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Ryan Irwin

University at Albany, State University of New York, [rirwin@albany.edu](mailto:rirwin@albany.edu)

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# Wikileaks, and the Past and Present of American Foreign Relations

Ryan Irwin

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On April 5, 2008, a small coterie of Republican senators and diplomats—John Barrasso, Saxby Chambliss, Mitch McConnell, and James Risch, among others—held a quiet meeting with former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak at the Heliopolis Palace in Cairo. The setting was regal. Designed in the early twentieth century by a Belgian architect, the one-time luxury hotel had been remade as Mubarak's home and workplace in the 1980s. Blending Arabic, European, and Persian architectural styles, the complex purposefully embodied Egypt's place at the crossroads of the pan-Islamic and pan-European worlds.

The conversation turned naturally to current events as the group settled down to talk. After a brief back-and-forth about Israel, Mubarak brought up Iraq. "My dear friends," he began, "democracy in Iraq equals killing. The nature of those people is completely different. They are tough and bloody, and they need a very tough leader. They will not be submissive to a democratic leader." Stability required an authoritarian fist. "As I told Secretary of Defense Gates last year," Mubarak continued, "the only solution [to America's desire to leave Iraq] is to strengthen the military and security forces, arm and train them, wait for the emergence of some generals, don't oppose them, then stay in your camps in the desert and don't interfere. The military will control Iraq like the ayatollahs control Iran." Twenty-eight years in power, and Mubarak's worldview amounted to a simple adage: never "mix democracy and tribalism."<sup>1</sup>

The transcript drips with irony now. It was sent to the Department of State by U.S. Ambassador Margaret Scobey on April 8, 2008, and it comes to us via Private First Class Bradley Manning, who at present sits in isolation in a Marine Corps jail in Quantico, Virginia, awaiting trial for passing along 251,287 such cables—only 2,000 of which are available online currently—to the media organization known as Wikileaks. Manning's fate and the imbroglio surrounding Julian Assange, the controversial figure who shared the cables with the world, has faded somewhat from the headlines in recent months. Yet the Wikileaks communiqués reveal much about America's role in today's world. In the words of author Timothy Garton Ash, the documents are a "historian's dream" and a "diplomat's nightmare"—a spigot of information from the contact points of American power, where powerbrokers and diplomats go daily through the motions of statecraft.<sup>2</sup>

## Leaks, Yesterday and Today

In the United States, politicians hyperventilated over the Wikileaks story after it broke in 2010. Despite the fact

that most foreign leaders quickly dismissed the material as insignificant, American leaders portrayed Assange and Manning as unambiguous enemies of the international community.<sup>3</sup> Internal dissent—voiced notably by (now former) State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley, who criticized the U.S. government's imprisonment of Manning—was cast as inexcusable and irresponsible.

However, the American ship of state has leaked since the republic's founding. George Washington reprimanded Alexander Hamilton for passing material to the British during the 1794 Jay Treaty negotiations, and James Madison once castigated his secretary of state for giving administration secrets to members of the opposing Federalist Party. Since then, there has been no shortage of leak-related precedents. In 1848, as the United States' war with Mexico drew to a close, Senate investigators placed a journalist under house arrest for the first time because he refused to disclose how he obtained details about the not-yet-complete peace treaty. At the height of the First World War, lawmakers considered making it illegal to leak state information to the public, but changed their minds because of first amendment concerns, opting instead for legislation that criminalized the act of relaying defense secrets to the enemy during wartime.

The most notorious leak in U.S. history came in the early 1970s, when Daniel Ellsberg, a Princeton-educated analyst who worked for Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara during the 1960s, delivered a seven-thousand-page Pentagon report to the *New York Times*, and later the *Washington Post*. Unprecedented in scope, the collection of top-secret materials revealed that Lyndon Johnson's White House had lied systematically to the public about the rationale behind America's involvement in Vietnam. Richard Nixon tried to use an injunction to stop the material's publication in 1971, setting another historical precedent in the process, but failed at the Supreme Court.

The ethics of leaking have never been straightforward. Nixon's own contradictions were on full display as he and his advisors formulated their response to Ellsberg:

Nixon: "Let's get the son of a bitch into jail."

Henry Kissinger: "We've got to get him."

Nixon: "We've got to get him. . . . Don't worry about his trial. Just get everything out. Try him in the press. . . . Everything . . . that there is on the investigation, get it out, *leak it out*."

