

Disclosure and deceit: Secrecy as the manipulation of history, not its concealment

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The declassification of official secrets is often seen as either a challenge or a prerequisite for obtaining accurate data on the history of political and economic events. Yet at the same time high government intelligence officials have said that their policy is one of 'plausible deniability'. Official US government policy for example is never to acknowledge or deny the presence of nuclear weapons anywhere its forces are deployed, especially its naval forces.

The British have their 'Official Secrets' Act.

When the Wikileaks site was launched in 2007 and attained notoriety for publication of infamous actions by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, this platform was heralded and condemned for its disclosures and exposures. Julian Assange is quoted as saying that when he receives documents classified under the UK Official Secrets Act he responds in accordance with the letter of the law – since it is forbidden to withhold or destroy, his only option is to publish.

The question remains for historians, investigators, and educated citizens: what is the real value of disclosures or declassification?

Given the practice of plausible deniability, does disclosure or declassification constitute proof, and if so by what criteria? Both facts and non-facts can be concealed or disclosed.

Information is not self-defining

Ultimately there remain two questions: does the secret document (now public) really constitute the 'secret'? To what

'secret' does the document we use actually refer?

Is secrecy the difference between the known and unknown, or the known and untold?

Some benefit can be found by borrowing theological concepts. We can distinguish between a mystery revealed and a supernatural truth which, by its very nature, lies above the finite intelligence. But a secret is something unknowable either by accident or on account of accessibility.

I believe that the popularised form of disclosure embodied in Wikileaks should force us to distinguish between those beliefs we have about the nature of official action and the conduct of people working within those institutions and the data produced. Wikileaks is clearly a platform for publishing data but much of the response to these documents is more based on mystery than on secrecy. That is to say that the disclosures are treated as revelation in the religious sense – and not as discovery in the sense of *scientia* – knowledge. Why is this so?

Wikileaks is described as a continuation of the ethical and social responsibility of journalism as an instrument to educate and inform the public – based on the principle that an informed public is essential to a democracy and self-governance. By collecting, collating and disclosing documents 'leaked' to it, Wikileaks also attacks what Assange calls the invisible government, the people and institutions who rule by concealing their activities from the people – and brings to light their wrongdoing.

There are two traditions involved here that partially overlap. In the US the prime examples are the 'muckraking journalism' originating in the so-called Progressive Era, spanning from 1890s to 1920s, and more recently the publication of the Pentagon Papers through Daniel Ellsberg. While liberals treat both of these examples favourably, their histories, however, are far more ambivalent than sentimentally presented.

To understand this ambivalence, itself a sort of plausible

deniability, it is necessary to sketch the history of journalism in the US – the emergence of an unnamed but essential political actor – and some of the goals of US foreign policy since the end of the 19th century. This very brief sketch offers what I call the preponderance of facticity – as opposed to an unimpeachable explanation for the overt and covert actions of the US.

First of all it is necessary to acknowledge that in 1886 the US Supreme Court endowed the modern business corporation with all the properties of citizenship in the US – a ruling reiterated with more vehemence in 2010 by another Supreme Court decision. As of 1886, business corporations in the US had more civil rights than freed slaves or women. By the end of the First World War, the business corporation had eclipsed the natural person as a political actor in the US. By 1924 US immigration law and the actions of the FBI had succeeded in damming the flow of European radicalism and suppressing domestic challenges to corporate supremacy. Thus by the time Franklin Roosevelt was elected, the US had been fully constituted as a corporatist state. US government policy was thereafter made mainly by and for business corporations and their representatives.

Second, professional journalism emerged from the conflict between partisan media tied to social movements and those tied to business. The first journalism school was founded in 1908 at the University of Missouri with money from newspaper baron Joseph Pulitzer. As in all other emerging professions at that time, it was claimed that uniform training within an academic curriculum would produce writers who were neutral, objective, and dispassionate – that is to say somehow scientific in their writing. A professional journalist would not allow his or her writing to be corrupted by bribery or political allegiances. These professional journalists would work for commercial enterprises but be trained to produce value-free texts for publication.

The US has always refused to call itself an empire or to acknowledge that its expansion from the very beginning was imperial. The dogma of manifest destiny sought to resolve this contradiction by stipulating that domestic conquest was not imperial. Control of the Western hemisphere has always been defined as national security, not of asserting US domination.

Likewise, it is impossible to understand the actions of the US government in Asia since 1910 without acknowledging that the US is an empire and recognising its imperial interests in the Asia-Pacific region. It is also impossible to understand the period called the Cold War without knowing that the US invaded the Soviet Union in 1918 with 13,000 troops along with some 40,000 British troops and thousands of troops recruited by the 'West' to support the Tsarist armies and fascist Siberian Republic.

