

The Afghanistan documents and the struggle against war

Bill Van Auken
29 July 2010

The public release of the 92,000 secret documents on the Afghanistan war by WikiLeaks, together with the reaction of the media and the official establishment, has immense political implications for the antiwar struggle in the US and internationally.

This collection of battlefield reports from US military personnel documents the killing of over 20,000 Afghans—only a fraction of the total death toll—and the ravaging of an entire society. It stands as an indictment of a war of aggression, in which the deaths inflicted by secret assassination squads, checkpoint shootings and aerial bombardments of civilian homes all have the intended purpose of crushing mass popular opposition to foreign occupation.

Yet within just days of what is unquestionably the largest exposure of official secrets in US history, the WikiLeaks release has been taken off of the front pages of most American newspapers. This follows reams of commentary about there being “nothing new” in the reports.

This burying of the story has been combined with an increasingly menacing campaign against WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange, who is being indicted by the media for allegedly placing the lives of Afghan quislings and informers at risk.

The corporate-controlled media’s attitude toward the release of the documents has been one of unconcealed hostility. From the beginning, it worked out a game plan with the Obama administration and the Pentagon on how the WikiLeaks story could be packaged and presented to the public in a manner that would have the least possible impact on the conduct of the war.

As in previous instances, such as the promotion of the “weapons of mass destruction” lie to sell the war against Iraq, the *New York Times* took the lead in setting the national media’s agenda. It claimed that the

overriding significance of the documents was that they portrayed a “hamstrung military” in Afghanistan and a duplicitous government in Pakistan. In this fashion, the supposed “newspaper of record” took material exposing US and NATO crimes against the Afghan people and spun it into a justification for an intensification and expansion of the war.

The media response is in lockstep with that of official Washington, where the WikiLeaks revelations have provoked no outcry over the documents’ contents, but rather a dismissal of their importance combined with vilification of those responsible for making them public.

All of this comes as the ninth anniversary of the US invasion of Afghanistan fast approaches, with US troop strength rising to 100,000 and a new and bloody offensive being prepared against Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second largest city. Meanwhile, some 90,000 soldiers and Marines and tens of thousands of military contractors remain in Iraq, with every indication that tens of thousands of them will remain there for years to come.

An eerie silence exists in the United States on the ongoing wars. There are no visible protests, much less significant opposition within Congress. The Obama administration clearly hopes—and the media takes for granted—that a point has been reached where antiwar sentiment has been dissipated and the government has a free hand to pursue its wars as it sees fit and for as long as it desires.

What happened to mass opposition to the war? As soon as the shock of 9/11 wore off and the Bush administration’s drive toward war against Iraq began, this opposition was clearly evident, expressed in street demonstrations by millions in February 2003, the eve of the Pentagon’s launching of its “shock and awe”

campaign.

Over the next several years, every election was dominated by public opposition to the war, even as the candidates of the supposed opposition party, the Democrats, failed to advance any alternative to the rampant militarism unleashed under Bush.

Nonetheless, the antiwar protest organizations worked systematically to subordinate the antiwar movement to the Democratic Party, channeling mass opposition to war into support for the Democrats' electoral campaigns and thereby suppressing antiwar sentiment, demoralizing it and rendering it harmless.

This process culminated in the election in November 2008 of Barack Obama, who won the Democratic nomination largely by presenting himself as more opposed to war than his principal rivals. Once in office, he assembled an administration that is even more ruthless and calculated in its policy of military aggression than that of his Republican predecessor.

This is the concrete political process that has bottled up mass opposition to war, denying it any viable public expression. As poll after poll has substantiated, however, this opposition has not gone away. It has merely been driven underground, while remaining deeply embedded in the consciousness of broad masses of American working people.

The more far-sighted elements within the state apparatus are conscious of this fact. One of the earlier secret documents released by WikiLeaks was a CIA report on Afghanistan entitled "Why Counting on Apathy Might Not be Enough." While the report referred to the threat that governments in Europe would be brought down over the war, this fear exists with regard to the population in the US itself.

How will this opposition reemerge? Those, perhaps including the WikiLeaks editor himself, who believed that the publication of the Afghanistan documents would have a similar effect as the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War are seeing their illusions dashed in short order.

That was 40 years ago. The intervening period has seen a fundamental restructuring of American politics, characterized by deepening reaction, the moral disintegration of both capitalist parties, and the adoption of a foreign policy that is rancid with imperialism. Overshadowing every public institution is an unprecedented level of social inequality and the

emergence of a ruling oligarchy that is hostile to democratic rights and processes and indifferent to the carnage and human suffering caused by its pursuit of wealth and profits, including by military means.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party see the reemergence of a mass antiwar movement as deeply embedded in class issues. The fight against war is a revolutionary question.

The simmering hostility to war that exists beneath the surface of political life can find expression today only within the framework of a mass independent working class movement mobilized against capitalism, the two big business parties, and the political sociopaths who preside over this system. The fight against war must be linked to the struggle against mass unemployment, attacks on living standards and cuts in vital social services. The answer to the attacks by the profit system on working people and to its wars abroad lies in the socialist transformation of society.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact