

Pentagon demands return of WikiLeaks data on Afghanistan war crimes

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It is hard to top the arrogance of the Pentagon's chief press spokesman, Geoff Morrell, as he stood at a podium Thursday to demand that the WikiLeaks web site return all the evidence of US war crimes in Afghanistan which was leaked to it and posted on the Internet ten days ago.

Some 92,000 documents were made available by WikiLeaks July 25, with an advance opportunity to study them provided to three publications: the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* (UK), and the German magazine *Der Spiegel*.

WikiLeaks representatives announced at the time that they were holding another 15,000 documents for review, due to possible security dangers to individuals in Afghanistan whose names might be made public. The group offered to work directly with the Pentagon on a "harm minimization" effort.

The press briefing was called to reject that offer and demand, instead, that WikiLeaks turn over to the Pentagon all US military intelligence records in its possession and erase them on its own servers. Morrell declared, "We're not getting involved in harm-minimization conversations. We're asking them to return stolen property."

Morrell said the Pentagon was engaged in no direct contact or negotiations with WikiLeaks, but was using the news media to present its demands.

"We are asking them to do the right thing and not further exacerbate the damage done to date," he said. He continued, in an open threat of unspecified retaliation, "If doing the right thing is not good enough for them, we'll figure out what other alternatives we have to compel them to do the right thing."

This sounds much like a Mafia boss demanding the return of surveillance recordings, although the Pentagon gangsters have a wider range of

"alternatives," ranging from a judicial detention order to a cruise missile.

Morrell denounced the website as a "brazen solicitation to US government officials, including our military, to break the law." Actually, it is the US military-intelligence complex that is the world's greatest lawbreaker, waging illegal wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and dozens of other countries. WikiLeaks is being targeted because it has done what the cowardly American corporate media will not do—inform the American people of what the US government is doing in their name.

In the last week there have been several calls from right-wing media pundits and congressmen that the US government carry out direct action to take down WikiLeaks servers and deny it access to the Internet. The Pentagon has a vast cybersecurity apparatus connected to the National Security Agency, which spies on most of the world's electronic communications, including e-mail, telephone calls and Internet chat.

One week ago, the *Washington Post* revealed that the White House was seeking to radically expand the FBI's subpoena powers for e-mail records, without obtaining a court order. The Obama administration wanted to add the words "electronic communication transactional records" to a list of items that the FBI can legally demand from Internet Service Providers. This would include lists of e-mail addresses to which a user sends messages, the times and dates of the messages, and the browser history of the web sites and individual visits. One "senior administration government official" told the *Post* that "most" Internet or e-mail providers already do this in response to an FBI demand known as a National Security Letter.

The White House has asked Congress to amend the controlling statute, the Electronic Communications

Privacy Act, to add the necessary language. The term “electronic communication transactional records” is not defined in the statute, however, so the expanded powers could become open-ended, affecting, for instance, behavior on social networking sites, such as Facebook “friend” requests.

The Pentagon recently centralized all its Internet-based disruption and spying capabilities in a “cyber-terrorism” command. The US has consistently rejected proposals by Russia and other countries that the Internet—whose backbone is US-based—should be off limits for cyber-warfare.

That is the background to Morrell’s thuggish language. Shortly afterwards, WikiLeaks gave an appropriate response on its Twitter page: “Obnoxious Pentagon spokesperson issues formal threat against WikiLeaks: Destroy everything, or else.”

Morrell revealed that the Pentagon has deployed a team of 80 analysts to vet the released documents for incriminating information, and that effort is expected to increase significantly, including a “page by page, word by word” review of each of the documents.

Last week, in what some Internet experts said was a precaution against a direct cyberwarfare attack, WikiLeaks posted a huge 1.4 gigabyte file of encrypted data on a file-sharing network and on the web page where it published the Afghan war logs. It was entitled “insurance file,” suggesting that a password to access the file could be distributed widely if WikiLeaks’ own site is attacked.

WikiLeaks also revealed August 3 that it would pay half the expected \$100,000 cost of hiring civilian defense attorneys to defend Private Bradley Manning, the soldier charged with leaking Iraq war videotapes to the group. Manning has been designated a “person of interest” in the Pentagon’s investigation into the leak of Afghanistan war documents.



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