

THE GOVERNMENT ONCE AGAIN HARRASSES OTHERS TO HIDE ITS OWN FAILURES

This is a post I could have written (in fact, I think I did here, here, here, and here). One difference, however, is that the author of this post is a government insider, State Department Foreign Service Officer Peter Van Buren.

The State Department and its Bureau of Diplomatic Security never took responsibility for their part in the loss of all those [WikiLeak] cables, never acknowledged their own mistakes or porous security measures. No one will ever be fired at State because of WikiLeaks – except, at some point, possibly me. Instead, State joined in the Federal mugging of Army Private Bradley Manning, the person alleged to have copied the cables onto a Lady Gaga CD while sitting in the Iraqi desert.

That all those cables were available electronically to everyone from the Secretary of State to a lowly Army private was the result of a clumsy post-9/11 decision at the highest levels of the State Department to quickly make up for information-sharing shortcomings. Trying to please an angry Bush White House, State went from sharing almost nothing to sharing almost everything overnight. They flung their whole library onto the government's classified intranet, SIPRnet, making it available to hundreds of thousands of Federal employees worldwide. It is usually not a good idea to make classified information that broadly available when you cannot control who gets access to it outside your own organization. The intelligence agencies and the military certainly did no such thing on SIPRnet, before or after 9/11.

State did not restrict access. If you were in, you could see it all. There was no safeguard to ask why someone in the Army in Iraq in 2010 needed to see reporting from 1980s Iceland. Even inside their own organization, State requires its employees to "subscribe" to classified cables by topic, creating a record of what you see and limiting access by justifiable need. A guy who works on trade issues for Morocco might need to explain why he asked for political-military reports from Chile.

Another difference is that Van Buren is being harassed because he included a link from his blog to some cables describing the US dealing weapons to Moammar Qaddafi, including this account of John McCain and Lindsey Graham sucking up to the dictator.

The more amusing cable is from August 2009, just two short years ago. It recounts the visit to Libya of Congressional super heroes John McCain, Joe Lieberman and Lindsey Graham. The boys had a nice visit with Qaddafi and his son it seems. The cable notes "Lieberman called Libya an important ally in the war on terrorism, noting that common enemies sometimes make better friends." Old Man McCain assured his hosts "that the United States wanted to provide Libya with the equipment it needs for its security. He stated that he understood Libya's requests regarding the rehabilitation of its eight C-130s and pledged to see what he could do to move things forward in Congress. He described the bilateral military relationship as strong and pointed to Libyan officer training at U.S. Command, Staff, and War colleges as some of the best programs for Libyan military participation."

The cable continued to say that "Qadhafi commented that friendship was better for the people of both countries and expressed his desire to see the relationship flourish. He

thanked the Senators for their visit and described America as a race rather than a nationality, explaining that many Libyans are dual citizens because they were born in the United States. Senators McCain and Graham conveyed the U.S. interest in continuing the progress of the bilateral relationship and pledged to try to resolve the C-130 issue with Congress and Defense Secretary Gates.”

And whereas in my posts on the government’s overreaction to WikiLeaks, I focused on DOD’s hypocrisy on assigning all of the blame for a massive security breach to Bradley Manning in spite of its own rank incompetence keeping its networks safe, Van Buren rehearses the State Department’s past failures to keep their data safe.

Over the years, State has leaked like an old boot. One of its most hilarious security breaches took place when an unknown person walked into the Secretary of State’s outer office and grabbed a pile of classified documents. From the vast trove of missing classified laptops to bugging devices found in its secure conference rooms, from high ranking officials trading secrets in Vienna to top diplomats dallying with spies in Taiwan, even the publicly available list is long and ugly.

[snip]

Then again, history shows that technical security is just *not* State’s game, which means the Wikileaks uproar is less of a surprise in context. For example, in 2006, news reports indicated that State’s computer systems were massively hacked by Chinese computer geeks. In 2008, State data disclosures led to an identity theft scheme only uncovered through a fluke arrest by the Washington D.C. cops. Before it was closed down in 2009, snooping on private passport records was a popular intramural activity at the State Department, widely known and

casually accepted. In 2011, contractors using fake identities appear to have downloaded 250,000 internal medical records of State Department employees, including mine.

[snip]

Diplomatic Security famously took into custody the color slides reproduced in the *Foreign Service Journal* showing an open copy of one of the Government's most sensitive intelligence documents, albeit only after the photos were published and distributed in the thousands. Similarly DS made it a crime to take photos of the giant U.S. Embassy compound in Baghdad, but only after the architecture firm building it posted sketches of the Embassy online; a Google search will still reveal many of those images; others who served in Iraq have posted them on their unsecured Facebook pages

Finally, though, there's the big difference. State is threatening to take away Van Buren's security clearance, which would amount to firing a successful Foreign Service Officer for a few links to WikiLeaks cables widely available elsewhere.

Secrecy News just posted a Congressional Research Service report written on WikiLeaks type leaks. As SN has previously reported, CRS researchers aren't allowed to refer to the WL cables, not even for their reports.

"Add me to the list of grumblers," said a respected national security analyst at the Congressional Research Service, where employees have been prohibited from accessing WikiLeaks documents online.

"This whole thing is so [expletive] stupid," he said yesterday. "Even staff with clearances can't read the cables, let alone quote them. One reason is that we can't read classified materials on unclassified computers and we have no classified

computers.”

“We can now quote news stories which cite the cables, but we have no way of verifying whether the article correctly quotes the cables.”

“This is hampering CRS work and management knows it,” the analyst said. “There’s just no leadership on this issue.”

The rule, in the case of this recent report, results in the absurdity of long footnotes citing news articles, but never once citing an actual WL cable.

16 State’s Secrets, NY TIMES (online edition), Nov. 29, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/world/state-secrets.html>. According to the Guardian, the fact that most of the cables are dated from 2008 to 2009 is explained by the increase in the number of U.S. embassies linked to the military’s secure computer network, SIPRNet, over the past decade. See The US embassy cables, GUARDIAN (UK), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/nov/29/wikileaks-cables-data>.

17 Scott Shane and Andrew W. Lehren, Cables Obtained by WikiLeaks Shine Light Into Secret Diplomatic Channels, NY TIMES.

18 The Guardian states that the earliest of the cables is from 1966. See The US embassy cables, supra footnote 16.

Not to mention a CRS report the very first sentence of which makes a demonstrably false statement.

The online publication of classified defense documents and diplomatic cables by the organization WikiLeaks and **subsequent** reporting by The New York Times, The Guardian (UK), and Der Spiegel (Germany), among others, have focused attention on whether such publication violates U.S. criminal law. [my emphasis]

The Iraq cables were published simultaneously,

and except for the recent dump of everything, the State cables were published by the newspapers before WL published them.

This continuing game—the persecution of insiders for non-serious leaks while sanctioned leaks to Bob Woodward or General's kids go uninvestigated, the preference for the error and inanity of this CRS report over actual information—is getting really pathetic. It makes us dysfunctional as a country, preventing real discussion and therefore sound decision making, while we're not doing the bureaucratic things to keep our secrets safe from our actual enemies. And all the while, efforts of people like Van Buren to tell us what a catastrophe our Iraq project really was get punished.