

Blaming WikiLeaks

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The WikiLeaks story has unified the political elite in the U.S. elsewhere to a startling degree. It is as almost as if a readiness to strongly criticize WikiLeaks is the not so secret password to be part of this elite. Based on [the barrage of attacks](#) on WikiLeaks and its leader Julian Assange, one would think that Assange is single-handedly responsible for the difficulties the U.S. faces all over the world.

This has been a tough decade or so for the U.S. The terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 followed by two very long and, thus far, largely unsuccessful war, general, and undeniable, signs of declining global power and influence, accelerating global climate change that will create myriad new problems over the next decades, seemingly intractable conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, the persistent threat of terrorism, and the economic crisis which began in August of 2008 have only been some of the foreign policy problems troubling the U.S., yet our political leaders would have us believe that the real problem is some leaked cables, most of which can generously be described as innocuous. While it certainly is possible that the leaked information will create real problems for the U.S., a sense of perspective seems to be missing in much of this fury.

Perhaps one of the reasons this scandal is so infuriating to the political elite is because the notion of secrecy and having access to secret information is so much part of the gestalt of that elite. Having access to secret information, whether in the form of security clearance, background information or off the record conversations, is one of the perks of the elite. WikiLeaks has blown the lid off this secrecy narrative by making an extraordinary amount of previously secret information accessible to anybody with internet access.

Importantly, the information made available by WikiLeaks is not all bad for the U.S. On a recent trip to Brussels, several European diplomats told me that they were impressed by the quality of the cables which they had read on WikiLeaks. A more blunt assessment was [recently offered by Josh Kucera](#), who found the cables refreshingly honest, demonstrating that U.S. diplomats are “smart and perceptive, and with no illusions about the countries they are dealing with.” Kucera contrasts the quality of the cables with the uninspired and not insightful comments he has received from American diplomats overseas even in off the record conversations. A corollary phenomenon to the one Kucera identifies is the tendency of diplomats to use access to secret information as a rhetorical tool in private conversations with other Americans who do not have access this information.

WikiLeaks has changed this. Now, American journalists having off the record conversations with diplomats will push harder knowing that the diplomats have more insight than they are willing to offer. The diplomats will have to reveal more, but can easily do so without endangering the mission or putting anybody at risks. Similarly, the

next time secret information is cited by a U.S. diplomat, the other person in the conversation will be able to push back a little, making it a little more difficult for diplomats to use this rhetorical crutch in conversations with other Americans. This is, on balance, probably a good thing and hardly counts as a crisis.

The point here is not that no element of the leaked information are serious or potentially destructive, but that the condemnation of WikiLeaks has been overplayed and leads to the wrong lessons. Instead of discussing what brand of traitor, and to whom, Assange is, we should be thinking about how to upgrade security for genuinely important documents, how secrecy has been misused in the past and whether it might be better for our country if some of this secret information were simply publicly available.