

The New York Times and WikiLeaks

Joseph Kishore
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In the ongoing campaign of persecution against WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange, the *New York Times*, the principal voice of American liberalism, has played a particularly filthy role.

Since the initial release of US State Department documents late last month, the *Times* has sought to downplay the significance of the revelations. It has largely ceased publication of new articles on the cables, confining those that it does produce to its inside pages. From the start, it has tailored its coverage to bolster US interests. The more significant exposures of US criminality are ignored.

As for the escalating international campaign targeting Assange, the *Times* has maintained a deliberate silence. It has not published a single editorial on Assange's arrest or the calls from sections of the US political and media establishment for him to be killed and for WikiLeaks to be branded a terrorist organization. This is tantamount to tacit support for this campaign.

The role of the *Times* as an adjunct of the state was brazenly proclaimed by Executive Editor Bill Keller in extraordinary comments posted November 29 in response to a series of letters arguing that the *Times* has no right to report on the classified documents.

Keller began by declaring that he was "uncomfortable" with the notion that the editors of the *Times* "can decide to release information that the government wants to keep secret." The editor's "discomfort" at performing what has traditionally been considered one of the most essential roles of the media says a great deal about the real function of organs such as the *New York Times*.

"We have as much at stake in the war against terror as anyone," Keller continued. "So the thought that something we report might increase the dangers faced by the country is daunting and humbling... When we find ourselves in possession of government secrets, we think long and hard about whether to disclose them."

Here Keller accepts entirely the legitimacy of the "war on terror," which, as he is well aware, has been used as a catch-all pretext for a series of criminal wars. The

Times itself played a critical role in legitimizing the lies used to launch the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. By declaring that the newspaper has as much a stake in the "war on terror" as anyone, Keller is, in fact, proclaiming the *Times*' unconditional support for the interests of American imperialism.

In considering whether to disclose information, Keller wrote, the *Times* engages in "extensive and serious discussions with the government." Here he evinces no conception of the press as an institution independent of the state. That the *Times* should discuss its publishing decisions regularly with the US government is for him perfectly natural.

In a passage that could have come straight from Orwell, Keller wrote, "We agree *wholeheartedly* that transparency is not an absolute good. Freedom of the press includes freedom *not* to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise *with some regularity*" [emphasis added].

For Keller, the question of the freedom of the press is not a matter of the right of the public to know state secrets through the investigative inquiries of the press, but the right of the state, through its connections in the media, to keep information "with some regularity" from the American people. It is already known that the *Times* decided to sit on stories involving illegal domestic spying and torture carried out by the United States. How many other crimes is the newspaper helping to cover up?

In relation to the recently released documents, Keller continued, "We have withheld from publication a good deal of information in these cables that, on our own and in consultation with government officials, we believed could put lives at risk or could harm the national interest." These conditions for withholding information from the American people—"could put lives at risk or could harm the national interest"—are so broad as to cover virtually anything.

Not only did the *Times* censor itself, it worked essentially as an arm of the US government in trying to get other news organizations with access to the documents

to follow its lead. Keller noted in his November 29 posting that the *Times* sought to inform the other news organizations in possession of the documents of “both the State Department’s concerns about specific disclosures and our own plans to edit out sensitive material. The other news organizations supported these redactions.”

For the *Times*, the release of the documents by WikiLeaks is a misfortune. Keller would prefer that this information—and previous leaks documenting the criminal character of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—were kept secret. Given that the information was coming out anyway, however, the role of the *Times* was to vet it and function as a “gatekeeper” and guardian of state secrets.

The *Times* had the option, Keller wrote, “to ignore the secret documents, knowing they would be widely read anyway, picked over, possibly published without removal of dangerous information, probably used to advance various agendas [i.e., agendas opposed to the policy of the US government]; or, to study them, put them in context, and publish articles based on them, along with a carefully redacted selection of actual documents. We chose the latter course.”

In a recent interview on National Public Radio’s “Fresh Air” program, the *New York Times*’ chief Washington correspondent David Sanger was, if anything, even more explicit. “We are filtering it out to try to avoid the greatest harm to individuals, ongoing operations [i.e., military and secret intelligence operations], and so forth... Had we waited for this all to appear on the Internet... we would not have had as much time to think as hard as we did about what should and should not be redacted.”

A more open self-condemnation and exposure of the *Times* and the US media as a whole would be hard to imagine. The decay of democratic consciousness within the US media establishment has reached a level that such declarations of journalistic prostitution can be made without a trace of shame. The American media is “embedded” with the US military and intelligence apparatus not merely on the battlefield, but at all times and under all conditions.

Keller functions as a state operative and the *Times* as a state institution. After reading these comments, no person in his right mind would go to the *Times* with information potentially harmful to the US government. Such a meeting would undoubtedly be followed by a call from Keller to the State Department or to US intelligence agencies.

Such statements would have struck journalists of a previous generation as unimaginable. Even if newspapers in earlier times engaged in discussions with the

government—and they did—it would have been considered impermissible to acknowledge this openly.

Everything Keller says is a repudiation of the position the *Times* took in relation to the Pentagon Papers. In 1971, the *Times* faced a US government suit attempting to prevent it from publishing leaked documents exposing the lies and crimes associated with the US war in Vietnam. The newspaper refused to reveal to the government what documents it had. It considered such a move to be a violation of principles central to the freedom of the press and to democracy as a whole.

To open up the *Times* documents to government inspection, the newspaper’s lawyer, Floyd Abrams, argued at one court hearing, would be to expose it to “a fishing expedition through files of a newspaper which are as protected by the First Amendment as one could imagine.”

After the Supreme Court sided with the *Times* and declared that publication of the Pentagon Papers could go forward, the newspaper wrote in an editorial that the decision had implications beyond the freedom of the press. “We believe,” the *Times* declared, “that its more profound significance lies in the implicit but inescapable conclusion that the American people have a presumptive right to be informed of the political decisions of their Government.”

Not only does the *Times* now consider this “presumptive right” to be void, it sees the role of the mass media—in contrast to organizations such as WikiLeaks—as guaranteeing government secrecy.

The thoroughgoing decay of democratic consciousness evinced by the *New York Times*—which has long functioned as a principal voice of the bourgeois political establishment—is one reflection of a broader transformation of American society. A state-controlled press is an inevitable corollary of the emergence of a corporate aristocracy.

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