It is essential to bear these over-arching contextual points in mind when considering the value of classified US documents and their disclosure, whether by Wikileaks or Bob Woodward. It is essential to bear these points in mind because the value or the ambivalence of 'leaks' or declassification depends entirely on whether the data is viewed as 'revelation' or as mere scientific data to be interpreted.

Revelation and heresy

For the most part the disclosures by Wikileaks have been and continue to be treated as 'revelation' and the disclosure itself as heresy. This is particularly the case in the batches of State Department cables containing diplomatic jargon and liturgy. The 'revelation' comprises the emotional response to scripture generated by members of the US foreign service and the confirmation this scripture appears to give to opinions held about the US – whether justified or not.

Just as reading books and even the bible was a capital offence for those without ecclesiastical license in the high Middle Ages, the response of the US government is

comprehensible. It is bound to assert that Wikileaks is criminal activity and to compel punishment. Yet there is another reason why the US government reaction is so intense. As argued above, the primary political actor in the US polity is the business corporation.

In Europe and North America at least it is understood: (1) that the ultimate values for state action are those which serve the interests of private property; and (2) that the business corporation is the representative form of private property. This in turn means that information rights are in fact property rights manifest as patents, copyrights, and trade or industrial secrets. Since the state is the guardian of the corporation, it argues that the disclosure of government documents should only be allowed where the government itself has surrendered some of its privacy rights. This is quite different from the arguments for feudal diplomatic privilege, even though business corporations have superseded princely states.

The argument for state secrecy now is that the democratic state constituted by business corporations is obliged to protect the rights and privileges of those citizens as embodied in their private property rights – rights deemed to be even more absolute than those historically attributed to natural persons, if for no other reason than that corporations enjoy limited liability and immortality, unlike natural persons. When the US government says it is necessary for other states to treat Assange as an outlaw and Wikileaks as a criminal activity, it is appealing on one hand to the global corporate citizenry and on the other, asserting its role – not unlike the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages – as the sole arbiter of those rights and privileges subsumed by Democracy in the world. Many of those who lack a religious commitment to the American way of life have still recognised the appeal to privacy and ultimately to private property which are now deemed the highest values in the world – so that trade, the commerce in private property, takes precedence over every other human

activity and supersedes even human rights, not to mention civil rights.

Ellsberg

In 1971 Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*, which began their publication. This leak was treated as a landmark, although it would take several years before the US withdrew its forces from Vietnam and many more before hostilities were formally ended. What then was the significance of the 'leak'? The documents generally point to the failures of the military, omitting the role of the CIA almost entirely. Today it is still largely unknown that Ellsberg was working with the CIA in counter-insurgency programs in Vietnam.

Did the Pentagon Papers thus serve the interests of plausible deniability – a disclosure of secrets designed not to reveal truth, but to conceal a larger truth by revealing smaller ones?

On the other hand, the collection of essays, *Dirty Work*, edited by Philip Agee and Lou Wolf, showed how the identity of CIA officers could be deciphered from their official biographies, especially as published in the Foreign Service List and other government registers. This type of disclosure allows the competent researcher to recognise 'real' Foreign Service officers as opposed to CIA officers operating under diplomatic cover. Agee and his colleague Lou Wolf maintained that disclosure of CIA activities was not a matter of lifting secrets but of recognising the context in which disparate information has to be viewed to allow its interpretation. To put it trivially: in order to find something you have to know the thing for which you are searching.

In order to be meaningful, disclosures of intelligence information must explain that intelligence information seeks to deceive the US public. For example, the CIA and those in the multi-agency task forces under its control produced an enormous amount of reports and documentation to show

what was being done to fulfil the official US policy objectives in Vietnam. One of these programs was called Rural Development. This CIA program was run ostensibly by the USAID and the State Department to support the economic and social development of the countryside. This policy was articulated in Washington to fit with the dominant 'development' paradigm – to package the US policy as aid and not military occupation.

And yet, as Douglas Valentine shows in his book *The Phoenix Program*, Rural Development was a cover for counterinsurgency from the beginning. The Phoenix Program only became known in the US after 1971, and then only superficially. The information released to the US Congress and reported in the major media outlets lacked sufficient context to allow interpretation.

