

# What We Learned From WikiLeaks

Sunday 12 December 2010, by [SCHELL Jonathan](#) (Date first published: 10 November 2010).

The Army intelligence analyst Pfc. Bradley Manning, 22, now in a military detention center charged with having leaked classified documents related to the Iraq War, once explained why he was contemplating his deed. (He is additionally suspected of having leaked the 390,000 documents made public by the whistleblowing solicitor WikiLeaks, but he has not been charged with this.) Manning was not yet in prison or in the media spotlight. He was artlessly and recklessly chatting online to a blogger, Adrian Lamo, who eventually turned him in. Lamo wanted to know why Manning didn't cash in by giving the documents to a foreign power, such as China or Russia. Because "it belongs in the public domain," Manning replied. "Information should be free...because another state would just take advantage of the information...try and get some edge.... It should be a public good."

Manning's breaking point had come when he witnessed the arrest by the Iraqi police of fifteen people for printing "anti-Iraqi literature." He looked the documents over and found them to consist merely of "a scholarly critique" of the Iraqi prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki. He reported the finding to his American superior, who dismissed it and told him to busy himself looking for more people to detain.

As an intelligence officer with access to secret reports, Manning knew well what happened to detainees in Iraqi custody. They were commonly tortured. A typical example of a report by an American soldier reads:

*AT 191400C OCT\_\_ IN\_\_ (ZONE\_\_) IVO\_\_ NPTT\_\_ THAT-\_\_ BDE SPTT-\_\_ BDE SPTT CONDUCTED A ROUTINE INSPECTION OF THE -\_\_ [WOLF] BDE DETENTION FACILITY AND IDENTIFIED ONE PROBABLE CASE OF DETAINEE ABUSE. THE ALLEGED BEATING TOOK PLACE UNDER INTERROGATION AT THE—\_\_ HQ ON THE EVENING OF \_\_ OCT\_\_. THE DETAINEE WAS BLINDFOLDED AND IS UNABLE TO IDENTIFY THE OFFENDERS. THE DETAINEE CLAIMED HE WAS BEATEN ABOUT THE FEET AND LEGS WITH A BLUNT OBJECT, AND PUNCHED IN THE FACE AND\_\_. HE CLAIMED THAT ELECTRICITY WAS USED ON HIS FEET AND GENITALS, AND HE WAS ALSO [SODOMIZED] WITH A WATER BOTTLE. —\_\_ PERSONNEL CLAIMED IT WAS CAUSED BY THE DETAINEE FALLING FROM HIS MOTORCYCLE WHILE HE WAS BEING CHASED BY THE\_\_. THE DETAINEE DISPLAYED GREAT DIFFICULTY WALKING WITH BRUISING AND SWELLING ON THE SOLES OF BOTH FEET. THE DETAINEE HAD LOCALIZED CUTS AND BRUISING ON BOTH LEGS (PRIMARILY THE LEFT), THE LEFT ARM, AND THE LEFT CHIN. THERE WERE NO INJURIES VISIBLE ON THE DETAINEE E\_\_ HANDS, UPPER ARMS, TORSO, UPPER LEGS, OR BUTTOCKS. HIS CLOTHING WAS NOT RIPPED OR DAMAGED, BUT DID DISPLAY BLOOD STAINS.*

No intervention was attempted by the United States in such cases. The military's Fragmentary Order 242, known as FRAGO 242, dictated that if coalition forces were not involved, no further action was to be taken: "only an initial report will be made.... No further investigation will be required unless directed by HQ." FRAGO 242 is repeatedly cited by military reporters as the reason for doing nothing.

Sometimes, indeed, American or other coalition soldiers threatened Iraqi prisoners with the torture or execution that would befall them if they were turned over to their Iraqi compatriots. One unit

created in these years was the Iraqi Wolf Brigade, an elite outfit set up to terrorize insurgents, perhaps in imitation of the death squads that had operated with US connivance in El Salvador in the 1980s. One report describes a threat by an American to turn an Iraqi prisoner over to the battalion:

DURING THE INTERROGATION PROCESS THE \_\_\_\_ THREATENED THE SUBJECT DETAINEE THAT HE WOULD NEVER SEE HIS FAMILY AGAIN AND WOULD BE SENT TO THE WOLF BATTALION WHERE HE WOULD BE SUBJECT TO ALL THE PAIN AND AGONY THAT THE WOLF BATTALION IS KNOWN TO EXACT UPON ITS DETAINEES [December 14, 2005].

