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# The WikiLeaks Cables: How the United States Exploits the World, in Detail, from an Internal Perspective, 2001–2010

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## ABSTRACT

The disclosure of more than 250,000 American diplomatic cables by the dissident media organisation WikiLeaks in 2010–2011 gained much attention in the American mass media but generated little interest for diplomatic historians. A small number of scholars explored small parts of the archive, but diplomatic historians and political scientists largely dismissed the cables as insignificant source material. These scholars overlooked important primary sources. The cables provide important revelations about American actions in every region of the world, especially between 2001 and 2010. Although United States officials and their supporters in the American mass media insisted that the cables showed American diplomats performing admirable work, the cables reveal how the United States exploits the world.

Over a series of days in late May 2010, an American Army intelligence analyst, Chelsea Manning, kept returning to her computer, looking for advice.<sup>1</sup> During one on-line chat, she got right to the point, asking her correspondent, “if you had free reign over classified networks for long periods of time ... say, 8–9 months ... and you saw incredible things, awful things ... things that belonged in the public domain, and not on some server stored in a dark room in Washington DC ... what would you do?” Imagine, Manning continued, that those classified networks included as many as “260,000 state department [sic] cables from embassies and consulates all over the world, explaining how the first world exploits the third, in detail, from an internal perspective.” The cables featured “crazy, almost criminal political backdealings ... the non-PR-versions of world events and crises” and “it affects everybody on earth.” What would you do, Manning asked, if you had access to such information?<sup>2</sup>

For Manning, the question had an answer. After grappling with the ethics of her situation, she had decided to send the diplomatic cables to the dissident media group WikiLeaks. The archive has been “forwarded to WL [WikiLeaks] and god knows what happens now,” Manning explained. Mainly, she hoped that her actions would result in “worldwide discussion, debates, and reforms.” Otherwise, she said, “we’re doomed as a species,”

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and “i [sic] will officially give up on the society we have.” Despite her concerns, Manning remained hopeful, believing that disclosing the cables would spark a public debate about the United States’ role in the world: ultimately, “i [sic] want people to see the truth ... regardless of who they are ... because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public.”<sup>3</sup>

Not everyone agreed with Manning’s decision. After arresting Manning, who had unknowingly been corresponding with a government informant, officials in the Barack Obama Administration began subjecting her to harsh treatment. American officials held her for nearly a year in solitary confinement, forcing her to strip naked in her cell at night. For Juan Mendez, the United Nations special rapporteur on torture, this treatment “constitutes at a minimum cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment” and could potentially be torture. After Manning’s trial in 2013, a military judge sentenced her to 35 years in prison, the longest sentence in American history for a whistle-blower. “If you deny my request for a pardon,” Manning said, “I will serve my time knowing that sometimes you have to pay a heavy price to live in a free society.” Although Obama later commuted this sentence, enabling Manning to leave prison in May 2017, she had faced considerable challenges as a transgender woman confined to a male facility.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the American government faced its own challenges. On 28 November 2010, five major newspaper organisations with exclusive access to the cables began publishing reports on their contents. Four collaborated with WikiLeaks: Britain’s *Guardian*, Spain’s *El País*, Germany’s *Der Spiegel*, and France’s *Le Monde*. The fifth organisation, the *New York Times*, acquired access to the materials from the *Guardian*. “The Times,” its editors explained, “believes that the documents serve an important public interest, illuminating the goals, successes, compromises and frustrations of American diplomacy in a way that other accounts cannot match.”<sup>5</sup>

As the newspapers published their initial reports, Obama Administration officials condemned the disclosure of classified information, complaining that the cables featured critically important material. “Many of these reports are raw, unvarnished,” a State Department spokesperson, Philip Crowley, said. “They provide on-the-ground perspective. They inform policies. They inform actions.” Although some speculation existed that the cables did not reveal the most sensitive information about American foreign policy—none had classification at the highest level of top secret—Administration officials wanted the cables to remain secret. Crowley indicated, “what you see here is information that is very, very important to the conduct of the foreign policy of the United States.” The cables displayed “the breadth of our engagement around the world and the breadth of the foreign policy of the United States.”<sup>6</sup>

