

# The Secret War between Wikileaks and the Pentagon (and some media outlets)



A news ticker in New York's Times Square flashes a headline on the release of 400000 secret US documents about the war in Iraq on the WikiLeaks website.

October 25, 2010

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It happened on a Friday, the anniversary of the first US casualties of the Vietnam War way back in 1957. It was also the anniversary, in 1964, of French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre's announcement that he was turning down the Nobel Prize. He later sat as a judge on Bertrand Russell's Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal, which indicted that conflict's carnage and lies.

It was the day this year that the often shadowy Wikileaks, chief nemesis of the Pentagon, maybe their worst nightmare—considered perhaps even more dangerous than the Taliban—surfaced again with the largest public drop of secret military documents in history. Wikileaks is a public web site run by the Sunshine Press, a non-profit group.

For understandable reasons, the Pentagon is at war with its information war against the war—literally.

Wikileaks introduced the significance of their immense treasure trove of secrets on their website this way: "The 391,832 reports ('The Iraq War Logs'), document the war and occupation in Iraq, from 1st January 2004 to 31st December 2009 (except for the months of May 2004 and March 2009) as told by soldiers in the United States Army. Each is a 'SIGACT' or Significant Action in the war. They detail events as seen and heard by the US military troops on the ground in Iraq and are the first real glimpse into the secret history of the war that the United States government has been privy to throughout."

This time around, and unlike the earlier dissemination of what they called Afghan "war logs, they sanitized these documents to remove names that might become targets for retribution. The

gesture did not satisfy the Pentagon that said they would provide aid and comfort to the enemy. Forcibly retired General Stanley McCrystal called the release “sad.”

The *Los Angeles Times* reported, “In addition to the *Times*, the documents were made available to the *Guardian* newspaper in London, the French newspaper *Le Monde*, *Al Jazeera* and the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, on an embargoed basis.

The *New York Times* said it had edited or withheld any documents that would “put lives in danger or jeopardize continuing military operations.” It said it redacted the names of informants, a particular concern of the Defense Department

The Pentagon had been bracing for the release for months. Fearing more compromises of national security and more embarrassment for practices they wanted hidden, they had set up a Wikileaks war room staffed with 120 operatives in anticipation. The Central Command in Tampa, Florida has been fully engaged in trying to get newspapers not to run “stolen” documents.

A special intelligence unit called the Red Cell was involved. The task has been to prod the American spy networks to operate in a cleverer and more intelligent manner. (Ironically, Wikileaks had leaked some of their internal reports earlier.)

One report dealt with perceptions abroad that the US supported terrorists. Another was oriented toward how to sell support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Western Europe, counseling that “counting on apathy is not enough.”

I can testify to their savvy. I met members of the unit at a University of Westminster conference in London in September on war and terrorism. There were three of them. Two stood out because of their crew cuts and military demeanor. A third was a Muslim woman. They were clearly on a reconnaissance mission probably linked to Wikileaks detection since it had been reported that English students were helping the covert citizens agency target covert government activities.

I spoke at some length with their leader, an active duty Army Major in plain clothes, who told me that his unit in Iraq handled high value prisoners including Saddam Hussein. (They escorted him to the hangman, he revealed.) He was very friendly, made no secret of his affiliation but clearly was not at a leftist academic conference to collect footnotes.

As we know now, the Pentagon were unable to stop the release but may have pressured Wikileaks not to name names. We may never know what happened until Wikileaks finds some document about their anti-Wikileaks operations.

Wikileaks founder Julian Assange accused the Pentagon or more than document editing. CNN reported, “The founder of Wikileaks was denied a Swedish residency permit on Monday and said his whistleblowing website had been cut off by a company that handled many of its donations. Julian Assange blamed the financial cutoff on the U.S. government, which denied any involvement.” Reports of Death Squads have received little pick up even as they were routinely reported during wars in Central America.

He had earlier intimated the US might have been behind the other incidents in Sweden that led to his being accused of sexual harassment—so called “honey pot” traps used in seduction scenarios have always been part of espionage operations.