Such conviction, of course, facilitated Nixon's undoing, but the implications were clear and the sentiment was probably felt widely among American elites: leaking was bad when it violated the interests of power. Or, as columnist David Corn said once, there are leaks "that serve the truth, and those that serve the leaker."<sup>4</sup>

The second Bush administration blurred this line frequently. White House staff members gave the identity

of CIA agent Valerie Plame to columnist Robert Novak after her husband, Ambassador Joseph Wilson, criticized the rationale for the 2003 Iraq invasion, and Bush himself passed along (selectively chosen) top-secret documents to reporter Bob Woodward for the 2002 book, *Bush at War*.

### Wheat from the Chaff

Each of these leaks tells a different historical story. The Plame affair underscored the politicization of information in our fractured age, when partisans compete with cynical glee to mold Washington's weekly narrative. Ellsberg's papers exposed the contradictions of an earlier epoch, highlighting the tenuous underpinnings of the global Cold War, particularly in Southeast Asia. Controversies from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—often sharpened by war and codified through law—offer windows into the rise of the modern state and highlight how the U.S. government came to police its inner correspondence. And the experiences of the founding fathers hint at an era when leaders navigated questions of secrecy with little consideration of bureaucratic power.

So given this long leaky history, what makes the Wikileaks material so interesting? Size matters (there is a lot of information in the 251,287 cables), but these documents are also different. For one thing, they draw on unusual source material. Unlike Ellsberg, Manning did not have access to top-secret reports. Most of the information he downloaded from his desk at a military base in Iraq never reached the Oval Office. It is likely that few of his cables even made their way to the seventh floor of the U.S. State Department, where America's top statesmen manage the daily business of U.S. foreign relations. Moreover, the documents do not lend themselves to a Plame or Ellsberg-like controversy. There are embarrassing tidbits here and there (mostly gossipy assessments of foreign leaders) and heart-wrenching details from the battlefields in Afghanistan and Iraq. But for the most part Washington's foreign officers come across as professionals. As commentator Fareed Zakaria opined, "Washington's secret diplomacy is actually remarkably consistent with its public diplomacy" this time around, unlike during the Vietnam War, and U.S. diplomats are undeniably "sharp, well informed, and lucid."<sup>5</sup>

What emerges from the Wikileaks material is a story that features not the great men and women of Washington but the mid-level officials who work in U.S. outposts around the world. These are the individuals who conduct American diplomacy on the ground. Their correspondence is dominated neither by turf battles nor policy debates but rather by a continual effort to collect accurate information, analyze trends, and advance U.S. interests in the world. Looking through the eyes of such individuals reveals much about U.S. foreign relations, especially in that zone of exchange at the outskirts of Washington's political influence. The Wikileaks documents showcase the common priorities of the officials who enact American policy in this region, and they tell scholars something about the challenges of U.S. foreign affairs in the early twenty-first century. Things have certainly changed since the end of the Cold War, but they haven't changed as much as one might expect.

### Small States, Big Allies

Washington's global influence today is deeply contested. To a degree that might surprise both boosters and detractors of America's foreign policy, negotiation is the motif of the Wikileaks documents. Whether dealing with special friends or political afterthoughts, U.S. diplomats rarely dictate the terms of international exchange. They're

caught instead in a continual two-way conversation that often obfuscates the asymmetrical nature of Washington's military and economic resources.

The examples are almost endless. Consider Yemen. Residing at the outskirts of the Arab world with a harsh climate and a small population, the country should not possess any leverage over the U.S. policymaking establishment. Unlike Saudi Arabia, it has neither oil reserves nor regional clout—only the strategic port city of Aden, which provides access to the waters between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. But the Wikileaks material shows how Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, pushed Washington to take a greater interest in his country in recent years. "If you don't help, [Yemen] will become worse than Somalia," he told America's ambassador in September 2009. The threat proved remarkably effective. Between 2009 and 2011, the United States tripled aid to Yemen, providing over \$300 million in military equipment and security assistance.

U.S. diplomats on the ground acknowledged that Saleh was using these funds for personal reasons. His principal aim, quite logically, was to strengthen his government's position vis-à-vis rebels in the north and secessionists in the south. (Yemen's borders have long been contested, and religious and ethnic tensions have simmered since the country took its current form in 1990.) However, Washington was willing to overlook Saleh's diversion of funds as long as he remained an ally in the fight against terrorism.

The resulting situation has been rife with contradictions. The Wikileaks material proves that the U.S. military attained almost unfettered access to Yemeni territory after 2009. Until last year, American warships and aircraft were bombarding training facilities linked to foreign groups such as al-Qaeda, and U.S. advisors were working in various capacities with local military and police forces. However, Saleh shaped the trajectory of these interventions. In a 2010 meeting with General David Petraeus, the president proposed to "continue saying the [U.S.] bombs are ours, not yours" as long as American officials promised not to punish him personally for future terrorist acts and recognized his domestic enemies as terrorist sympathizers. Such statements would be bound to anger Yemenis, to whom U.S. actions must feel suspiciously like old-fashioned imperialism.