Hoping to minimise the controversy, Administration officials countered Manning's argument that the cables revealed shady American back dealings. In a united front, they insisted that the documents showed American diplomats performing admirable work around the world. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked, "what is being put on display in this cache of documents is the fact that American diplomats are doing the work we expect them to do." Their work "should make every one of us proud." America's permanent representative to the United Nations, Susan Rice, agreed, praising American diplomats for their service and "enormous skill and integrity... I couldn't be more proud of them as they conduct the work of the American Government and do the work that diplomats do around the world."<sup>7</sup>

American mass media largely echoed the Obama Administration's talking points. The *New York Times* editors wrote that "much of the Obama administration's diplomatic wheeling and dealing is appropriate and, at times, downright skillful." Numerous commentators agreed, despite many of them not having access to the full archive. "On the whole, the trove makes American diplomacy look pretty good," George Packer wrote for the *New Yorker*. Likewise, *Time* columnist Fareed Zakaria felt reassured by what he read in the cables, insisting, "Ambassadors are not caught pushing other countries in order to make deals secretly to strengthen the U.S., but rather to solve festering problems." The overall message was that the cables revealed American diplomats doing good work around the world. "In U.S. elite media," the watch group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting observed, "the main revelation of the WikiLeaks diplomatic cables is that the U.S. government conducts its foreign policy in a largely admirable fashion."<sup>8</sup>

Complicating matters, American diplomatic historians, who have perhaps the most experience working with United States diplomatic correspondence, provided more reasons to doubt Manning's interpretation. Several suggested that the cables were unimportant source material, arguing that they were not comparable to the high-level planning documents that the State Department publishes in its *Foreign Relations of the United States* [FRUS] series. K.C. Johnson and Andrew Johns speculated that few of the cables would appear in future FRUS volumes. Laura Belmonte agreed: WikiLeaks documents "will never replace the context, analysis, and cohesion provided by FRUS." Although the WikiLeaks cables consist of the same type of source material that appeared in an earlier incarnation of the FRUS series, a number of American diplomatic historians ignored the connexion and compared the cables to the modern FRUS to minimise their importance.<sup>9</sup>

Re-enforcing the notion that the cables lacked importance, scholars made few serious efforts to explore their contents. American diplomatic historians have not published a single article in their flagship journal, *Diplomatic History*, which cites a single one of the more than 250,000 WikiLeaks

documents. Neither have political scientists made much use of the cables: “Despite the breadth and depth of information exposed by a series of high-profile leaks over the past several years, political scientists have been relatively reluctant to use leaked information as a data source in research.” Having spent the past few decades calling on the State Department to make more classified information available to researchers, American foreign relations scholars have displayed a remarkable lack of interest, balking at the opportunity to work with the uncensored WikiLeaks cables.<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately, there are exceptions. Some scholars have published articles that explore various aspects of the archive. Jeffrey Lefebvre used cables from American embassies in Eritrea and Ethiopia to explore American policy towards the Horn of Africa. Christopher Young and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee took a similar approach in examining American and Chinese policy towards Taiwan. However, the only major publication that has provided a broad critical assessment of the contents of the cables is the 2015 book, *The WikiLeaks Files*, published in association with WikiLeaks. “This book begins to address the need for scholarly analysis of what the millions of documents published by WikiLeaks say about international geopolitics,” WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange explained in the “Introduction.”<sup>11</sup>

This analysis addresses the shortcomings in the literature. Although *The WikiLeaks Files* provides an important starting point, lingering questions about the importance of the cables need answering. A basic one is about whether to ignore this archive as a viable source in writing about American foreign policy. More important and fundamental is what the cables reveal about American diplomacy. Were American officials and their supporters in America’s mass media correct to argue that the cables showed American diplomats performing admirable work around the world? Or, as Manning suggested, do they reveal troubling dimensions about American diplomacy?

Naturally, a methodological challenge exists. Because of its size, the WikiLeaks archive makes it almost impossible for a single scholar to read it all. Accordingly, this analysis finds basis on a sampling of the cables by region: Europe, the Asia Pacific, Latin America, the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Africa—the way the State Department generally characterises areas of the world. As a refinement, there is examination of cables about countries and organisations that American officials considered critically important to their regional and global strategies. In choosing cables for analysis, three categories were important. First, those that various media organisations had already reviewed, including reports by independent news media on cables that the larger organisations ignored or overlooked. Next were “Scenesetter” missives whereby American diplomats typically provided visiting officials with a broad overview of United States diplomatic priorities. The third group were those marked “SECRET/NOFORN,” the most restrictive classification level in the archive. Finally, electronic word search allowed

finding the names of major American policies and programmes in other cables. The sample covers the most important concerns and activities of American diplomats.