It’s not just the government that’s been out to discredit Assange or perhaps try to prosecute/persecute him. On Sunday, the *New York Times* ran a front page “profile” of the leader of WikiLeaks that many readers in the comment session saw as a hit job because it insinuated a mass defection in his organization and painted him as arrogant and unstable. It spoke of his problems in Sweden where he was threatened with arrest without noting no charges were filed. Later, CNN seemed to take its cue to go on the offensive and grilled him more on his personal life than the issues the new Wikileaks disclosures raised. He ended up walking off the set in the middle of the tabloid-style “interview.”

A week earlier, an American veteran of the Iraq “surge” published an open letter urging the administration to heed the revelations and change its policies.

Josh Stieber wrote, “Dear members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and other willing parties, this is an anticipatory letter aimed to advise you on your response and responsibility for the coming Wikileaks release, expected on October 23rd. Based on the White House’s response to the last leak about Afghanistan, the temptation seems strong to once again divert attention away from accountability.

I write as a young veteran who once fully embraced the concept of a preemptive war to keep my fellow citizens safe and, as President Bush declared, because “America is a friend to the people of Iraq.” I now hope to preempt your response to the information regarding that war in which I fought.”

The full brunt of the US response has yet to be felt. The media outlets that worked with Wikileaks have a new scoop of unprecedented depth and dimension. Yet, the different ways media outlets reported the disclosures reveals continuing media biases against allegations of torture. Few newspapers reported that the documents about civilian deaths minimized the total or that it was US troops that trained Iraqis now accused of abuse.

The *New York Times* played up the revelations in a page one spread but downplayed their meaning writing: “...the Iraq documents provide no earthshaking revelations, but they offer insight, texture and context from the people actually fighting the war.”

Not surprisingly, reports of widespread torture that American forces knew about, and in some cases reported with nothing done, is not “earthshaking.” 15,000 unreported civilian deaths are also minimized. The Times devoted more ink to evidence of abuses by Iraqi forces without mentioning most were trained by Americans who were the occupying power. It fleshes out US military allegations of Iranian intervention more than reports of killings by American soldiers, an emphasis that conveniently contributes to the demonization of Iran by American politicians.

Contrast this with the *Guardian* coverage which called its package “Iraq: The War Logs”, and goes high with revelations of “serial detainee abuse” and “15,000 [previously] unknown civilian deaths.”

The *Times* approach infuriated writer Rob Beschiza who came up with what he called “The New York Times Torture Euphemism Generator!”

<http://www.boingboing.net/2010/10/22/torture.html>

“Reading the NYT’s stories about the [Iraq War logs](#), I was struck by how it could get through such gruesome descriptions [fingers chopped off, chemicals splashed on prisoners](#) without using the word ‘torture.’ For some reason the word is unavailable when it is literally meaningful, yet is readily tossed around for laughs in contexts where it means nothing at all.” Oddly, the *New York Times*-owned Boston Globe had no reservations in using Torture in its headline.

The New York based Columbia Journalism Review surveyed global coverage and, weirdly, criticized *Al Jazeera* for a video it produced, “All in all, *Al Jazeera*’s coverage of the secret files is straightforward, “except perhaps” (my emphasis) for a six-and-a-half minute documentary video posted prominently throughout the site, a video that is awkwardly edited and features weird, cable-TV-style reenactments and dramatic readings of some of the reports.” This condescending comment betrays a lack of insight into the differences between TV coverage and newspaper formulas.

While all of the press seems to be reporting the story, few media outlets are going back to their own coverage and acknowledging how they had failed at the time to report many of the atrocities we now know the US military knew about, and covered up. One glaring example: The killings that took place in Fallujah where *Al Jazeera* correspondents were banned.

Much of the media, as we now see, especially leading American media outlets, were complicit in a multi-year cover-up of truths and crimes that continue to this day, not just in Iraq or Afghanistan, but in our living rooms at home.

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*[Much of this commentary first appeared on the AlJazeera website:*

<http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2010/10/2010102410827506430.html>]

*The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial policy.*

[Reposted from: <http://revolutionaryfrontlines.wordpress.com/2010/10/26/the-secret-war-between-wikileaks-and-the-pentagon-and-some-media-outlets/#more-10916> ]