According to the U.S. ambassador, Saleh understood exactly what he was doing. "The net effect" of the arrangement, "and one we strongly suspect Saleh has calculated," was an "iron fist" approach toward the president's enemies at home and interlopers from abroad. Moreover, by capitalizing on Washington's anxieties, Saleh buttressed his defense budget while outsourcing counterterrorist operations to the United States, effectively giving him the political space and financial resources to address his real problem: anti-government unrest. Although Saleh fled to Saudi Arabia to receive treatment for injuries he sustained during an attack on his compound in June 2011, he returned to his country in September. His hold on power is tenuous.

Perusing the Wikileaks material, one can unearth situations similar to that of Yemen elsewhere in the Middle East and throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Small states, or at least the politicians who sit at the interface of the international community and Third World conflict zones, influence how the U.S. government engages the world.<sup>6</sup> Washington's military might is unquestioned and often omnipresent, but this power functions through intermediaries on the ground and these individuals rarely possess the same agenda as official Washington. In fact, they often turn U.S. strategic interests to their advantage.

## Irony of Strategy

This state of affairs should come as no surprise. A similar dynamic defined America's stance abroad during the Cold War. Although the containment strategy no longer governs the rhetoric and practice of U.S. foreign relations, it allowed small states to influence the form that American power took in the world. Originally promulgated by George Kennan in the late 1940s, containment defined America's foreign engagements throughout the second half of the twentieth century, at least theoretically. Europe—Germany in particular—initially anchored the idea. Moscow's desire to prevent a Fourth Reich clashed fundamentally with Washington's plan to reintegrate Germany into the newly formed United Nations. For Kennan and others, containment enabled America to address this dispute without losing sight of the postwar world's true pivots—Western Europe and Japan. These were the places where Moscow's influence had to be denied.

How then did containment become a global doctrine? Some scholars blame overly aggressive Washingtonians, but context and external actors mattered tremendously. America's European and Japanese allies relied on markets and raw materials in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia—regions outside the traditional scope of U.S. power. As communists began establishing areas of influence beyond Europe, with Mao Zedong's Communist Party taking control of China and Josef Stalin exploding an atomic bomb in Central Asia, fear pushed containment beyond Western Europe and Japan—fear that communists would gain further footholds in the Third World and fear that Washington's allies would tire of the benefits of U.S. patronage. Politicians abroad understood the possibilities of this new mindset. As colonial rule collapsed, Europeans and non-Europeans alike began to court the United States, often with guile and sophistication, trading friendship and local resources for money and military equipment.

Consider the case of Pakistan. Washington's 1954 decision to give security support to Islamabad rather than New Delhi makes little sense against the backdrop of India's regional clout. Yet the United States found itself persuaded by Pakistan's threats of Soviet incursions and strident assurances that it would be an unwavering bulwark against communism in Asia. The result was a slow-moving Cold War debacle, with U.S. diplomats dragged inexorably into a series of countervailing commitments that alienated India and frustrated Pakistan while draining American coffers and arming opponents in South Asia.

Or consider the Philippines. Whereas U.S. planners hoped to remake the country in the image of liberal capitalism in the 1950s, the Philippine government sought, first and foremost, to use U.S. aid to build client relationships at the local level. Whenever Washington threatened to withdraw aid, Manila raised the specter of communist insurrection. By the time Ferdinand Marcos came to power in 1965, the status quo was set: the United States maintained access to its military bases and the Philippines retained control of its crony capitalist system.

The quagmire in Vietnam also dramatized the influence of external actors on U.S. foreign relations. American diplomats had little interest in Southeast Asia at the beginning of the Cold War, and most officials recognized the region as unimportant to U.S. interests. Nonetheless, London and Paris managed to pull Washington down the slippery slope of economic and military aid during the late 1940s and 1950s by actively policing information about Ho Chi Minh and exaggerating the menace of communism. The result was a self-fulfilling prophecy, with the Viet Minh radicalized by resurgent French colonialism and America committed to the invented nation of South

Vietnam—a commitment that culminated, of course, in the Second Indochina War.

Containment both rationalized and justified Washington's growing engagements abroad. But foreign actors—not only Washington policymakers—dictated how, when, and where containment was applied. Cognizant of the benefits of U.S. aid, local elites tapped into American anxieties purposefully, pushing the United States in particular directions while pursuing goals that diverged from Washington's own aims. Their actions do not absolve the U.S. government of responsibility for its actions. Once committed to a country and its leaders, the United States frequently pursued goals with Manichean zeal, and its actions in Guatemala, Iran, and Chile should not be excused. Nor do those actions call into question the importance of rhetoric. Once employed, containment's logic morphed invariably in unexpected directions, and foreign suitors rarely walked away satisfied from their engagements with the United States.