In terms of the questions posed above, WikiLeaks cables contain very important information about American foreign policy, as State Department officials initially confirmed. Many cables feature critically important information not found in other publicly available sources. Second, Manning is correct. The cables reveal remarkable things about American diplomacy, documenting how American officials worked to keep each region of the world performing a specific function in a globally integrated system. The cables are especially valuable in showing how these officials worked to exploit countries and regional organisations to achieve American strategic objectives.

The European cables disclose American officials pursuing different aspects of their transatlantic strategy: working with European allies to write the rules of the global economy and transforming the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO] into a global interventionist military force. They record the determination of American officials to maintain the United States dominant position in the transatlantic system, providing accounts of efforts to infiltrate and manipulate the European political process. The European Union [EU] is easy to “penetrate,”<sup>12</sup> according to one former American official. Perhaps most alarming, the cables show that American policy-makers actively pursued NATO enlargement with the full knowledge that it risked war with Russia—Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014 must be considered with these warnings in mind.

The cables from the Asia Pacific are equally important. At the most basic level, they reveal the imperial mind-set of American officials, who repeatedly instructed their Japanese allies that there could be no regional order that excluded the United States from Asia. There could be no “Asia for the Asians,”<sup>13</sup> as State Department official Bruce Campbell put it. Similarly, the cables show that American officials harboured imperial ambitions for South Korea, where American diplomats expected a new trade pact to provide the United States with a “foothold”<sup>14</sup> on the Asian continent. Perhaps most significant, American officials applied an offensive strategy towards China, knowing that it would increase regional tensions. Although internal reports indicated that China was willing to accept a subordinate position in a system of “U.S.-policed globalization,”<sup>15</sup> American officials began a massive military build-up to shape and constrain China’s rise.

Latin American cables, revealing constant United States interference in the region, confirm that American officials directed a major political campaign to stoke divisions within Latin America at a time when regional politics shifted to the left. American diplomats often meddled in Cuban and Venezuelan affairs, working with opposition groups seeking to oust the Cuban and Venezuelan governments. Furthermore, American efforts to

forge strategic partnerships with the Colombian and Mexican governments had devastating consequences: the terrible increase in violence that came with the implementation of Plan Colombia in Colombia and the Mérida Initiative in Mexico.

The cables from the Middle East provide significant insights, showing American officials working to secure United States access to the region's oil. They document how American officials worked closely with the Saudis to keep Saudi oil flowing to the United States and its allies. Similarly, American diplomats in Iraq oversaw what they called a "black gold-rush" by helping to open the country's oil industry to international oil companies.<sup>16</sup> All the while, the diplomats recognised that American actions were having devastating consequences for the region: the American-led war in Iraq after March 2003 brought horrendous violence to the country, including the cleansing of the minority Sunni population from Baghdad and a "grinding daily repetition of violent death."<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the cables show that American officials were knowingly empowering a tyrannical regime in Saudi Arabia, a country at the centre of a regional terrorist network.

South Asian cables are equally illuminating, documenting how American leaders created a criminal regime in Afghanistan after the United States invaded the country in 2001 and overthrew the ruling Taliban government. They confirm that American officials pushed to "integrate"<sup>18</sup> the country's warlords into a new Afghan government. For the broader region, the cables provide important insight into American involvement in India and Pakistan. American diplomats sometimes talked down to their Indian partners in paternalistic ways. They were also well aware that their allies in Islamabad were supporting terrorism as a matter of national policy. Perhaps most important, the cables make it clear that American officials understood that they assumed great risks by supporting both India and Pakistan, two nuclear-weapons states constantly preparing for war.

