

# WikiLeaks' dangerous disregard

By William C. Kashatus

With massive releases of documents related to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, WikiLeaks has become an important presence in journalism and national security. It has also abandoned journalism's traditional deference to national security.

The approximately 390,000 classified, unedited Iraq war documents released by WikiLeaks describe in minute detail what U.S. troops encountered on a daily basis from 2003 to this year. They include sensitive intelligence tips and accounts of meetings between informants and the U.S.-led coalition. That information could jeopardize the lives of American soldiers and those who have collaborated with the coalition.

WikiLeaks was founded in 2006 by dissidents, journalists, mathematicians, and technologists from the United States, Australia, Taiwan, Europe, and South Africa. The organization prides itself on "exposing oppressive regimes" around the world and "assisting people who wish to reveal unethical behavior in their governments and corporations" by publishing otherwise unavailable documents while preserving the sources' anonymity.

It's difficult to argue with such a mission, especially in the United States, where freedom of the press is guaranteed by the First Amendment. As a self-governing society, we rightfully condemn any government — including our own — that attempts to shield its misjudgments, incompetence, or misconduct from public scrutiny. Such "government secrets" must be exposed because they threaten to destroy the individual liberties and collective freedom democracy depends on.

All too often, government officials attempt to maintain secrecy by invoking the claim of national security, as President Obama and his predecessor have been accused of doing. We rely on the integrity and wisdom of the free press to determine which national secrets are legitimate and which are illegitimate.

That was the debate surrounding publication of the Pentagon Papers. A top-secret Defense Department history of U.S. political and military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967, the papers revealed that President Lyndon B. Johnson and the defense estab-

lishment intentionally misled the American public and Congress about involvement in Vietnam.

When the New York Times began to publish the papers in 1971, the Nixon administration, citing national security, obtained a federal court injunction blocking further publication. But the newspaper prevailed on appeal under its First Amendment right to pub-

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The organization is leaving behind traditional national-security considerations.

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lish information significant to the people's understanding of government policies. Furthermore, the Pentagon Papers had little or no effect on national security or the Vietnam War, partly because they were written years before publication.

This is not the case with the classified documents released by WikiLeaks. Those released last month contain information that could still endanger American troops. They also identify hundreds of civilians who have collaborated with the coalition in Iraq. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has vowed to use WikiLeaks material to track down and punish informants.

Human-rights groups asked WikiLeaks to censor secret files to protect civilians after it released some 92,000 documents on the Afghan war in July. But WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange refused to do so and then went on to release similarly sensitive information on the Iraq war.

WikiLeaks has acted recklessly, creating a clear and imminent danger to both U.S. and international security. The Obama administration should not only join other NATO countries in demanding the removal of classified documents from the WikiLeaks website, but also bring criminal charges against Assange and stop his travels across international borders. That would help restore the right balance between freedom of the press and international security.

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