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## Wikileaks and Intelligence Reform

Carl Ford

Carl Ford was Assistant Secretary of State and head of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research under President George W. Bush. He gave a lecture at Georgetown's Qatar campus on the topic, "Wikileaks and Intelligence Reform" on January 25, 2011. Ford is a Professorial Lecturer with



Georgetown University's Master of Science in Foreign Service (MSFS) program.

Ford began the discussion by saying that Wikileaks' "basic assumption is that transparency should be complete and that every citizen should know everything that goes on in the government." With such resounding ideals, "it's hard to argue against the people's right to know," but the freedom of speech principles that Wikileaks is purporting to promote are naive and impractical in the current political climate. Ford argued that "complete transparency" is an idealistic principle that is sound in theory, but cannot be sustained in practice. There are many incidences where secrecy can and should be used as leverage in political negotiations that serve the national interest. "The fact is," he said, "there are things that have to remain secret – not because we want to hide it from people, but because it is a practical matter, for national security interests."

The Wikileaks saga has brought into public debate a variety of core questions about the relationship between societies and governments. Ford said that "this is an issue that is extremely important and extremely

complex. There are major principles at stake: freedom of speech, press freedoms, and the ability for people to know what their government is doing.” These issues are fundamental to democracy and remain the tenets of any liberal state, but, Ford said, Wikileaks has hijacked and capitalized upon them as an excuse for testing the U.S. democratic system to its limit and doing untold damage to methods of information gathering and sharing.

Ford argued that although Wikileaks may have had good intentions when it exposed private and classified documents, its plan has backfired. Ford said that “Wikileaks is going to have the opposite effect of what the people who support it want.” As such, Wikileaks is self-destructive, counterproductive, and a short-term phenomenon that will have negative effects on transparency.

“I guarantee you,” Ford said, “that Wikileaks has already had a major impact on tightening down of security procedures and the flow of information, not only with our policy-makers, but within the intelligence community.” This means that the United States as well as other countries will necessarily become even less transparent than they were in the past. In future, reporters will find it hard to find sources and those who do leak sensitive material will face criminal charges.

In conclusion, any idea of future intelligence reform has been dealt a major set-back. “The knowledge of the U.S. intelligence community and the quality of our analysis will suffer because of Wikileaks. The information itself was not very important, but the damage it did to the process was what concerned most people in the intelligence community.”

*Article by Suzi Mirgani, CIRS Publications Coordinator*

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