

Alex Gibney's We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks

A cinematic disinformation job on Julian Assange

By Richard Phillips
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Written and directed by Alex Gibney, We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks recently screened at the Sydney Film Festival. It currently has a limited US theatrical release and will be in Australian cinemas this coming week.

Director Alex Gibney has directed a couple of notable and hard-hitting documentaries during the past ten years. These include *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005) and *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007). The latter work, which exposed US torture and murder in Afghanistan, was awarded a best documentary Oscar.

However, Gibney's latest release—*We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks*—is something else again. The 130-minute feature is a political hatchet job against Julian Assange and dovetails with the media and US government campaign against the WikiLeaks web site. Whether Gibney has shifted to the right or simply revealed the fatal limitations of his liberal “oppositional” views is a matter for a separate discussion. In any event, his newest work is an effort at disinformation.

We Steal Secrets contains so many distortions and omissions that it's not possible to deal with them all in this review. The documentary's attitude to the events can be summarised as follows:

* WikiLeaks started with worthy aims, winning international fame for exposing various US government secrets, but unfortunately has been destroyed by the narcissism, anti-democratic methods and paranoia of its founder Julian Assange, who inhabits a “digital world” and shows little or no care for the consequences of his actions.

* The only real hero in this tragic whistleblowers' tale is US Army Private First Class Bradley Manning, a disoriented young man with sexual identity issues. Manning, who is now on trial and facing a possible life sentence on espionage and “aiding the enemy” charges, provided WikiLeaks with the infamous *Collateral Damage* video and hundreds of thousands of other documents. He appears to have been persuaded by Assange to send the material to WikiLeaks.

* By contrast, Assange, after being caught out by his own indiscretions in Sweden, responded by attempting to manufacture a non-existent US extradition conspiracy and is now hiding out in Ecuador's London embassy rather than returning to Sweden to face questioning over serious sexual assault allegations.

In other words, *We Steal Secrets* differs little in its approach and content from the print and television tabloids. Gibney, of course, feigns concern about the escalating attacks on whistleblowers, but any serious examination of his movie exposes this as mere window dressing.

Gibney denies the Obama administration's ongoing efforts to extradite and prosecute Assange and destroy WikiLeaks, claiming there is “no proof”. He fails to mention US actions against the web site and its founder have been officially described as “unprecedented in its scale and

nature”. Nor does the documentary make any reference to the grand jury that has been empanelled since September 2010 and whose existence has been confirmed twice. (See: “New evidence of US operation against Julian Assange”)

Gibney's underhanded methods begin with the documentary's deceitful title, which implies that WikiLeaks is involved in illegal activity, an allegation repeated ad nauseam by the Obama administration and its international allies. The dangerous legal implications of this assertion for Assange and Manning, or investigative journalists publishing leaked government documents in the future, appear to be of little concern to the director.

“We steal secrets,” in fact, is a comment made later in the film by former CIA director and National Security Agency (NSA) chief Michael Hayden to describe the illegal activities of the US and its secret agents and diplomats.

Gibney's film asserts on three occasions that Assange was in direct contact with Manning. Conspiracy is one of the central allegations in Manning's trial and the basis of any future US extradition and prosecution of the WikiLeaks founder. These claims are demonstrably false. WikiLeaks is designed to ensure that there is no direct contact between whistleblowers and individuals working for the web site.

Manning's trial testimony has explicitly refuted the conspiracy allegations, making clear that he was not pressured to provide the documents. Manning turned to WikiLeaks only after failing to garner any interest from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* over his damning evidence of American war crimes.

Gibney does not include any of the US Army private's testimony in *We Steal Secrets* and has attempted to justify this by claiming that the film, which was released in US cinemas on May 24, was already “finished” and could not be changed. Manning delivered his testimony, however, on February 28, ample time for it to be included in any modified version.

The insidious foundation of Gibney's film is its trivialising of the political concerns animating Assange's and Manning's decision to expose US war crimes and the dangerous implications of the government and media witch-hunt against the two men, along with the ongoing campaign to smear and apprehend Edward Snowden.

Manning's actions, Gibney asserts, can only be understood within the context of his alleged sexual identity crisis. A section of the film is devoted to this issue, circulating various anecdotal claims and even the use of CGI graphics to paste a portrait of Jean Harlow on Manning's face.

Manning's refusal to remain silent about the war crimes being committed by the US is important, the film is forced to admit, but he was driven by personal concerns, not just by outrage over war crimes and other violation of democratic rights. The US Army soldier cannot be compared to someone like Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel

Ellsberg, Gibney has since told journalists. “Whistleblowers are alienated people who don’t get along with people around them [and] which motivates them to do what they do.”

We Steal Secrets failed to interview Assange or secure the active assistance of other WikiLeaks members for the documentary—the organisation was rightly suspicious. Gibney turned instead to figures such as *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies, and James Ball and Daniel Domscheit-Berg, formerly of WikiLeaks and now public opponents of Assange, to provide supposed evidence of Assange’s failings.