The cables from Africa feature important revelations. They show some of the ways in which American officials grappled with their policy of classifying South African leaders as terrorists. Although diplomats on the ground privately characterised members of the African National Congress [ANC] as heroic freedom fighters, officials in Washington required the diplomats to treat various ANC leaders as terrorists. In addition, American officials knowingly supported a criminal regime in Nigeria. The cables confirm that American officials were well aware that Nigerian leaders were looting the nation's oil wealth as they employed all sorts of nefarious measures to remain in power, such as rigging elections and assassinating politicians.

In short, the WikiLeaks cables show exactly what Manning charged: "how the first world exploits the third."<sup>19</sup> They demonstrate the non-public relations version of American diplomacy, including many of the shady political back dealings that American officials prefer to keep hidden from the public.



In contrast to the arguments of American officials and their supporters in the American mass media, who repeatedly insisted that the cables showed American diplomats performing admirable work around the world, the cables reveal many disturbing things about American diplomacy. What the cables show, to paraphrase Manning, is how the United States exploits the world, in detail, from an internal perspective. The evidence is clear.<sup>20</sup>

At the beginning of the 21st century, American officials began their approach to the world with Europe, the historical “epicenter of America’s global and strategic thinking” according to a diplomat and State Department official, R. Nicholas Burns. The reasons were simple. Europe was one of the world’s Great Power centres. Since Europe played such an influential role in global affairs, American officials wanted to work with its leaders to shape the structure of the world system. “The United States and Europe are centers of power and wealth,” another State Department official, Daniel Fried, explained. The two must “help shape the world.” American officials gained two main benefits from their European allies. First, they augmented US economic power in the world. Integrating the North American and European economies, the transatlantic economy generated over one-half of the world’s gross domestic product. “Even with the rise of emerging economies such as China and India, our relationship will be the engine of the global economy for at least the next generation,” Fried said. The transatlantic economy also provided American officials with additional leverage over global trade and exchange. As diplomats posted at the EU reported, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic “remain the leaders in setting the global economic and regulatory agenda.” Indeed, American officials relied on the transatlantic economy to drive global economic growth and structure the international economy.<sup>21</sup>

Gaining such tremendous economic advantages from the transatlantic economy, American officials worked to ensure that the EU leaders followed their lead in global affairs. In internal reports, American diplomats at the EU often discussed opportunities to guide Union policy. One former American official acknowledged how he was “routinely surprised at how easy EU institutions are to penetrate and how malleable they can be if approached with an apt understanding of the EU coalition building process.” On matters of shared concerns, he reckoned, “Washington has an opportunity to drive the EU agenda precisely because of the EU’s loose operational style.” American diplomats found comparable opportunities to influence the EU agenda. The accession of new member-states, they noted in one of their reports, “greatly enhances our ability to form and build coalitions that can sway the policy of the EU as a whole.” Proper strategies will “help ensure that we get the right results with the EU.”<sup>22</sup>

The second major advantage American officials gained from Europe was a boost in military power. NATO, the military alliance tying Europe and



North America together, enabled American officials to project their military power more effectively across the world. “NATO has been transforming from its Cold War and then regional incarnation of the 1990s into a transatlantic institution with global missions, global reach, and global partners,” Fried explained. “There is no ‘in area/out of area.’ Everything is NATO’s area, potentially.” Working to accelerate the transformation, American NATO diplomats advised Obama, “NATO needs to be able to deploy more forces to greater distances and more rapidly than it can do at present.” The military alliance must be prepared to “engage in a far-off corner of the globe,” they argued.<sup>23</sup>

To increase NATO’s military power, American officials worked to bring more states into the military alliance. After seven new countries joined in 2004, Americans focused their sights on Georgia and Ukraine, two former republics of the defunct Soviet Union. NATO leaders “must make clear that NATO welcomes the aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine for their membership in NATO,” President George W. Bush announced. “Ukraine and Georgia is a very difficult issue for some nations here. It’s not for me.” Although NATO’s Bucharest Summit in April 2008 decided not to move the two countries into the organisation’s Membership Action Plan [MAP], American diplomats reported that NATO leaders “agreed that Ukraine and Georgia will become NATO members.” “The question is now ‘when,’ not ‘if.’”<sup>24</sup>

