

# UN DESCRIBES “THE RIGHT OF EVERY PERSON TO ... KNOW WHAT GOVERNMENTS ARE DOING ON THEIR BEHALF”

The UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights’ Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression issued a statement Wednesday laying out several principles parties should keep in mind in regards to WikiLeaks.

It balances the importance of journalists’ self-regulation to weigh the public interest of classified material against public authorities’ responsibility to protect their own classified information; it is not an unlimited endorsement of WikiLeaks.

But it does have this to say, which (particularly given that I was listening to Garry Wills’ Bomb Power as I drove across the Rust Belt yesterday) really resonated with me:

The right to access information held by public authorities is a fundamental human right subject to a strict regime of exceptions. **The right to access to information protects the right of every person to access public information and to know what governments are doing on their behalf.** It is a right that has received particular attention from the international community, given its importance to the consolidation, functioning and preservation of democratic regimes. **Without the protection of this right, it is impossible for citizens to know the truth, demand accountability and fully**

**exercise their right to political participation.** National authorities should take active steps to ensure the principle of maximum transparency, address the culture of secrecy that still prevails in many countries and increase the amount of information subject to routine disclosure. [my emphasis]

Mind you, the statement does take the necessity of protecting information that could cause substantial harm to national security with its release quite seriously. But only after first laying the foundation of knowing what your government is doing in your name.

I was somewhat agnostic about this latest WikiLeaks dump when it began. I wasn't sure whether—particularly given WikiLeaks' efforts to redact harmful information—this dump would be all that useful. But as we go on, I'm more and more convinced of its importance. Not just because revelations of our bullying of the Germans and Spaniards to back off of torture prosecutions and (in the case of Germany) to sacrifice its citizens' privacy to unfettered American access might pressure those countries to stand up to us in the name of rule of law. Not just because of revelations about how corporations—like Pfizer in Nigeria—and the Church—in Venezuela and elsewhere—drive our foreign policy. Not just for the way our country has a seeming obsession with Michael Moore's films.

But because at a time when our country is returning to a perennial debate about whether or not we are an exceptional country—the bestest!—we need to see what the wizard behind the curtains of that purported exceptionalism really looks like.

All the ugly things WikiLeaks has revealed our government has been doing behind the curtain of diplomacy? They've been doing those things in **our name**. They've been invoking **us** when they did

those ugly things.

And we deserve to know what they've been doing  
in our names.