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A Massive Attack on America's Ideological Fiction

by [George de Stefano](#)

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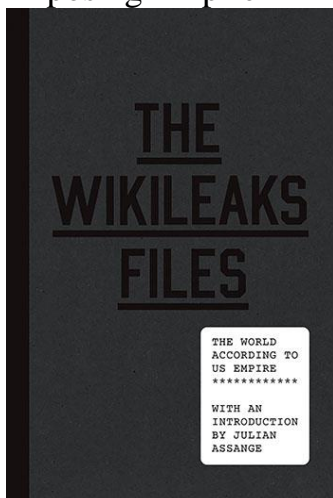
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The WikiLeaks Files examines how 21st century American imperialism works; the military and economic interventions, the covert actions, the violations of national sovereignty and human rights.

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Exposing Empire



THE WIKILEAKS FILES: THE WORLD ACCORDING TO US EMPIRE

INTRODUCTION BY JULIAN ASSANGE; VARIOUS CONTRIBUTORS

(Verso)

US: Aug 2015

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This is a dangerous book. It also is one whose importance and usefulness is hard to overstate.

The WikiLeaks Files: The World According to US Empire is a massive attack on the ideological fiction so assiduously promoted by the government and corporate media that the United States is a benevolent force in the world. Based on millions of top-secret State Department diplomatic cables that WikiLeaks released in November 2010 – the largest release of government documents in history – the book examines how the US Empire actually operates, the military and economic interventions, the covert actions, the violations of national sovereignty and human rights.

The US government certainly won't welcome the publication of *The WikiLeaks Files*. Both the Bush and Obama administrations have condemned the organization and have moved to suppress its work and to deny the public and researchers access to it. They also have waged a relentless campaign against Julian Assange, WikiLeaks' founder. As John Pilger observed in a 31 July 2015 article for the online journal [Counterpunch](#), "The Americans are pursuing Assange because WikiLeaks exposed their epic crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq: the wholesale killing of tens of thousands of civilians, which they covered up, and their contempt for sovereignty and international law, as demonstrated vividly in their leaked diplomatic cables."

Noting Vice-President Joe Biden's "preposterous slur" that Assange is a "cyber-terrorist", Pilger remarked that those who doubt "the degree of ruthlessness Assange can expect should remember the forcing down of the Bolivian president's plane in 2013 – wrongly believed to be carrying Edward Snowden [the government contractor who leaked classified information from the National Security Agency in 2013]." Snowden has released documents showing that Assange is on a "manhunt target list"; leaked Australian diplomatic cables reveal that Washington's efforts to capture the WikiLeaks founder are "unprecedented in scale and nature".

All this despite the fact that the First Amendment protects publishers, journalists, and whistleblowers. At one time, Barack Obama seemed to understand the value of whistleblowers. During his 2008 presidential bid, the former professor of constitutional law said they were "part of a healthy democracy [and they] must be protected from reprisal." Four years later, his [re-election campaign boasted](#) that Obama had prosecuted more whistleblowers in his first term than all previous presidents combined.

With the exception of some radical outlets, American media have tended to focus on the leaks themselves, rather than analyze the substance of the leaked documents. Academia has done even worse. The International Studies Association has forbidden its members from using WikiLeaks material in their scholarly work, a shocking example of what Assange calls a "closing of ranks within the scholar class around the interests of the Pentagon and the State Department."

WikiLeaks may be, as its website says, "an uncensorable system for untraceable mass document leaking", but US government agencies are hell-bent on censoring its findings. The Library of Congress blocks internet access to WikiLeaks; the National Archives even blocks searches of its own database using the search term "WikiLeaks". In 2012, the Pentagon imposed an automatic filter to block emails containing the word "WikiLeaks".

The leaked State Department cables collated and analyzed in *The WikiLeaks Files* range far and wide, geographically and in topic areas. The book is in two parts, the first comprising Assange's Introduction followed by three chapters by him that set out key themes and concepts. In the second part, 17 commentators (academics, journalists, and political activists) interpret diplomatic cables on Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Russia, East and Southeast Asia. (They also draw on previous WikiLeaks publications for their analyses.)

The United States, the world's remaining superpower, practices what Assange calls an "imperialism of free trade" in which "American military might is used, not for territorial expansion, but to perpetuate American economic pre-eminence." The key agency for managing the interests of the US Empire is the State Department. Assange maintains that the "modern" State Department came into being when Henry Kissinger became secretary of state in 1973. Kissinger didn't only head the Department; he also was national security advisor, which facilitated "a tighter integration between the foreign relations and military and intelligence arms of the government." Kissinger's appointment changed the way diplomatic cables were written, indexed, and stored; for the first time, most were transmitted electronically.

