

Ten years since WikiLeaks published the Afghan war logs

By Oscar Grenfell
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Last Saturday marked ten years since WikiLeaks published the Afghan war logs, a vast trove of leaked US military documents, which provided an unprecedented insight into the criminality of a war that has become the longest in American history.

The documents were released, with commentary, analysis and contextual material, in partnership with the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and *Der Spiegel*, some three months after WikiLeaks published “Collateral Murder,” the infamous video showing a 2007 US army massacre of civilians, including two Reuters journalists, in Iraq.

Taken together, the exposures had an immense impact on popular consciousness, fortifying and deepening the mass anti-war sentiment first revealed in the huge international protests against the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Significantly, the 2010 releases by WikiLeaks followed the suppression of that movement by upper middle-class pseudo-left groups. They had increasingly dispensed with opposition to imperialist war as they supported the 2008 election of Barack Obama, and aligned with other militarist parties of the ruling elite, such as the Labor Party in Australia.

The Afghan logs particularly exposed the claims of innumerable liberal pundits that the occupation of that country was the “good war,” supposedly waged to defeat terrorism, extend democracy and protect women’s rights. This they contrasted with the “failed” operation in Iraq.

This dovetailed with the agenda of the new US administration. Obama’s phony anti-war posturing during the 2008 election had been accompanied by plans for a massive surge in Afghanistan.

The mythmaking was facilitated by the suppression of any information about the real situation on the ground by the US, its allies and a pliant corporate media. WikiLeaks lifted the veil on the lies, revealing a neo-colonial occupation aimed at looting natural resources and securing control of the geo-strategically critical Central Asian region.

Mass civilian killings, widespread popular opposition and demoralisation within US army ranks all came to the surface, more fully than they had in the nine years since the US invasion.

The publication was based on 91,000 US army logs covering the period of January 2004 to December 2009, provided to WikiLeaks by Chelsea Manning, who had access to the material as a military intelligence analyst.

Indicating the extent of corporate media integration into the military, Manning only turned the material over to WikiLeaks

after her attempts *New York Times* to *Washington Post* were ignored.

In releasing the material, WikiLeaks publisher and then editor-in-chief Julian Assange described it as “the most comprehensive history of a war ever to be published, during the course of the war.”

Unlike the corporate hacks, who seek to hide their alignment with imperialist war behind a mask of impartiality, Assange was unapologetically partisan. The documents suggested thousands of war crimes, he stated, and their release would serve to shift public opinion. “The most dangerous men are those who are in charge of war. And they need to be stopped,” he said.

Some 20,000 deaths are recorded in the logs. They include at least 195 civilian casualties at the hands of NATO troops, which had previously been hidden from the public.

Most explosively, the documents cut through the presentation of fatalities as being the inevitable product of the “fog of war,” supposed mishaps and errors. Mass murder was not an accidental by-product of the conflict, but an essential component of its character as a neo-colonial occupation of a hostile population.

The release confirmed, for the first time, the existence of a secretive “black unit,” within the US military, whose explicit task was to extrajudicially murder prominent “insurgents,” i.e., those Afghans thought to be playing a leading role in the fight to liberate their country.

Incidents detailed in the logs provided a picture of imperialist lawlessness that had perhaps not been seen since the horrors of the Vietnam war several decades earlier.

The *Guardian* noted at least 21 occasions when British troops opened fire on civilians, commenting: “Some casualties were accidentally caused by air strikes, but many also are said to involve British troops firing on unarmed drivers or motorcyclists who come ‘too close’ to convoys or patrols.”

Citing just some of the previously unknown events contained in the records, the British paper wrote: “Bloody errors at civilians’ expense, as recorded in the logs, include the day French troops strafed a bus full of children in 2008, wounding eight. A US patrol similarly machine-gunned a bus, wounding or killing 15 of its passengers, and in 2007 Polish troops mortared a village, killing a wedding party including a pregnant woman, in an apparent revenge attack.”

Attacks on civilians were frequently presented as “targeted strikes” on “Taliban militants.” To again cite the *Guardian*:

A Harrier bombing is listed as killing eight people. In another an F16 jet called in by a Rifles squad radioed afterwards that it could see “bodies being picked up in the target area.” Seven civilians were wounded and one killed in that attack.