## From Communism to Terrorism

But the basic point remains: today's situation is not unique. Saleh is merely the latest in a long line of astute intermediaries who have pulled Washington closer to the periphery by exchanging friendship for money. Perhaps the true story of Wikileaks, then, is one of historical continuity. The Cold War is over, but the processes that shaped American foreign relations in the early twentieth century are remarkably familiar. What is unique today is the way that counterterrorism frames the discursive landscape of U.S. diplomacy. The second Bush administration made no secret of its desire to recast America's grand strategy around the war on terror after September 11, and Barack Obama's White House—while opposed ardently to unilateral intervention—has done little to alter the fundamental logic of these efforts. The effect has not been the rise of a new world order but the amplification and acceleration of older trends.

Whether summarizing the state of U.S.–Macedonia relations or surveying events in Russia, U.S. embassy officials fixate daily on information about terrorist behavior, reiterating rumors passed along invariably by liaisons on the ground.<sup>7</sup> Containment gave U.S. diplomats an opponent in the Soviet Union, but this new fight against terror is without political direction. The reports speak for themselves. In October 2008, a vehicle with Iranian license plates parked outside the U.S. embassy in Azerbaijan for nearly an hour, driving off only when a man entered the car; a few days later an individual stood on a street corner near the American Institute in Taiwan, videotaping numerous buildings in the area before departing abruptly on a motor scooter.<sup>8</sup> The disconnected scenes flow to Washington every day, like a twenty-first-century retelling of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1982). And no country—no person, for that matter—appears too obscure for Washington's watchful eye. Writing from the sleepy archipelago of the Maldives in 2008, U.S. officials relayed that local police had given the embassy the name of a young man who might have recently met with a Waziristan group with unspecified links to al-Qaeda. Little was known of the man beyond the fact that he had visited a website associated with radical Islam—but his name was entered dutifully into a terrorist database, along with a solemn rejoinder about the potential dangers of Maldives-based, Waziristan-trained extremists.<sup>9</sup>

How is it possible to police the line between America's vital and peripheral interests in such a world? Everything and everyone matters to Washington in the twenty-first century. The story of Wikileaks is defined by continuity—and it hints at how the American geopolitical tradition

has arced further downward since the end of the Cold War. Although the material leaked by Manning tells us relatively little about the top-level debates in the Bush and Obama administrations, the cables convey neither a sense of proportion nor humility. Nowhere was there an awareness of how distance and terrain affect international affairs in different ways around the world—or a cognizance that Yemen (and regions like it) simply do not matter to the United States.

### Saying No

Today, as in the past, small states appropriate American rhetoric. They lay claim to the language of U.S. foreign affairs and push U.S. powerbrokers in particular directions by conflating their own goals with America's stated strategic priorities. Those who insist that America has lost its "influence" around the world seem not to understand this history. Our world is interconnected in novel ways, and new technologies pose threats and opportunities that are at once terrifying and exhilarating. But old lessons are worth heeding. The most important of these: not every region matters equally. And the most important task of every great power, now and yesterday, is saying no. It is a lesson worth reflecting on, especially as diplomats and policymakers adjust to a political landscape without such mainstays as Hosni Mubarak.

#### Notes:

1. For documentation, see <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/28/world/20101128-cables-viewer.html#report/egypt-09CAIRO604>
2. Timothy Garton Ash, 'US embassy cables: A banquet of secrets,' see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/28/wikileaks-diplomacy-us-media-war>
3. 'Worldwide Reaction to Wikileaks Drop,' *PBS NewsHour*, see <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2010/11/worldwide-reaction-to-wikileaks.html>

4. For interesting background information, see <http://hnn.us/articles/342.html>.
5. Fareed Zakaria, "Wikileaks Shows Skill of U.S. Diplomats," see <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2034508,00.html>
6. For documentation, see <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/28/world/20101128-cables-viewer.html#report/yemen-10SANAA317>
7. For documentation, see <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/28/world/20101128-cables-viewer.html#report/elmasri-06SKOPJE105> and <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/28/world/20101128-cables-viewer.html#report/litvinenko-06PARIS7755>.
8. For documentation, see <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/28/world/20101128-cables-viewer.html#report/security-08STATE116943>.
9. For documentation, see <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/28/world/20101128-cables-viewer.html#report/security-08STATE116943>.

## CALL FOR PROPOSALS TO HOST THE 2013 SHAFR SUMMER INSTITUTE

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**May 1, 2012.** Questions can be directed to Peter L. Hahn, Executive Director, at [Hahn.29@osu.edu](mailto:Hahn.29@osu.edu).