Assange notes that the State Department is unique because, unlike other agencies with limited functions, it "represents, and even houses, all major elements of US national power. It provides cover for the CIA, buildings for the NSA mass-interception equipment, office space and communications facilities for the FBI, the military and other government agencies, and staff to act as sales agents and political advisors for the largest US corporations."

The Department also is a propaganda agency dedicated to "putting a friendly face on empire", spending about \$1 billion annually to "influence journalists and civil society, so that they serve as conduits for State Department messaging."

Diplomatic cables, Assange observes, are not meant to manipulate the public but instead "are aimed at elements of the rest of the US state apparatus, and are therefore relatively free from the distorting influence of public relations." Reading the cables, Assange adds, is a much more effective way to understand an institution like the State Department than reading journalistic reports.

The chapters "Dictators and Human Rights" and "War on Terrorism", both by Assange, draw on leaked cables (and other sources) to analyze the human rights abuses, including torture, that US forces committed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Assange clears away the ideological smokescreen around the "war on terror", showing how the US reconfigures such terms as "terrorism" and "torture" and even the definition of "civilian" to serve its own interests.

"War on Terrorism" connects "the aspect of the American empire that is involved in war, torture, subversion, and espionage" with "the political-economic basis" of "free trade" imperialism, whose "'manifest destiny' ... is the global spread and institutionalization of capitalism."

Using leaked cables and WikiLeaks publications, the chapter details American efforts to promote economic integration on its terms. Corporate interests and the politicians who serve them like to extol the "free market", but it is the strong and not so "invisible" hand of the US government that has shored up banks and financial institutions and aggressively promoted the interests of American corporations abroad. Countries like Haiti, Venezuela, and Honduras all have experienced the consequences of embracing populist economic policies that Washington regards as threatening to markets.

The Obama Administration currently is struggling to win Congressional approval of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a controversial, so-called free trade pact involving Asian and Western nations, including the United States. In 2014, WikiLeaks disclosed documents revealing that the TPP's main purpose isn't to promote "free trade" but to protect and extend property rights, and particularly

information as property. Assange compares the TPP to the enclosures in Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries, when aristocrats evicted peasants from the lands they had lived on and cultivated. Intellectual property rights “in the era of the internet have become the modern legal form of enclosure – the means by which the status of valuable knowledge is settled at the expense of the majority who have no property in knowledge.”

The diverse coalition of anti-TPP forces – environmentalists, labor unions, public health professionals, “open internet” activists, journalists, and elected officials – owes WikiLeaks a debt of gratitude.

This review began by noting that *The WikiLeaks Files* is both dangerous and useful. In the chapter “Indexing the Empire”, Sarah Harrison explains how researchers can use the State Department documents that WikiLeaks published in 2010 and 2011. They are collected in a searchable archive, the Public Library of US Diplomacy (or “PlusD”), which comprises more than two million documents. This material, Harrison notes, is “a rich depository of information on countries, major international and domestic figures, political parties, events, policies, processes, trends and developments.”

Harrison urges researchers to look at the material broadly to gain a holistic view and not narrowly “mine” it for specific topics. Noting that diplomatic cables are “episodic”, each one part of a succession of messages composed over time, she advises researchers to “read widely around the topic you wish to research” and to become familiar with “the documentary context of your topic”, that is, to read all cables on a topic or event chronologically.

Just as crucially, she cautions researchers to keep “a critical distance from the documents” because the cables “will reflect the biases and ideology of the US government and establishment, and its aspirations in the wider world.”

“It is important always to be on the lookout for how ideology is shaping the content: the euphemisms and clichés, and the way in which contentious issues are hidden in plain sight, or left out entirely,” she warns.

“The structured attempt at managing an extended cultural and economic system using communications is the hallmark of empire,” according to Assange. (More accurately, it’s a hallmark of the US empire. The gunboat, or the AH-64 Apache, hardly are obsolete as imperial management tools.) As WikiLeaks has shown, however, communications also can be used to challenge empire, by exposing its workings and its crimes and fueling opposition. That’s the dangerous – and most valuable – part of *The WikiLeaks Files*.

George de Stefano is a New York-based writer specializing in culture, politics and sexuality. He is the author of *An Offer We Can't Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux) and a contributor to many other books, websites and print publications.

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