

The American left and the WikiLeaks documents

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The release by WikiLeaks of 92,000 secret documents has helped expose the brutal, neo-colonial character of the US-led war in Afghanistan.

The documents detail US military atrocities against the Afghan population, reveal the scope of the opposition to the foreign occupation, and expose the stooge regime in Kabul for what it is, a coalition of big business interests, drug lords and sadistic killers.

The American public has been lied to for nine years about the war, both its motives and its reality. The US media has worked hand in glove with the White House and Pentagon to conceal the horrific character of the conflict.

Despite that, the population defeated the Republicans in two elections, 2006 and 2008, in part because of opposition to and suspicion about what the US military was up to in Iraq and Afghanistan. Brought to power promising “change,” the Obama administration has continued and escalated the military intervention.

In the wake of the WikiLeaks release, the *New York Times* and the establishment media have downplayed the significance of the documents, insisting there is “nothing new” in them. Moreover, they are attempting to use the leaked material to justify an escalation of the war, claiming it shows the US military has been “hamstrung” in Afghanistan and the Pakistani regime has been playing a double game.

American liberalism and the “left” respond as an element of the establishment, suggesting alterations in policy, but rejecting an independent struggle against war based on a break with the Democratic Party.

In its July 29 editorial, “Getting Out of Afghanistan,” the *Nation* magazine argues that “we have seen enough—enough to know that [Obama’s current] strategy cannot work, and enough to understand that the costs of continuing the war far outstrip any conceivable benefits.” Which conceivable benefits?

The editors continue: “After nearly nine years of war, it is clear that Afghanistan—with its complex regional and ethnic divisions, its long history of fierce resistance to occupying forces, its decentralized governance and tribal system, and its susceptibility to the interference of neighbors—does not lend itself to successful counterinsurgency.”

“Successful counterinsurgency”? The editors are complaining

that the massive, ruthless effort to suppress popular resistance to the US-led forces in Afghanistan has failed. Does the *Nation* now stand for “successful counterinsurgency”? What examples do they have in mind?

Not a single reference appears in the editorial to war crimes, atrocities, the murder of thousands of men, women and children by the US military and its allies. The only mention of civilian deaths comes by way of noting how counterproductive such violence is from the US point of view: “The Pentagon presents counterinsurgency as a benign force to protect the population, but—as the WikiLeaks revelations about civilian casualties show—it is also deeply disruptive and destabilizing and can make reconciliation more difficult.”

The murderous war, conducted in part by death squads, is “disruptive” and “destabilizing.” The language is revealing: the *Nation*, in its own fashion, is contributing to the media downplaying of the scale of the ongoing war crimes.

The editorial pursues a central theme, since “there is no prospect of success,” the war should be abandoned. But what if there were a prospect of success? Presumably the *Nation* would support such an effort.

The *Nation*’s editors are considerably to the right of Senator Robert Kennedy during his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968. Kennedy, a savvy bourgeois politician, nonetheless condemned the war in Vietnam not simply on the grounds that it *was not going well*, but that it was a moral crime.

Kennedy argued, “We’re killing children, we’re killing women, we’re killing innocent people.... Do we have the right here in the United States to say we are going to kill tens of thousands of people, make millions of people, as we have, refugees, kill women and children as we have?... We must feel it when we use Napalm or a village is destroyed and civilians are killed.”

There’s none of that in the *Nation* editorial, which is written with hardly a pretense of sympathy for the sufferings or sentiments of the Afghan people. Indeed, it speaks in the crude manner of the semi-criminal elements who have come to the top in Washington, observing: “Even if we are able to eliminate many Taliban leaders, younger and more radical ones may take their place. The US military has killed a large number of

insurgent leaders, yet the Taliban have only grown stronger and more determined.” No moral outrage, simply the sad fact that this homicidal operation hasn’t worked.

