

WikiLeaks: Fruit of an unhealthy tree

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The WikiLeaks imbroglio is still in its early stages. However, we can say five things about its impact on the international system:

1. The randomness of the State Department dump is disturbing. Such a disclosure will inevitably have some good consequences; it will also have many evil ones. US contacts will be identified by security services that are less fussy about human rights than the FBI or the Justice Department. Peace processes will be compromised. Representatives of civil society in harsh places will be less willing to speak with foreign diplomats.

I have no confidence that Julian Assange and his anonymous colleagues have exercised their duty of care to maximise the good and minimise the evil. Mr Assange's scary Orwellian diktats to his browbeaten colleagues reveal that robust, collaborative internal decision-making processes are foreign to WikiLeaks.

2. The rationale for the dump is incoherent. What is the justification for dropping a quarter of a million cables, from diplomatic missions all over the world, on every topic under the sun? It's one thing for a whistleblower to expose a particular piece of information relating to one abuse of power: even that is a serious act entailing a very heavy responsibility.

But with this dump WikiLeaks is not uncovering a particular secret; it is outlawing secrets altogether.

Does Mr Assange really believe no-one is entitled to secrets? Would the world be safer, saner or more pleasant if nothing could be held in confidence? How could wars be averted in such a world? How could peace negotiations take place? Would news sources talk to journalists? Would business be done and jobs created? Could families enjoy each other's company? (I wonder whether the recent posting of Mr Assange's online dating profile will alter his view that transparency must trump every other right and every other interest. I will not link to the profile because I believe people have a right to privacy.)

3. It seems that Mr Assange has something against diplomacy. During the Bush Administration's years, especially in its first term, the left was rightly critical of George W Bush's over-reliance on military force. Now WikiLeaks is setting out to punish Washington for pursuing its aims through peaceful means — and undermining those peaceful means in the future. Thanks Julian, but I'd take the late Richard Holbrooke over you any day.

4. The playing field WikiLeaks has established is not a level one. It is much easier to steal information from open, democratic societies than from closed, authoritarian ones. WikiLeaks has hinted about future Russian leaks, but so far the vast preponderance of material is American in origin. Therefore the world sees the frailties of US diplomacy in much sharper focus than that of, say, China or Iran. Do US diplomats look good in every exchange on which they report? No. But WikiLeaks doesn't allow us to compare them fairly to their foreign counterparts.

5. Even though WikiLeaks has rigged the game against the Americans, they don't come out of it as badly as you might think (and as Mr Assange doubtless hoped). If you squint your eyes and look at the totality of the information released so far, it turns out that the international problems about which Washington complains (for example, the Iranian nuclear program) are real and dangerous; that other capitals broadly agree with this; and that the American diplomats who are trying to address these problems often get little assistance from the rest of

the world, including from those who egg them on privately. In other words, despite its clear intentions, WikiLeaks undercuts the view that America is arrogant, unilateral and bellicose.

I can't deny that WikiLeaks is fascinating. For a foreign policy think tank, it's great for business. Though many of the documents tell us nothing new, some are genuinely interesting and enlightening. Yet none of this takes away from the essential recklessness of WikiLeaks' conduct.

Even a sick tree can bear fruit. But we shouldn't pretend that the tree is healthy.

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