

RELEASE IN FULL

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Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2010 10:42 AM
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Subject: FW: The Right to Secrecy

FYI

From: Toiv, Nora F
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2010 10:40 AM
To: Reines, Phillippe I; Klevorick, Caitlin B; Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: The Right to Secrecy

The New Yorker

INTERESTING TIMES

Semi-regular thoughts on foreign affairs, politics, and books, from George Packer.

November 29, 2010

The Right to Secrecy

Posted by *George Packer*

What do we learn from the latest WikiLeaks dump, at least according to the Times's privileged and heavily edited account? That the Gulf Arabs are just as nervous about Iran's nuclear program as Israel is, and they want the U.S. to stop it. That Saudi King Abdullah doesn't think much of Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki. That Yemeni President Saleh is happy to claim American airstrikes against Al Qaeda targets as his country's own, and that he doesn't mind whiskey being smuggled into Yemen as long as it's the good stuff. That the Chinese government probably hacked into Google. That Qaddafi never goes anywhere without his Ukrainian "senior nurse."

On the whole, the trove makes American diplomacy look pretty good. Obama's Iran strategy of engagement-leading-to-isolation is shown to have succeeded. Bush—contrary to the impression left on every page of his new memoir—had enough self-awareness about the disaster in Iraq to put the brakes on military action against Iran. And American diplomats are capable of writing blunt, vivid, even amusing assessments of world leaders. Berlusconi is feckless, Sarkozy thin-skinned, Mugabe a megalomaniac: the accounts seem spot-on. The faceless corps of tight-lipped American embassy officials turn out to be an alert and discerning bunch.

Future diplomatic correspondence is going to be a lot more circumspect. The WikiLeaks dump contains (so far) a number of minor embarrassments, a few surprises, a lot of confirmations of what we already pretty much knew, and no scandals. It will make the work of American diplomacy harder for a long time to come. Classification abuse will increase—more cables will be labelled "Top Secret" that should have been labelled "Secret" or "Confidential." Exchanges between American officials and their foreign counterparts will grow less candid and more opaque. The same with cable traffic between U.S. embassies and Washington. There is an undeniable public interest in knowing, for example, that U.S. intelligence believes the Iranians are buying advanced missiles from North Korea, and that Gulf Arab rulers have been privately urging American military

action against Iran. The question is, does that interest outweigh the right of U.S. officials to carry out their work with a degree of confidentiality?

Yes—the right. Lawyers, judges, doctors, shrinks, accountants, investigators, and—not least—journalists could not do the most basic tasks without a veil of secrecy. Why shouldn't the same be true of those professionals who happen to be government officials? If WikiLeaks and its super-secretive, thin-skinned, megalomaniacal leader, Julian Assange (is he also accompanied everywhere by a Ukrainian senior nurse?), were uncovering crimes, or scandals, or systemic abuses, there would be no question about the overwhelming public interest in these latest revelations. But the WikiLeaks dump contains no My Lais, no black sites, no Abu Ghraibs. The documents simply show State Department officials going about their work over a period of several years. Will we get another update in six months? Will it be worth the damage? Should no government secret remain secret? Is diplomacy possible when official views have all the privacy of social networking? Assange's stated ambition is to embarrass the U.S. This means that his goals and those of most journalists are not the same. WikiLeaks doesn't trouble itself with these questions. The rest of us, journalists included, should.

Read more <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/georgepacker/2010/11/the-right-to-secrecy.html#ixzz16mSX2xpb>