The editors reason that given the accumulating difficulties, “It is therefore time for the president to change policy” and begin the redeployment of US troops, presumably to some location where their efforts could be more productive.

This isn’t opposition, but friendly advice, to imperialism.

Robert Dreyfuss’s July 26 piece in the *Nation*, “The WikiLeaks Papers and the Pakistani Intelligence–Taliban Connection,” ignores US crimes and Afghan deaths entirely and speaks to an issue that might concern a State Department policy maker. Dreyfuss emphasizes, along with the *New York Times*, “the involvement of Pakistan, its army and its intelligence service, the ISI, in support of the Taliban.”

This key to the leaked documents, for Dreyfuss, leads to a piece of *Realpolitik* advice, “The administration has no choice but to deal realistically with Pakistan, the real one—the one that exists—and not with the happy, sunny Pakistan that they wished existed. President Hamid Karzai has already figured that out.” This appears in a “left” publication.

The *Nation* identifies itself with the “national interests” of American capitalism. When the magazine speaks of “our own troops” and “our power” and “our strategy,” its editors are not speaking loosely.

As we have noted, a division of labor exists in liberal and left circles. The *New York Times* sets the tone, the *Nation* interprets the arguments in its own, slightly more “left” fashion, and publications such as the *Socialist Worker* add a further “left,” even “socialistic” twist—all of this within respectable bounds.

SocialistWorker.org did not respond to the release of 92,000 documents until July 29, several days after the material was available online.

As is the case with the *Nation*, *Socialist Worker* begins with the fact that the war is not going well. Noting the administration’s claim that the WikiLeaks “documents were ‘old news,’” the article continues, “This last point was surely damage control—the WikiLeaks documents vividly expose the disastrous state of the U.S. war on Afghanistan.”

Again, what if it weren’t “disastrous”? What would that do to the International Socialist Organization’s attitude toward the Afghanistan war?

Socialist Worker reports on US war crimes, unlike the *Nation*, but its orientation is fundamentally the same, toward changing establishment public opinion and the Obama administration’s policies. Its article quotes extensively from James Fallows of the *Atlantic*, a former speechwriter for Jimmy Carter, who makes it clear that his perspective is shifting “mainstream opinion about the war.”

Fallows’ criticism of the administration is bound up with tactical differences within the ruling elite over how best to pursue US geopolitical aims. In the *Atlantic* piece referred to by SocialistWorker.org, in a portion that is not quoted, Fallows

cites approvingly the comments of a reader who writes that “If the debate had been centered around ‘securing Afghanistan or parts of it for own use’ for as long as it serves our strategic interests, the debate could take a much more constructive turn.... The question is which tactics are most likely to keep the costs (in lives and dollars) of securing Afghanistan for our own use as low as possible during the time we wish/need to control the area.”

Following its reference to Fallows, the ISO comments that “It’s too soon to judge the impact of the WikiLeaks documents,” and adds, “Nevertheless, the Obama administration won’t end the US war on Afghanistan because of declining approval ratings or because it is embarrassed by the revelations in the WikiLeaks documents.”

The aim here is to channel popular hostility to the war into applying pressure on Obama and the Democrats, and thus prevent it from breaking beyond the two-party system. *Socialist Worker*’s opposition to the war doesn’t distinguish it from numerous liberal publications and organizations, who also can detail the “massacres and bloodshed,” but remain firmly within the Democratic Party orbit.

Hardly anything could be more futile or more of a political diversion than the effort to shift “mainstream opinion,” i.e., the leading circles in Washington. As the WikiLeaks episode has graphically demonstrated, there is no constituency in the US elite for opposition to colonialism.

The task at hand is turning to the only social force with an interest in opposing imperialist war, the working class, and building up an antiwar movement on a principled socialist basis, in opposition to Obama and his left apologists. As Trotsky explained, “the defense of a backward country against colonial oppression deals a blow to imperialism, which is the main enemy of the world working class.”



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