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WikiLeaks documents implore us to notice war's horrors

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The website WikiLeaks' release of nearly 400,000 secret U.S. war logs on Iraq, posted amidst the din of midterm elections, represents the largest intelligence leak in U.S. history. The release also provides Americans with a mammoth record of a war most of us want to ignore or forget.

No "earthshaking revelations" here, claimed *The New York Times* in its initial summaries of the documents, known as the Iraq War Logs. Iraqi civilian deaths, the excesses of privatized warriors, the torture of Iraqis by Iraqi troops and police detailed in the logs were stories already reported.

Amy Goodman, co-anchor of the progressive news program *Democracy Now!*, described WikiLeaks' latest offering as "a new trove of evidence of the violence and suffering that has befallen Iraqis since the U.S. invasion of 2003."

The posting of these 391,832 "significant action reports" from U.S. military files may also signify the durability of conscience and its unpredictable emergence even in war.

"The only reason that the public are seeing [the logs] now is that some brave soldier or soldiers stepped forward to give us this material and get it out into the public domain where it can shape public policy and do some good," said Julian Assange, WikiLeaks editor-in-chief, during a recent interview on *Democracy Now!*.

Assange's comments brought to mind past whistleblowers:

- Daniel Ellsberg, the former RAND analyst who leaked "the Pentagon Papers" -- secret documents about the Vietnam War;

- Ron Ridenhour, the helicopter gunner who broke the story on the 1968 massacre at the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai, during which U.S. troops killed between 347-500 unarmed Vietnamese -- mostly women, children, and the elderly; and
- Joseph Darby, the Army Specialist who slipped a letter to military investigators along with two discs of photos depicting the torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib by members of his reserve unit.

For these men finding the courage to heed conscience took time. All three deliberated extensively before turning in damning evidence about a war they were fighting.

For Hugh Thompson, Jr., a U.S. army helicopter pilot, conscience remained intact and decisive even amidst war's carnage. Thompson and two crewmen were flying reconnaissance when they saw the strewn bodies of women and children in My Lai.

"It looks to me like there is an awful lot of unnecessary killing going on down there," the pilot radioed to his accompanying gunships.

Thompson drew his gun on the Americans and threatened to shoot anyone who killed another Vietnamese. He had his crewmen waded into the gore of shot-up bodies to retrieve children who were still alive. Thompson took them to a hospital and then returned to army headquarters.

According to William Eckhardt, chief prosecutor for My Lai, the agitated pilot pounded on a table, tears rolling down his cheeks, and said: "Notice, notice, notice. . ."

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Conscience, to loosely paraphrase Pope John Paul II, can be muted, garbled, warped, but never silenced.

Perhaps it persists because "self-deception wears us down," says Michael Baxter.

A professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame and a Catholic pacifist, Baxter has counseled Iraq combat veterans and seen up close the cracks in psyche and heart caused by war.

The soldiers who push the send button are "feeling free. They are kind of doing it for themselves," he said.

And for us. Messengers report the details of battle only if they believe the truth still matters to the listeners.

It is an oversimplification to compare the anonymous whistleblowers of WikiLeaks to the likes of Ellsberg, Thompson, Jr., or Darby -- men who risked imprisonment, endured death threats, and were ostracized for telling what they saw.

With the exception of U.S. Army Private Bradley Manning, an intelligence analyst now in solitary confinement for leaking thousands of memos and the "Collateral Murder" video of a July 2007 Apache helicopter attack in Baghdad, none of the Web site's contributors, so far, have faced any consequences for their actions.

But like whistleblowers before them -- Ellsberg has come out in support of WikiLeaks -- the website's contributors, perhaps troubled by "a lot of unnecessary killing," hope to prompt change.

?I want people to see the truth?because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public,? Manning said in an Associated Press interview in July.

WikiLeaks? recent postings have provoked predictable castigations from the Pentagon, fierce criticism of Assange, and debates about the ethics of dumping so much classified information on the internet.

The war logs documentation of American acquiescence to Iraqi use of torture has also led to the discovery of Frago 242, a military order issued in 2004 that made it a policy to turn a blind eye.

Several countries are now calling for war crimes investigations into reports that coalition forces indulged in what one journalist described as ?domestic rendition? -- knowingly turning over Iraqis tagged as ?terrorists? to Iraqi authorities who tortured.

None of these revelations shock Robert Fisk, Middle East correspondent for the British daily *The Independent* and a man who has covered more wars than any human being should. Fisk, who reported from Iraq, says the WikiLeaks war logs merely confirm the Pentagon was lying when it denied journalists? reports of civilian deaths and torture.

Said Fisk: ?The fact of the matter is that routinely when armies go abroad to other countries far away, they torture and they abuse and they turn blind eyes. Look at Korea. Look at Vietnam. I could go through a whole lot more. And it will happen again. I don?t think we care about the people whose lands we occupy and that is the problem.?

To that revelation, I say: *Notice, notice, notice?*

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