At this time in Iraq, executed victims were being found in the streets with electric-drill holes in their bodies.

American forces were thus routinely handing over Iraqi suspects to Iraqi forces who routinely tortured them, and then nothing further was done. This proceeding did not constitute abuse of some other, better system that provided the rule; it was the system—a torture system. Elsewhere in the “war on terror,” “extraordinary rendition”—the practice of sending prisoners to foreign countries to be tortured—required long flights on CIA Gulfstream jets. In Iraq it was a matter of walking across the street. In the days leading up to the war, of course, the United States frequently cited the Saddam Hussein regime’s practice of torture as a reason for invading. Now America’s own client regime was engaging in widespread torture.

Faced with this particular and general knowledge, Manning felt “helpless,” he told Lamo. “That was a point where I was...actively involved in something that I was completely against.” In sum, Manning found himself in the classic, excruciating dilemma of the decent person enmeshed in an abhorrent system, not as a victim but as a perpetrator. By following the rules, he would be an accomplice of torture. Only by breaking them could he extricate himself.

Julian Assange, the nomadic cyber rebel who leads WikiLeaks, was not himself a cog in the machine, but he was of like mind with Manning in regard to individual responsibility. Before he got into the business of disclosing the dirty secrets of governments and corporations, he reflected in an essay, “Every time we witness an act that we feel to be unjust and do not act we become a party to injustice,” adding, “Those who are repeatedly passive in the face of injustice soon find their character corroded into servility.” In his own way, he, too, acted. In July WikiLeaks released more than 70,000 secret documents pertaining to the war in Afghanistan, and then came the documentary tsunami from Iraq, which may have, in Assange’s words, “constituted the most comprehensive and detailed account of any war ever to have entered the public record.”

Assange is not in prison—on the contrary, this tall, white-haired, disciplined, well-spoken and somehow unearthly information guerrilla shows up regularly on television, where he performs with a kind of high-minded, cool scrappiness. But his organization has been cloudily but menacingly designated a “threat to the U.S. Army” in a classified Army document (also published by WikiLeaks), and he is a man on the run, moving from nation to nation in search of safety from possible legal jeopardy. (Assange is under investigation for sexual misconduct in Sweden but has denied all accusations.)

Among the flood of Afghan war documents there happens to be a report on one more instance of a man who, finding himself threatened with participation in the evil-doing of a malignant system, opted to withdraw. In Balkh province, a little more than a year ago, the report disclosed, Afghan police officers were beating and otherwise abusing civilians for their lack of cooperation. The police commander then sexually assaulted a 16-year-old girl. When a civilian protested, the report stated, “The district commander ordered his bodyguard to open fire on the AC [Afghan civilian]. The bodyguard refused, at which time the district commander shot [the bodyguard] in front of the AC.”

At the time these documents came out, the official reaction to them, echoed widely in the media, was that they disclosed “nothing new.” But let us pause to absorb this story. A police officer, unwilling, at the risk of his own life, to be a murderer, is himself murdered by his superior. He gives his life to spare the other person, possibly a stranger. It is the highest sacrifice that can be made.

The man’s identity is unrecorded. His story is met with a yawn. But perhaps one day, when there is peace in Afghanistan, a monument will be erected in his honor there and schoolchildren will be taught his name. Perhaps here in the United States, when the country has found its moral bearings again, there will be recognition of the integrity and bravery of Bradley Manning and Julian Assange. For now, the war- and torture-system rolls on, and it’s all found to be “nothing new.”

**Jonathan Schell**

---

---

**P.S.**

\* Published on The Nation (<http://www.thenation.com>) November 10, 2010.

Source URL:

<http://www.thenation.com/article/156388/what-we-learned-wikileaks>