper on Tuesday published an op-ed piece by Andrew Exum, a former Army captain who has become a Middle East expert at the Center for a New American Security, a Democratic Party-aligned think tank that backs Obama's war.

He dismissed the documents, saying that readers "may be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss is about." The reports of atrocities against the Afghan population were of no significance, he argued, cavalierly dismissing them with the phrase: "civilians inevitably suffer in war." As for the assassination of alleged insurgent leaders,

he wrote that this criminal enterprise would be viewed by Americans as "one of the least controversial ways in which the government spends their tax dollars."

Exum concluded by declaring that the *Times* "did nothing wrong in looking over the WikiLeaks documents and excerpting them." However, WikiLeaks and Assange were "another matter." Despite the supposed innocuousness of the documents, he described the web site's editor as being "as reckless and destructive as the contemptible soldier or soldiers who leaked the documents in the first place."

Here one has the unmistakable voice of the state—and of the *Times*—with the implicit threat of retribution, legal or otherwise.

In all of its coverage of the Afghanistan war, the *Times* acts as a defender and propagandist for US policy. It excludes reporting that calls into question the legitimacy and legality of the war itself, restricting its attention to tactical questions. More and more it has emerged as an advocate for "taking the gloves off"—lifting restrictions on the supposedly "hamstrung" military and extending the offensive into Pakistan.

In this, it reflects the interests of a ruling elite that sees withdrawal as impossible. It is not only a question of refusing to give up on the war's original aims—the military assertion of US hegemony in the energy-rich and geostrategically vital region of Central Asia. Under conditions of deepening social and economic crisis, fears of the domestic ramifications of a defeat in Afghanistan play an increasingly central role.

America's ruling establishment cannot be unmindful of the implications of the defeat in Afghanistan for the Soviet Union, which ceased to exist shortly after pulling its troops out of the country. A similar defeat for US imperialism would have a shattering impact on public opinion in the US and worldwide, dashing whatever remains of the myth of American invincibility and leaving every section of the ruling elite thoroughly discredited.

None of them can account for what they have done in the "wars of choice" in Iraq and Afghanistan, where millions have been killed, wounded or turned into homeless refugees. Not only Bush and his cabinet, but also Obama and leading figures in the present administration are guilty of war crimes that could send them to prison for the rest of their lives.

The editors of the *New York Times*, which have made the newspaper a corrupt and venal propaganda appendage of US militarism, are deeply implicated and compromised by these crimes.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>