

The Trump/Obama ‘Leak War’

“Leaks” can be whistleblowers exposing government wrongdoing, but many actually are government agencies manipulating the public or punishing enemies, as is playing out in today’s Trump/Obama “leak war,” says Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

“Hacking” and “leaking” can be either good or bad depending on the motives behind the disclosures and your political perspective. Generally speaking, democracy benefits from transparency and from having a more fully informed citizenry.

But “leaks” can also be used to punish dissidents or to enflame public passions in favor of war or against some vulnerable minority group. Indeed, “leaks” can paradoxically be used to advance cover-ups by punishing people who tried to expose the truth.

An example of that sort of “leak” occurred during George W. Bush’s presidency when his subordinates “leaked” derogatory information about former U.S. Ambassador Joe Wilson, who had offended the White House by exposing a key falsehood used to justify the Iraq War, that Iraq had been seeking yellowcake uranium from Niger.

To discredit and punish Wilson, Bush’s aides disclosed through “leaks” that Wilson’s wife, Valerie Plame, was a CIA officer as a way to suggest that Wilson’s investigation was a junket, not a serious inquiry.

In other words, to discredit an attempt to honestly inform the American people about a false pretext for war, the Bush administration released classified information that was intended to undercut Wilson’s reputation and which destroyed his wife’s CIA career. The so-called Plamegate Affair sent a warning to other government officials who might be inclined to challenge the case for war in Iraq that – if you dare do so – you will pay a price. That “leak” was really part of a cover-up.

Still, as commonly understood, public-spirited “leaks” seek to expose the lies and the propaganda that are often used to justify war. Perhaps the most famous “leak” occurred during the Vietnam War when former senior Pentagon official Daniel Ellsberg photocopied a top secret historical analysis known as the Pentagon Papers and, in 1971, began distributing copies to major news organizations.

Thus, Ellsberg exposed decades of lies that the U.S. government had used to pull

the American people into the conflict. The Pentagon Papers led more Americans to oppose the war and hastened its end although President Nixon and other war supporters denounced Ellsberg as a traitor and unsuccessfully sought to prosecute him.

Some “leaks” have been even more controversial. In 1975, former CIA agent Philip Agee published *Inside the Company: CIA Diary* that exposed covert CIA operations in Latin America. Patrick Breslin of the Washington Post described the book this way: “Agee has provided the most complete description yet of what the CIA does abroad. In entry after numbing entry, U.S. foreign policy in Latin America is pictured as a web of deceit, hypocrisy and corruption.”

Agee identified corrupt politicians plus American and foreign CIA operatives throughout Latin America, thus reducing the CIA’s powers to manipulate America’s neighbors to the south.

In 1984, John Stockwell, former CIA director of the Angola Task Force, published *In Search of Enemies*, documenting how the CIA trained, armed and otherwise funded a “rebel” group to wage war in Angola ultimately leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths. Stockwell described how the CIA spread disinformation as part of an “information war.”

For example, when Cuban soldiers came to assist the Angolans against a South African invasion, Stockwell’s team invented a false report that Cuban soldiers were raping Angolan women. Stockwell described how the false story was planted in a small foreign newspaper before being republished all over the West. By detailing that sort of dirty trick, Stockwell’s exposé made it more difficult for the CIA to run such “black propaganda” for a while.

Manning’s Disclosures

In 2010, Pvt. Chelsea (then Bradley) Manning leaked files revealing war crimes and government deceptions related to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Manning copied war logs, including videos, and passed the files to WikiLeaks. One of the videos, entitled “Collateral Murder,” showed U.S. soldiers in an Apache helicopter attacking and killing two Reuters journalists along with other civilians on the streets of Baghdad. Other of Manning’s “leaked” documents revealed manipulations and schemes carried out by the U.S. State Department around the world.

For his selfless efforts, Manning was convicted in a court martial and imprisoned. (Manning is scheduled for release in May.) No known punishments were meted out to the soldiers and other U.S. officials whose misconduct was exposed.

Former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden is perhaps the best

known modern “leaker.” He copied files from the NSA computer system onto flash drives and then made the information public through the news media. The files confirmed that NSA was spying on foreign leaders including allies such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and belied claims from Obama administration officials that the NSA was not collecting bulk data about Americans.

Instead, Snowden’s “leak” revealed that the NSA was collecting data on the computer and phone communications of nearly all American citizens in violation of the U.S. Constitution and exposed Director of National Intelligence James Clapper’s lie to Congress denying the bulk collection. For Snowden’s public service, he was indicted by the Obama administration and ended up stranded in Russia which granted him political asylum.

