

# Getting Lost in the Fog of War

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Washington

ANYONE who has spent the past two days reading through the 92,000 military field reports and other documents made public by the whistle-blower site WikiLeaks may be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss is about. I'm a researcher who studies Afghanistan and have no regular access to classified information, yet I have seen nothing in the documents that has either surprised me or told me anything of significance. I suspect that's the case even for someone who reads only a third of the articles on Afghanistan in his local newspaper.

Let us review, though, what have been viewed as the major revelations in the documents (which were published in part by The Times, The Guardian of London and the German magazine Der Spiegel):

First, there are allegations made by American intelligence officers that elements within Pakistan's spy agency, the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, have been conspiring with Taliban factions and other insurgents. Those charges are nothing new. This newspaper and others have been reporting on those accusations -- often supported by anonymous sources within the American military and intelligence services -- for years.

Second, the site provides documentation of Afghan civilian casualties caused by United States and allied military operations. It is true that civilians inevitably suffer in war. But researchers in Kabul with the Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict have been compiling evidence of these casualties, and their effect in Afghanistan, for some time now. Their reports, to which they add background on the context of the events, contributed to the decision by the former top commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, to put in place controversially stringent new measures intended to reduce such casualties last year.

Third, the site asserts that the Pentagon employs a secret task force of highly trained commandos charged with capturing or killing insurgent leaders. I suspect that in the eyes of most Americans, using special operations teams to kill terrorists is one of the least controversial ways in which the government spends their tax dollars.

The documents do reveal some specific information about United States and NATO tactics, techniques, procedures and equipment that is sensitive, and will cause much consternation within the military. It may even result in some people dying. Thus the White House is right to voice its displeasure with WikiLeaks.

Yet most of the major revelations that have been trumpeted by WikiLeaks's founder, Julian Assange, are not revelations at all -- they are merely additional examples of what we already knew.

Mr. Assange has said that the publication of these documents is analogous to the publication of the Pentagon Papers, only more significant. This is ridiculous. The Pentagon Papers offered the public a coherent internal narrative of the conflict in Vietnam that was at odds with the one that had been given by the elected and uniformed leadership.

The publication of these documents, by contrast, dumps 92,000 new primary source documents into the laps of the world's public with no context, no explanation as to why some accounts may contradict others, no sense of what is important or unusual as opposed to the normal march of war.

Many experts on the war, both in the military and the press, have long been struggling to come to grips with the conflict's complexity and nuances. What is the public going to make of this haphazard cache of documents, many written during combat by officers with little sense of how their observations fit into the fuller scope of the war?

I myself first went to Afghanistan as a young Army officer in 2002 and returned two years later after having led a small special operations unit -- what Mr. Assange calls an "assassination squad." (I also worked briefly as a civilian adviser to General McChrystal last year.) I can confirm that the situation in Afghanistan is complex, and defies any attempt to graft it onto easy-to-discern lessons or policy conclusions. Yet the release of the documents has led to a stampede of commentators and politicians doing exactly that. It's all too easy for them to find field reports to reaffirm their preconceived opinions about the war.

The Guardian editorialized on Sunday that the documents released reveal "a very different landscape ... from the one with which we have become familiar." But whoever wrote that has not been reading the reports of his own newspaper's reporters in Afghanistan.

The news media have done a good job of showing the public that the Afghan war is a highly complex environment stretching beyond the borders of the fractured country. Often what appears to be a two-way conflict between the government and an insurgency is better described as intertribal rivalry. And often that intertribal rivalry is worsened or overshadowed by the violent trade in drugs.

The Times, The Guardian and Der Spiegel did nothing wrong in looking over the WikiLeaks documents and excerpting them. Despite the occasional protest from the right wing, most of the press in the United States and in allied nations takes care not to publish information that might result in soldiers' deaths.

But WikiLeaks itself is another matter. Mr. Assange says he is a journalist, but he is not. He is an activist, and to what end it is not clear. This week -- as when he released a video in April showing American helicopter gunships killing Iraqi civilians in 2007 -- he has been throwing around the term "war crimes," but offers no context for the events he is judging. It seems that the death of any civilian in war, an unavoidable occurrence, is a "crime."

If his desire is to promote peace, Mr. Assange and his brand of activism are not as helpful as he imagines. By muddying the waters between journalism and activism, and by throwing his organization into the debate on Afghanistan with little apparent regard for the hard moral choices and dearth of good policy options facing decision-makers, he is being as reckless and destructive as the contemptible soldier or soldiers who leaked the documents in the first place.

By ANDREW EXUM

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