

# Is WikiLeaks the Pentagon Papers, Part 2? Parallels, and differences, exist.

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A voluminous cache of secret documents is leaked, shedding new light on official statements and drawing into question some of the rationale for America's involvement in a murky, distant and long-running war.

That would accurately describe the publication in 1971 of the Pentagon Papers, the Defense Department's secret history of the Vietnam War that revealed a "credibility gap" between the Johnson administration's public statements and its private actions.

It might also describe the leak Sunday of thousands of official military documents characterizing the U.S. military's prosecution of the war in Afghanistan.

In the wake of the release of the Afghan documents, the link between the two leaks 39 years apart was made by Julian Assange, the Australian who is the key proprietor of WikiLeaks, the whistleblower Web site that posted the documents and orchestrated their simultaneous publication by the New York Times, the Guardian newspaper of Great Britain and Der Spiegel magazine of Germany. It also was made by Daniel Ellsberg, the renegade Rand Corp. researcher who leaked the Pentagon Papers, first to the New York Times and later to The Washington Post and other newspapers.

"The parallels are very strong," Ellsberg said in an interview Monday. "This is the largest unauthorized disclosure since the Pentagon Papers. In actual scale, it is much larger, and thanks to the Internet, it has moved [around the world] much faster."

Superficially, the two episodes do seem related. In substance, however, the case may be weaker.

Both certainly portrayed their wars in much grimmer terms than those in power would publicly acknowledge. The Pentagon Papers were quickly seized on by those who questioned and opposed the war; a similar fate seems likely for the Afghan archive.

But there are important differences. The key one is the nature of the documents and the substance of what they reveal. The Pentagon Papers were a complete, three-volume history of the war, a 7,000-page narrative spanning a 22-year period. They relied on some of the highest-level documentation possible: White House memos, military reports, CIA and State Department cables. They disclosed official secrets, such as the covert bombing of Laos and Cambodia, and outright lies, such as Lyndon Johnson's plans to widen the war in 1964 despite an explicit campaign pledge to the contrary.

By contrast, the Afghan documents -- more than 91,000 in all -- are a loosely related collection of material covering nearly six years (early 2004 through late 2009) that leaves out important context. Many of the documents are unedited, firsthand reports by military officials, some of which are routine after-action summaries. What's revealing about the material may be what's missing: classified documents that could shed further light on some of the incidents described in the raw material.

"We . . . need to be a little bit sophisticated about the nature of documents," says Steven Aftergood, director of the Federation of American Scientists' Project on Government Secrecy. "The fact that something is written down and even classified does not make it necessarily interesting or true. Documents can mislead as well as inform. The idea that this disclosure constitutes the true record, as opposed to everything we've learned up to now, is naive and ridiculous. These documents are one more collection of data points from which we have to assemble an understanding of what has gone on."

A further distinction: No single message has emerged from the Afghan documents the way it did from the Pentagon Papers.

On Monday, the New York Times emphasized the duplicity of the Pakistan military and secret service and its involvement with the Taliban; the Guardian focused on reports of civilian atrocities; and Der Spiegel underscored how the German government has mischaracterized the military situation in northern Afghanistan that involves German troops. The headlines from the publication of the Pentagon Papers were more consistent: The administration had deceived the public about the war.

"The reports I'm seeing make me feel that this is not the Pentagon Papers," says Danielle Brian, executive director of the Project on Government Oversight, which works with whistleblowers. "I think there's an enormous difference between raw intelligence from the ground and high level analysis from inside the Pentagon. Ninety-two thousand cables is so scattershot . . . that I don't know what the specific message is."

Importantly, the Afghan documents don't specifically contradict official statements and administration policies, as the Pentagon Papers did. Some of what is disclosed is revelatory or embarrassing -- American forces with inadequate equipment or resources, for example -- but there are no fully formed conclusions at odds with the Bush or Obama administration's views of the war.

Ellsberg argues, however, that the situations are parallel. "The conclusion you draw from the Pentagon Papers is the same one you can draw from these documents," he says. "Is there any reason to believe the future will be any different than the past? I'll make the prediction that, when people go through all 92,000 pages, they will not find a good reason for our escalation in Afghanistan or any more reason why the commitment of the next 30,000 troops and billions of dollars will be any better of an investment than the last \$300 billion we spent there."

The 2010 leak differs, too, because its release was instantaneous and global. Rather than publish by itself, WikiLeaks maximized the impact of the disclosure by recruiting three mainstream news

organizations in three countries as its "partners." It then placed a hard deadline on the release, notifying its partners that it intended to post the documents July 25, about one month after the publications were first permitted to review them and prepare stories about them.

The Times went with its story after it consulted with the White House, which didn't seek to stop publication but requested that the newspaper urge WikiLeaks to withhold "harmful" material. Contrast this to 1971, when the Nixon administration enjoined the New York Times from further publication after its first Pentagon Papers stories. Four days later, The Washington Post obtained its own copy of the papers and published stories before it, too, was enjoined.

Ben Bradlee, The Post's editor at the time, says Nixon's attempts to stop publication gave the Pentagon Papers a much higher profile. "I think it gave it a significance it probably didn't have," Bradlee said Monday. "When you came down to it, the amount of information that would be really damaging was very limited."

Would Nixon's legal team, led by Justice Department attorney (and future Supreme Court chief justice) William Rehnquist, have been better off ignoring the whole thing? "You could argue that, and I would," Bradlee says. "You're on a sticky wicket if you're trying to keep the truth out of the paper. Most of the stuff might have been embarrassing, or potentially embarrassing, but it wasn't endangering national security or placing anyone's life in jeopardy."