By and large, the Ellsberg, Agee, Stockwell, Manning and Snowden “leaks” were praised by liberals and progressives because the revelations lifted curtains of lies and deceptions that had prevented the American people from understanding what a secretive government was doing in their names. While some libertarian conservatives also hailed this challenge to government secrecy, many other conservatives denounced these “leaks” as endangering “national security.”

The ‘Leaks’ of Election 2016

But the “leaks” (or “hacks”) that are now center stage in U.S. politics are more complicated because they have been caught up in the politics surrounding Donald Trump’s election which many liberals and progressives abhor. Also the ongoing hysteria over Russia’s alleged “meddling” in the U.S. election has further muddied the waters.

The key “leaks” during Campaign 2016 occurred when WikiLeaks published two batches of emails – one from the Democratic National Committee and one from Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta. The DNC “leak” revealed that the DNC abused its powers by favoring Clinton over Sen. Bernie Sanders during the primaries. The Podesta “leak” exposed the contents of paid speeches that Clinton had given to Wall Street banks (but wanted to hide from the voters) and revealed pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

These “leaks” caused some embarrassment for the Clinton campaign but had only a marginal impact as the election seemed to be turning on disclosures about Donald Trump’s crude remarks in which he boasted of grabbing women’s genitals – comments that were caught on a “hot mic” and made public.

But then the campaign turned again when FBI Director James Comey briefly reopened the investigation into Clinton’s use of an unsecure private server for her emails when she was Secretary of State. After losing the close election to

Trump on Nov. 8, Clinton blamed Comey's decision for her defeat.

However, in the four-plus months since the election, claims by President Obama's outgoing intelligence chiefs – "assessing" that the DNC/Podesta "hacks" were carried out by Russian intelligence to tip the election to Trump – have sparked a political firestorm.

Though WikiLeaks has denied receiving the two batches of emails from Russians – instead suggesting that they came from two different American insiders – the intelligence assessments have been embraced by Democratic Party leaders, influential neoconservatives and many "never-Trump" activists as grounds for blocking Trump's planned détente with Russia and possibly even justifying his impeachment.

So, the political backlash against those "leaks" have become instrumental in escalating the New Cold War with Russia and further explaining away Clinton's defeat.

But there is another concern about the "leaks" that have been used to counter the DNC-Podesta "leaks." Many of these later "leaks" appear to be coming from U.S. intelligence agencies with the goal of thwarting President Trump's foreign policy.

For instance, a Dec. 29 phone call between incoming National Security Adviser Michael Flynn (who was on vacation in the Dominican Republic at the time) and Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak (based in Washington) was revealed although not its precise contents.

Though there is nothing wrong or unusual about incoming officials talking with foreign emissaries during a presidential transition, Obama holdovers in the Justice Department cited the archaic and never-prosecuted Logan Act of 1799 (barring private citizens from conducting foreign policy) to justify Flynn's interrogation by FBI agents who had access to the NSA transcript and thus caught Flynn on his failure to recall some details of the conversation.

Vice President Mike Pence's anger over Flynn's similar failure to provide him a full and accurate account of the call then led a panicked President Trump to fire his National Security Adviser and thus remove a key advocate for reduced tensions with Russia.

After Flynn's firing, a concern among some anti-war progressives was that the back story of the Flynn case was an attempt by U.S. intelligence agencies to sabotage a possible détente with Russia.

Former Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, commented: "General Flynn has admitted

misleading the Vice President but I think we need to look at this a little bit deeper. A phone call from the incoming national security director was intercepted and the contents given to the media ... at the core of this is an effort by some in the intelligence community to upend a positive relationship between the U.S. and Russia... There are people trying to separate the U.S. and Russia so that the military industrial and intelligence axis can cash in... The American people need to know that there's a game going on inside the intelligence community there are those who ...want to reignite the cold war. That's what's at the bottom of all this ...Wake Up America!"

However, for many liberals and progressives, Trump's policies on education, health care, environmental protection, immigration and law enforcement are horrible. Some on the Left are so alarmed by these policies that they are willing to ally themselves with neoconservatives and the national-security state to somehow "stop Trump."

The "bash Russia" club is considered a handy way of doing that. But that means siding with war hawks who are determined to derail Trump's campaign pledges to work with Russia in combatting terrorism and his potential cooperation with President Putin on resolving international conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Libya and elsewhere.

Such prospects for peace are anathema to neoconservatives and elements of the intelligence community which are fighting back with their own campaign of "leaks." But – for Americans who are tired of "perpetual war" – these "leaks" are not for the public good.

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