There was so little context that the same people who worked in the Phoenix program in Vietnam as 20-year-olds have been able to continue careers operating the same kinds of programmes in other countries with almost no scrutiny. Two people come to mind: John Negroponte, who is alleged to have provided support to death squads in Honduras during the US war against Nicaragua and later served as ambassador to occupied Iraq, began his foreign service career in Vietnam with one of the agencies instrumental in Phoenix. The other person died recently: Richard Holbrooke began his career with USAID in Vietnam, went on to advise the Indonesian dictatorship, went to manage the 'diplomatic' part of the US war in Yugoslavia and finally served as a kind of pro-consul for Central Asia with responsibility for the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.

As the secret weapon in US imperial policy, the counterinsurgency or rural development or 'surge' policies of the US government never include an examination of the professionals who managed them. It used to be said among some critics that one could follow General Vernon Walters' travel itinerary and predict military coups. But that was not

something 'leaked' and it did not appear in the mainstream media analysis.

The illusion of objective neutrality

So if much of what we see 'leaked' is gossip in the service of plausible deniability, what separates the important gossip from the trivial? I suggest it is a return to consciously interested, humanistic values in historical research. We have to abandon the idea that the perfect form of knowledge is embodied in the privilege of corporate ownership of ideas, and domination of the state. We also have to abandon the illusion of objective neutrality inherited from Positivism and Progressivism, with its exclusionary professionalism. Until such time as human beings can be restored to the centre of social, political and economic history we have to recognise the full consequences of the enfranchisement of the business corporation and the subordination of the individual to role of a mere consumer.

If we take the business corporation, an irresponsible and immortal entity, endowed with absolute property rights and absolved of any liability for its actions or those of its officers and agents, as the subject of history it has become, then we have to disclose more than diplomatic cables. We have to analyse its actions just as historians have tried to understand the behaviour of princes and dynasties in the past. This is too rarely done and when often only in a superficial way.

I would like to provide an example, a sketch if you will, of one such historical analysis, taking the business corporation and not the natural person as the focus of action.

In 1945, George Orwell referred to the threat of nuclear war between the West and the Soviet Union as a 'cold war'. He made no reference to the 1918 invasion of the Soviet Union by British troops. In 1947, US Secretary of State Bernard Baruch gave a speech in South Carolina saying 'Let us not be deceived: we are today in the midst of a cold war'. The speech

had been written by a rich newspaperman named Herbert Swope. In 1947, George Kennan published his containment essay, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', in *Foreign Affairs* under the name 'X'. In it he describes a supposed innate expansionist tendency of the Soviet Union – also no mention of the US invasion or the devastation of WWII, which virtually destroyed the Soviet Union's manpower and industrial base.

In April 1950, NSC 68 is published – classified top secret until 1975 – outlining the necessity for the US to massively rearm to assert and maintain its role as the world's superpower. At the end of summer 1950, war breaks out in Korea. President Truman declared an emergency and gets UN Security Council approval for a war that lasts three years, killing at least 3 million Koreans – most of whom die as a result of US Air Force saturation bombing of Korea north of the 38th parallel. Truman proclaims that US intervention will be used to prevent the expansion of the Soviet Union or as Ronald Reagan put it then – Russian aggression. After being utterly routed by the army of North Korea, the US bombs its way to the Yalu only to be thrown back to the 38th parallel by China. In 1954, the US organises the overthrow of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala and begins its aid and covert intervention in Vietnam beginning a war that only ends in 1976. Meanwhile Britain suppresses the Malaysian independence movement. Between 1960 and 1968, nationalist governments have been overthrown in Indonesia, Congo, Ghana, and Brazil.

Cuba is the great surprise amidst the literally hundreds of nationalist, anti-colonial movements and governments suppressed by the US. William Blum has catalogued the enormous number of overt and covert interventions by the US in his book *Killing Hope*. The amazing thing about much of what Blum compiled is that it was not 'secret'. It was simply not reported or misrepresented. Blum makes clear – what should be obvious – that the Soviet Union was not a party to a single war or coup from 1945 to 1989 and that the US government knew this.

Much of this early action took place when John Foster Dulles was US Secretary of State and his brother was head of the CIA. The Dulles brothers were intimately connected to corporations they represented in their capacity as 'white shoe' lawyers in New York. In fact the founder of the OSS, the CIA's predecessor, William Donovan, was also a corporate lawyer both before and after his service in the OSS. In other words the people who have commanded these foreign policy instruments have almost without exception been the direct representatives of major US business corporations. In each case the public pretext has been the threat of communism or Soviet expansion. Yet the only consistent quality all of these actions had was the suppression of governments that restricted the activities of US or UK corporations. Of course, communism has long been merely a term for any opposition to the unrestricted rights of business corporations. One could say people like Donovan or Dulles were seconded to government office. However, the direct financial benefit that someone like Dulles obtained when he succeeded in deposing Arbenz in Guatemala came from his shareholding in United Fruit, the instigator and financial backer of the CIA co-ordinated coup. Perhaps the more accurate interpretation of this secret activity is that the business corporation, which previously employed law firms and Pinkertons, had shifted the burden of implementing corporate foreign policy to the taxpayer and the state.