The Australian whistleblower is accused of various “crimes”—egotism, paranoia, undemocratic methods, deceiving WikiLeaks donors and using the web site to protect himself from alleged sex assault allegations in Sweden. This character assassination is to divert attention from the real crimes committed by the US government and military which have launched unpremeditated and illegal wars that have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands, or perhaps more, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Gibney provides no independent assessment of the sex assault allegations or comments on the refusal of the Swedish prosecutor to question Assange in Britain or by telephone. No reference is made to the detailed information on the bizarre legal and political machinations surrounding the case and thoroughly exposed in last year’s Australian ABC’s “Four Corners” television documentary “Sex, Lies and Julian Assange.”

Instead, the film director presents one side of the story, interviewing Anna Ardin, one of the Swedish women involved. The film then moves on to regurgitate media disinformation and malicious gossip about so-called “charges”. But as Gibney knows full well, there are no charges against Assange.

Factual rigor or accuracy, however, is of little interest to Gibney. *We Steal Secrets* simply declares: “Did [Assange] refuse to use a condom because he wanted to make the women pregnant? Some pointed to the fact he had already fathered four children with different women around the world.”

This claim is followed by comments, presented uncritically, from British journalist Iain Overton who outrageously states: “This is a man who is elusive, he’s always flying around the place, he doesn’t have any roots and he’s got a number of kids. There may be some sort of primary impulse in him to want to reproduce, to want to have some sort of bedrock in his life.”

While providing a platform for this rubbish, Gibney’s movie gives pride of place to former CIA director and National Security Agency chief Michael Hayden, along with Adam Lamo, who befriended Manning and then betrayed him to US authorities. Both men are treated with the utmost respect.

Gibney attempts to transform FBI informant Lamo into a sympathetic and tragic figure. Lamo is unchallenged when he tearfully declares: “I care more about Bradley than many of his supporters do... And I had to betray that trust for the sake of all of the people that he put in danger.”

Likewise, *We Steal Secrets*’ attitude toward Hayden is fawning. Gibney declared in a recent interview: “There’s something very compelling about Hayden ... you meet these guys in the heart of government and you realise that they are true believers in the best sense. They believe in the principles—and that the principles should be properly applied. *So that was great because it gave the story some breadth and balance.*” (Emphasis added)

“Breadth and balance” from a former CIA and NSA chief and who claimed in 2001 that the National Security Agency was not spying on US citizens without official warrants! Hayden should be on trial, along with the rest of the US intelligence apparatus hierarchy, who have ripped up the Bill of Rights and the rest of the Constitution.

In contrast to his obsequiousness toward Hayden, Gibney declares towards the end of *We Steal Secrets*: “Had [Assange] the secret-leaker

become the secret-keeper, more and more fond of mysteries? The biggest mystery of all was the role of the United States. Over two years after the first leak, no charges had been filed by the US.”

“Assange claimed that the US was biding its time, waiting for him to go to Sweden, but there was *no proof.*” (Emphasis added)

We Steal Secrets is not aimed at those seeking the truth. Its purpose is to provide political cover for the Obama administration and divert attention from the implications of its escalating assault on the basic democratic rights.

WikiLeaks has published an annotated transcript of *We Steal Secrets*, exposing many of its lies. Gibney’s hatchet job has also been condemned by several serious commentators and angrily denounced by those defending Assange and Manning in the US and internationally.

Gibney has reacted to these responses with the claim that he is being persecuted by WikiLeaks supporters. “Every time somebody tweets a positive note about [the documentary] they rain hell on them. I guess that is their way of trying to stamp out criticism, but it’s not what you would expect of a transparency organisation. It’s the tactics of Scientology,” he told an Australian journalist last month.

“It’s sad that the organisation and its followers are just so blind to anything but a kind of beatification of their messiah. It’s far more compelling to be the victim of a CIA conspiracy than to have two women angry at you for not using a condom.”

This is the world turned upside down. Assange, Manning and Snowden face pursuit, prosecution and decades in prison, or worse, at the hands of the most powerful military and intelligence apparatus the world has ever known ... but Gibney is being witch-hunted!

It is worth noting that the director’s father, Frank Gibney, was a significant American establishment figure and an expert on Japan and Asia, with ties to intelligence. According to a 2006 *Washington Post* obituary, “Working for naval intelligence during World War II and as a postwar Tokyo bureau chief for *Time* and *Life* magazines, Mr. Gibney saw firsthand the pivotal events of East Asian life during the mid-20th century.... He also wrote ‘The Secret World’ (1960) with Soviet intelligence defector Peter Deriabin and edited ‘The Penkovsky Papers’ (1966), which in a later edition he disclosed was done with the help of the Central Intelligence Agency.”

In fact, the latter was originally published as the purported journal of Colonel Oleg Penkovsky, a Soviet military officer who worked for the CIA. Gibney was later forced to admit that the book was based on CIA files and the “diary” was entirely an invention. Frank Gibney’s friendly 1960 correspondence with CIA director Allen Dulles is available online.

The problem confronting Alex Gibney and those involved in smearing Assange and other whistleblowers is that they are confronted with growing numbers of principled individuals— Snowden being the latest—who are not intimidated and reflect increasing concerns in the broader population. These courageous figures are prepared to do whatever they can to expose ongoing US war crimes and the Obama administration’s war on basic democratic rights.

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