A further Apache helicopter strike outside Kandahar was claimed to have killed three Taliban: but it proved later that two women and two children had died.

A Hellfire missile blast from an unmanned drone over Helmand was also claimed to have killed six Taliban. It later transpired it had wounded two children.

British troops at a checkpoint in Sangin killed four and wounded three civilians in July. In August a 2 Para squad rocketed what it thought were insurgents, killing three civilians and wounding four. And in September an unarmed motorcyclist was shot dead by a British patrol.

The documents consistently indicated that Coalition commanders were aware that the majority of the Afghan population favoured their expulsion from the country. They detailed the fraught relations between the US-led forces and their Afghan army allies. The latter were mistreated. The former lived in constant fear that, such was the popular opposition, one of their Afghan allies would “go rogue” and turn their guns on the occupiers.

The innumerable contradictions of US imperialist foreign policy were laid bare. The Allied commanders knew that the Pakistani intelligence services, with whom they were formally allied, were collaborating closely with Islamist militants.

Taken together, the revelations gave the world’s population a greater understanding of the first imperialist war crime of the century than any other publication. Their release was an historic event that will be analysed and commented on for decades to come.

But the Afghan war logs have not yet passed into history. The brutal occupation, which has resulted in the deaths of as many as half a million Afghans, continues. The war criminals have not only escaped any punishment. They sit at the helm of the US, Australian and British militaries and plot new crimes, including catastrophic conflicts with nuclear-armed powers such as China and Russia.

The only individuals who have faced criminal repercussions over the publication are Chelsea Manning, who has endured a decade of persecution, and Julian Assange, who is imprisoned in Britain’s maximum-security Belmarsh Prison awaiting court hearings for his extradition to the US.

There he faces 175 years of imprisonment, in the first attempted prosecution of a publisher and journalist under the Espionage Act. The exposures of the horrors of the Afghan war feature in Assange’s charge sheet, where they are perversely presented as evidence of a conspiracy with Manning that threatened US national security. The offence of “pure publication,” i.e., journalism, is among Assange’s supposed crimes.

The US indictment incorporates some of the most persistent government-media lies related to the Afghan war logs. It again asserts that their publication placed the lives of US military personnel and their Afghan informants at risk, a claim that was debunked at Manning’s 2013 court martial.

The alleged presence of the documents in Osama Bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound, where he lived for years as a ward of the US-aligned Pakistani military, is cited. Journals published by CIA-connected think tanks were also found at the compound, but there have been no calls for the prosecution of their authors.

Moreover, the assertion that Assange displayed recklessness has been thoroughly debunked. Australian journalist Mark Davis explained last year, based on his own personal observations, that it was Assange, not his media partners at the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*, who personally redacted thousands of pages before their release. Some 16,000 documents were held back, to prevent anyone from coming to harm.

Despite this, the claim that Assange displayed a cavalier attitude towards the safety of Afghan informants became one of the key justifications for betraying him provided by WikiLeaks’ erstwhile media partners at the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*. The *Times* had consulted extensively with the Obama administration, as it reported on only a handful of the revelations contained in the logs.

Very rapidly thereafter, however, as the US escalated its pursuit of Assange, even minimal collaboration with WikiLeaks became too much for these publications.

As cynical and false as their assertions were, it is not insignificant that the rallying cry of the corporate hacks in their rush to align with the Obama administration and the CIA, was the defence of US military informants. Nothing about the Afghan conflict, it seemed, had excited the passions of these reporters, so much as the prospect of turncoats suffering retribution.

The “journalists” instinctively identified with the informants, none of whom were killed or injured as a result of WikiLeaks’ publication. One can surmise that they shared a willingness to sell principles for money, an eagerness to align with the powerful and a contempt for anyone who would get in the way. Afghan informants, it must be said, were in some cases saving their own necks. The same dangers did not confront the reporters in their plush London and Washington homes.

A decade on, and the slanders have been discredited. Assange has courageously maintained his opposition to imperialism and war, in the face of an almost unprecedented state vendetta. The struggle for his freedom is at the cutting-edge of the fight against militarism and for democratic rights.

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