Now the interest of the US in Latin America has been well researched and documented. But the persistence of the Vietnam War and the silence about the Korean War have only been matched by the virtual absence of debate about the overthrow of Sukarno and the Philippine insurgency. The Philippines became a footnote in the controversy about US torture methods in Iraq and elsewhere as it was shown that the 'water cure' was applied rigorously by American troops when suppressing the Philippine independence movement at the beginning of the 20th century.

Lack of context not knowledge

The study of each of these Asian countries – and one can add the so-called Golden Triangle; and I would argue Afghanistan now – has been clouded not by lack of evidence or documentation but by lack of context. If the supposed threat posed by communism, especially Soviet communism is taken at face value – as also reiterated in innumerable official documents both originally public and originally confidential – then the US actions in Asia seem like mere religious fanaticism. The government officials and military and those who work with them are so indoctrinated that they will do anything to oppose communism in whatever form. Thus even respected scholars of these wars will focus on the delusions or information deficits or ideological blinders of the actors. This leads to a confused and incoherent perception of US relations in Asia and the Pacific. The virtual absence of any coherent criticism of the Afghanistan War, let alone the so-called War on Terror, is symptomatic not of inadequate information, leaked or otherwise. It is a result of failure to establish the context necessary for evaluating the data available. It should not surprise anyone that 'counter-terror' practices by US Forces are 'discovered' in Afghanistan or Iraq, if the professional careers of the theatre and field commanders (in and out of uniform) are seriously examined. Virtually all those responsible for fighting the war in Central Asia come from Special Operations/CIA backgrounds. That is what they have been trained to do.

If we shift our attention for a moment to the economic basis of this region, it has been said that the war against drugs is also being fought there. However, this is counterfactual. Since the 1840s the region from Afghanistan to Indochina has been part of what was originally the British opium industry. China tried to suppress the opium trade twice leading to war with Britain – wars China lost. The bulk of the Hong Kong banking sector developed out of the British opium

trade protected by the British army and Royal Navy. Throughout World War II and especially the Vietnam War the opium trade expanded to become an important economic sector in Southern Asia – under the protection of the secret services of the US, primarily the CIA. Respected scholars have documented this history to the present day. However it does not appear to play any role in interpreting the policies of the US government whether publicly or confidentially documented. Is it because, as a senior UN official reported last year, major parts of the global financial sector – headquartered in New York and London – were saved by billions in drug money in 2008?

Does the fact that Japan exploited both Korea and Vietnam to provide cheap food for its industrial labour force have any bearing on the US decision to invade those countries when its official Asia policy was to rebuild Japan as an Asian platform for US corporations – before China became re-accessible (deemed lost to the Communists in 1948)? Did the importance of Korean tungsten for the US steel industry contribute to the willingness of people like Preston Goodfellow, a CIA officer in Korea, to introduce a right-wing Korean to rule as a dictator of the US occupied zone? Is there continuity between Admiral Dewey's refusal to recognise the Philippine Republic after Spain's defeat – because the 1898 treaty with Spain ceded the archipelago to the US – and the refusal of General Hodge to recognise the Korean People's Republic in Seoul when he led the occupation of Korea in 1945? As John Pilger suggests, were the million people massacred by Suharto with US and UK support a small price to pay for controlling the richest archipelago in the Pacific? Was the Pol Pot regime not itself a creation of the US war against Vietnam – by other means? Is it an accident that while the US was firmly anchored in Subic Bay, armed and funded Jakarta, occupied Japan and half of Korea, that the US was prepared to bomb the Vietnamese nationalists 'into the Stone Age'? It only makes sense if the US is understood as an empire and its corporate interests are taken seriously when researching the

history of the US attempts to create and hold an Asian empire.

The resistance to this perception can be explained and it is not because of an impenetrable veil of secrecy. It is not because of the accidentally or inaccessibly unknown. Rather it is because US policy and practice in the world remains a 'mystery', a supernatural truth, one that of its very nature lies above the finite intelligence. The quasi-divine status of the universal democracy for which the USA is supposed to stand is an obstacle of faith.

