



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on July 31, 2010

Who's at Fault if WikiLeaks Endangers Innocents?

The federal government loves corporate whistleblowers; they get paraded before congressional committees and treated as selfless heroes out to protect the little guy from big, bad business. Let someone blow the whistle on the government, however, and Uncle Sam's long knives come out.

Such is the case with the Obama administration's responses to the WikiLeaks document dump. Immediately after the release of the documents, National Security Adviser Jim Jones issued a [statement](#) in which he said, "The United States strongly condemns the disclosure of classified information by individuals and organizations which could put the lives of Americans and our partners at risk, and threaten our national security."



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Apparently the revelations in the documents are really getting to the folks in Washington because they're ramping up the rhetoric even more. Referring to Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, "Mr. Assange can say whatever he likes about the greater good he thinks he and his source are doing, but the truth is they might already have on their hands the blood of some young soldier or that of an Afghan family," according to a [report](#) from Australian Broadcasting Corporation News.

The report also noted that Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that the document leak "had potentially severe and dangerous consequences for troops on the ground" and "could also pose a threat to those Afghan nationals assisting the coalition."

Assange, for his part, [says](#) that he took great care not to endanger anyone, explaining that WikiLeaks had contacted the White House, with the *New York Times* acting as intermediary, to ask the administration to review the documents before publication to ensure that no innocent people were identified. Assange said that he got essentially no response from the Obama administration.

The Pentagon, however, released a [statement](#) on July 30 denying that any such contacts between WikiLeaks and the White House had occurred.

This would appear, then, to be a classic "he said, he said" situation except for one thing: Days before Assange made his assertion, much of it was already being reported as fact. On July 26, the day after the documents were leaked, Michael Calderone of Yahoo! News reported that *Times* reporters "went to the White House last week to discuss what they planned on publishing."

The report continued:

"I did in fact go the White House and lay out for them what we had," [*Times* Washington bureau



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chief Dean] Baquet said. “We did it to give them the opportunity to comment and react. They did. They also praised us for the way we handled it, for giving them a chance to discuss it, and for handling the information with care. And for being responsible.”

Salon [noted](#) that the *Times* “redacted some information in the name of ‘national security’ and protecting the safety of individual soldiers, but the White House doesn’t seem to have told the *Times* that publishing stories based on these documents would in any real way harm our troops.”

Similarly, Calderone wrote that “in late 2005, George W. Bush intimated to *Times* editor Bill Keller that the paper would have blood on its hands” (a gambit that never goes out of style) if it published leaks about the National Security Agency’s warrantless wiretapping program. “But,” Calderone added, “it doesn’t seem like the Obama White House raised any similar alarms” about the *Times*’ intent to publish the WikiLeaks documents.

Whether or not Assange is telling the whole truth, it seems clear that the White House evinced little concern prior to the WikiLeaks documents’ publication that the documents would endanger any Americans or Afghans. Now that the political repercussions of the publication are being felt — perhaps especially the fallout from the knowledge that Washington is backing the Pakistani government and its intelligence service, which in turn is [supporting the Taliban](#) and others who are fighting against American troops in the region — the administration is suddenly worried that innocent people will be harmed as a result.

If innocent people are harmed as a result of the leaks, there will be blame to go around. Assange will surely deserve some measure of the blame for having failed to ensure that no innocents were named in the documents he leaked. However, far greater responsibility for such harm will rest on the shoulders of the U.S. government — the Bush and Obama administrations, Congress, and the courts — for putting both American troops and Afghans in such a position in the first place. The Afghanistan invasion was unconstitutional and, even if initially justified, has long outlived its purpose. Were it not for the invasion and ongoing occupation, there would be neither documents to leak nor Americans and Afghans to be endangered by such leaks.

The WikiLeaks saga is far from over. It will take quite some time to determine what is true and what is false in both the leaked documents and the statements coming from Assange and the Obama administration. The administration’s public outrage, however, suggests that much of what was leaked is both true and politically damaging.

Knowing that President Obama has [claimed](#) the authority to assassinate anyone he deems a threat anywhere in the world, Assange had better watch his back.

Photo: Julian Assange

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