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From: sbwhoeop [redacted]
Sent: Friday, December 3, 2010 9:55 AM
To: H
Subject: H: Roger Cohen in NYT: "American Diplomacy Revealed — as Good"

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/03/opinion/03iht-edcohen.html?hp>



December 2, 2010

American Diplomacy Revealed — as Good

By ROGER COHEN

NEW YORK — Let's hear it for the men and women of the U.S. Foreign Service!

They are, to judge from the WikiLeaks dump of a quarter-million of their private or secret cables, thoughtful, well-informed and dedicated servants of the American interest who write clear, declarative English sentences.

I've not heard much in the torrent of Wiki-chatter about these admirable career diplomats whose diplomacy is now condemned to be quiet. Yet it is they whose lives have been upturned. Every journalist knows that if their correspondence over several years was suddenly made public, they would lose most of their sources. That should give every journalist pause.

So it will be on the front line of U.S. diplomacy. Contacts will self-censor. They will go quiet, particularly in the more conspiratorial parts of the world which also tend to be the most unstable, like the Middle East. Layers of secrecy will be added.

Julian Assange, the thin-skinned founder of WikiLeaks, has hurt U.S. interests across a broad but probably shallow spectrum. That will satisfy him in that he's a self-styled foe of the United States. The guy makes me queasy.

Perhaps the most shocking thing about the Assange treasure trove — beyond the "shock" of vena Gulf Arab Sunni leaders looking for war on the cheap against Shiite Iran so long as it doesn't disrupt their U.S.-armed fiefdoms; or the "shock" of Pakistani double-dealing and nuclear procrastination; or the "shock" of yet more premature Israeli predictions on when Iran will have a nuclear weapon; or the "shock" of continued Saudi funding of Al Qaeda; or the "shock" of the Chinese Politburo hacking into Google; or the "shock" of Muammar el-Qaddafi's taste for voluptuous Slavic women and Silvio Berlusconi's taste for all women — perhaps the biggest shock of all is just how professional, sober and short on embarrassment all these cables are and just how much they conform with the world as we already knew it, right down to the familiar adjectives evoking French President Nicolas Sarkozy: "hyperactive," "mercurial," "authoritarian," "erratic," "monarch-like."

I swear, if they hadn't become diplomats a lot of these State Department people could have become good hacks.

Overall, my longstanding admiration for America's conscientious diplomats has been redoubled, not least for this underreported nugget on the turbulent Iranian election of 2009, contained in a cable of Jan. 12, 2010, from Dubai: "While we don't know nor might not ever know the real June 12 vote count, it is clear that the turnout was at record high levels and that there was systematic vote count fraud (if in fact the votes were even counted) to ensure that Ahmadinejad 'won big' in the first round."

It is good to know that this is the innermost conviction of American diplomacy: the fraud was evident to anyone in Tehran during the election and its violent aftermath.

A couple more observations on Iran: The first is that the Sunni autocrats of the Gulf are as exercised as they are about Tehran in part because they know that any U.S.-Iranian breakthrough might make them more dispensable to the United States. Their vested interest in the prevailing Middle Eastern strategic equation is strong; nothing would redraw the Middle East more than overcoming the U.S.-Iranian psychosis.

The second is that President Barack Obama's approach to Iran has been much more conventional than his initial outreach suggested. Old habits of attempted coercion trumped originality. Very quickly he fell back on Dennis Ross's tired thinking about balancing "appetizing carrots" with "sharp sticks" in tackling Iran's nuclear program.

The cables reveal that as early as March 2009, a senior U.S. diplomat was talking "dual track," telling Europeans that "engagement alone is unlikely to succeed" and calling for added "pressure." Perhaps Iranian skepticism could never have been overcome; certainly this approach guaranteed longstanding Iranian grievances would fester.

Assange himself clearly understands nothing of Iran or the Middle East or diplomacy. In an interview with Time, he expressed approval for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "coming out with a very interesting statement that leaders should speak in public like they do in private whenever they can" and bought into Netanyahu's view that this, in Assange's words, would "lead to some kind of increase in the peace process in the Middle East and particularly in relation to Iran."

Huh? Netanyahu was referring to Arab leaders' now-documented private calls for a U.S.-led war against Iran, an option he also favors. And that, for Assange, is a step forward to peace! He's all over the place.

What should we make of this brainy naif who told my colleague John Burns that America is a threat to democracy? He's a loose canon; let him be. My impression is he's self-armed with a spade and he's digging.

And what of the messenger's message? The cables are intriguing, offering plenty of voyeuristic titillation but no gasp of discovery. They provide texture but break little new ground. Yet their publication has done significant damage to the courageous work of America's diplomats and may endanger lives. That's a tradeoff that I find troubling and unpersuasive.