Engineering consent

In the twentieth century two conflicting tendencies can be identified. The first was the emergence of mass democratic movements. The second was the emergence of the international business corporation. When the Great War ended in 1918, the struggle between these two forces crystallised in the mass audience or consumer on one hand and the mass production and communication on the other. As Edward Bernays put it:

'This is an age of mass production. In the mass production of materials a broad technique has been developed and applied to their distribution. In this age too there must be a technique for the mass distribution of ideas.'

In his book, *Propaganda*, he wrote 'The conscious and intelligent manipulation of organised habits and opinions of the masses...' was necessary in a democracy, calling that 'invisible government'. Like his contemporary Walter Lippmann, a journalist, he believed that democracy was a technique for 'engineering the consent' of the masses to those policies and practices adopted by the country's elite – the rulers of its great business corporations.

By the 1980s the state throughout the West – and after 1989 in the former Soviet bloc – was being defined only by 'business criteria', e.g. efficiency, profitability, cost minimisation, shareholder value, consumer satisfaction, etc.

Political and social criteria such as participatory rights or income equity or equality, provision of basic needs such as education, work, housing, nutrition, healthcare on a universal basis had been transformed from citizenship to consumerism. The individual lost status in return for means tested access to the 'market'.

In order for the state to function like a business it had to adopt both the organisational and ethical forms of the business corporation – a non-democratic system, usually dictatorial, at best operating as an expert system. As an extension of the property-holding entities upon which it was to be remodelled, the state converted its power into secretive, jealous, and rigid hierarchies driven by the highest ethical value of the corporation – profit.

Journalists and 'corporate stenographers'

While historical research should not be merely deductive, it is dependent on documents. The veracity of those documents depends among other things on authenticity, judgements as to the status, knowledge or competence of the author, the preponderance of reported data corresponding to data reported elsewhere or in other media. A public document is tested against a private or confidential document – hence the great interest in memoirs, diaries and private correspondence. There is an assumption that the private document is more sincere or even reliable than public documents. This is merely axiomatic since there is no way to determine from a document itself whether its author lied, distorted or concealed in his private correspondence, too. Discrepancies can be explained in part by accepting that every author is a limited informant or interpreter. The assumptions about the integrity of the author shape the historical evaluation.

In contemporary history – especially since the emergence of industrial-scale communications – the journalist has become the model and nexus of data collection, author, analyst, and investigator. Here the journalist is most like a

scholar. The journalist is also a vicarious observer. The journalist is supposed to share precisely those attributes of the people to whom or about whom he reports. This has given us the plethora of reality TV, talk shows, embedded reporters, and the revolving door between media journalists and corporate/state press officers. In the latter the journalist straddles the chasm between salesman and consumer.

This is the role that the Creel Committee and the public relations industry learned to exploit. The journalist George Creel called his memoir of the Committee on Public Information he chaired – formed by Woodrow Wilson to sell US entry into World War I – *How We Advertised America*. The campaign was successful in gaining mass support for a policy designed to assure that Britain and France would be able to repay the billions borrowed from J. P. Morgan & Co. to finance their war against Germany and seize the Mesopotamian oilfields from the Ottoman Empire. Industrial communications techniques were applied to sell the political product of the dominant financial and industrial corporations of the day.

The professional journalist, freed from any social movement or popular ideology, had already become a mercenary for corporate mass media. The profession eased access to secure employment and to the rich and powerful. The journalists' job was to produce ideas for mass distribution – either for the state or for the business corporation. Supporting private enterprise was at the very least a recognition that one's job depended on the media owner. Editorial independence meant writers and editors could write whatever they pleased as long as it sold and did not challenge the economic or political foundation of the media enterprise itself. In sum the notion of the independent, truth-finding, investigative journalist is naïve at best. We must be careful to distinguish between journalists and what John Pilger has called 'corporate stenographers'.

This does not mean that no journalists supply us with useful information or provide us access to meaningful data. It

means that journalism, as institution, as praxis, is flawed – because it too is subordinated to the business corporation and its immoral imperatives. Wikileaks takes as its frame of reference the journalism as it emerged in the Positivist – Progressive Era – a profession ripe with contradictions, as I have attempted to illustrate. Were Wikileaks to fulfil that Positivist–Progressive model, it would still risk overwhelming us with the apparently objective and unbiased data – facts deemed to stand for themselves. Without a historical framework – and I believe such a framework must also be humanist – the mass of data produced or collated by such a platform as Wikileaks may sate but not nourish us. We have to be responsible for our interpretation. We can only be responsible however when we are aware of the foundations and framework for the data we analyse. The deliberate choice of framework forces us to be conscious of our own values and commitments. This stands in contrast to a hypothetically neutral, objective, or non-partisan foundation that risks decaying into opportunism – and a flood of deceit from which no mountain of disclosure can save us.

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