

Wikileaks 1; Obama 0

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 26, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

It is to be expected that the Obama administration would be upset about the disclosure of thousands of documents pertaining to the war in Afghanistan on the website Wikileaks, which is dedicated to combating excessive government secrecy. Governments like to control access to sensitive information, especially in a war where information is not just power as it always is, but the ability to manage information can sometimes permit one the element of surprise. "In wartime, truth is so precious she must always be attended by a bodyguard of lies," said Churchill in explaining the efforts to deceive the Germans about where the blow of D-Day would fall.

But, the Obama Administration is wrong to protest over much. It appears the main conclusion to be drawn from these documents is that elements of the Pakistani intelligence forces continue to aid and abet Taliban forces and, perhaps, even some Al-Qaeda groups. This is hardly news. But, if it helps Congress to understand the high stakes of our continued involvement in Afghanistan, this new information should strengthen the administration's hand. Pakistan, unlike Saddam Hussein's regime, really does have nuclear weapons and if these fell into the wrong hands, the consequences would be grim indeed.

Pakistan is an enigma to policymakers. Its military and intelligence forces continue to be obsessed with the prospects of another war with India, a war that seems increasingly unnecessary and hopefully, therefore, unlikely. Only when Islamic extremists began serious attacks within Pakistan, against government targets, did the security forces recognize the need to respond and send forces into South Waziristan. Whatever our policy towards Pakistan in the foreseeable future, we are going to be holding our noses.

Wikileaks, however, should not be dealt with too harshly by the administration or by the court of public opinion. The website stands in the same tradition as Daniel Ellsberg, the military analyst who heroically leaked the "Pentagon Papers" to the New York Times and others. It is not that the American people have a right to know everything about U.S. military secrets or complicated diplomacy with enigmatic foreign states. It is that it is human nature to control information that need not be controlled, it is in fact a confirmation of one's power, and so the desire to control the information easily slips from concern over national security to concern for one's prerogatives. The call of patriotism burns in every breast, but so too does the sin of pride.

The next couple of days may be embarrassing, and they will certainly be more hectic than anticipated, for the White House as they explain our nation's posture towards Pakistan. It is complicated and messy, the way wartime alliances usually are. Remember Stalin? (Actually, check back later today for a post on the controversy over a bust of Stalin being placed at the U.S. D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Virginia.) The administration will survive this new leak of information. It turns out that in the long view, more administrations are hurt by their desire to control information than by the information itself. "We believe that the way to justice is transparency," said Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks. Transparency is not an absolute value, but it is a value nonetheless.

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