By working to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, American officials knew that they were placing the entire Black Sea region at risk. Privately, diplomats warned Washington that ongoing efforts to incorporate the two states into the military alliance risked war with Russia. “Russia has made clear that Ukrainian (and Georgian) NATO membership is a red line for them,” diplomats in Russia reported. After war broke out between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, these diplomats issued stronger warnings, especially about the implications of NATO membership for Ukraine. “Russia opposes any further enlargement of NATO,” they explained. “The August war in Georgia signaled Moscow’s readiness to expend material and men to achieve this goal, even at the cost of international opprobrium.”<sup>25</sup> In spite of the risks, American officials continued working to bring the two countries into the alliance. Obama Administration officials repeatedly provided Georgian and Ukrainian leaders with assurances. Washington “believes there are multiple paths to NATO membership,” a Defense Department official, Alexander Vershbow, told Georgian officials. There are options that “could serve as functional equivalents to MAP.” Hillary Clinton relayed a similar message to Ukrainian officials: “The United States continued to support Ukraine’s eventual membership in NATO.”<sup>26</sup>

By trying to enlarge NATO, American officials were working to increase their influence in Europe. Even given the risk of war with Russia, they were determined to gain more allies who would work with them to shape the

world. "Much of what we hope to accomplish globally depends on working together with Europe," Clinton explained. The economic and military advantages especially convinced American officials of their need for the Europeans to side with them on matters of global affairs. For these reasons, they kept looking for ways to penetrate the EU, set the EU agenda, and bring more countries into NATO, even if it meant increasing regional tensions. As long as Washington led the transatlantic system, they believed that they would be able to set the agenda for much of the world.<sup>27</sup>

In pursuing their plans for Europe, American officials also focused attention on the Asia Pacific. With the region functioning as another major world power centre, American officials considered it just as important as Europe to their global strategy. "America's future is intimately tied to that of the Asia-Pacific, and our economic and strategic interests in the region are among the most important in the world," a State Department official, Bruce Campbell, explained. The region featured "critical strategic chokepoints for global commerce, emerging power centers that will have profound implications for U.S. and international interests, and a foundation for American power projection in the greater Asia-Pacific."<sup>28</sup>

Historically, the United States has maintained a dominant position in the Asia Pacific. Since the Second World War, American officials have employed a hub-and-spoke model to keep the United States positioned as a dominant hub, one that exerts influence through a series of spokes, including American states, territories, treaty allies, and partners. "American foreign policy in Asia has been largely successful during the post war era by essentially following a hub and spoke model," the American ambassador at Tokyo, J. Thomas Schieffer, explained. Although the model created a transpacific system that differed in significant ways from the transatlantic alliance, it produced a comparable outcome for the United States: "For decades now the first position in the Asian power structure has been occupied by the United States." "Both militarily and economically," Schieffer observed, "the United States has been without peer in Asia since the end of the last war."<sup>29</sup>

With their hub-and-spoke model, American officials relied heavily on their spokes. At the dawn of the 21st century, they considered both Japan and South Korea to be keys to their system. In 2009, American diplomats in Japan informed Obama, "the U.S.-Japan Alliance remains the indispensable foundation of U.S. strategy in Asia." South Korea, on the other hand, occupied what American diplomats in Seoul called "the most strategic piece of real estate in northeast Asia." Despite the fact that Japan and South Korea shared a troubled history, American officials approached the two Powers as their primary regional spokes. "The basis of our strategy in Northeast Asia rests on two very strong and important allies," Campbell explained. The American relationship with Japan "remains the cornerstone," whilst the American relationship with South Korea "serves as a critical anchor for our strategic engagement in the Asia-Pacific."<sup>30</sup>

Americans made significant efforts to control their spokes, putting significant pressure on Japan to follow their lead in regional affairs. When Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama expressed an interest in creating new regional policies in 2009 that focused less on the United States and more on Asia, American officials quickly pressured Japanese officials to reverse course. Any “exclusionary language would not be well-received in Washington,” Campbell informed Japanese leaders, demanding that Japanese officials refrain from making proposals for regional organisations that focused primarily on Asia. When “discussing regional architecture,” Japanese officials must “continue to avoid ‘Asia for the Asians’ formulations.”<sup>31</sup>

In the same vein, the Americans relied on South Korea to re-enforce their influence in the area, seeking to strengthen their regional staying power by forging a new free trade agreement [FTA] with the Seoul government. The proposed trade pact showed that “we will not stand idly by while others talk about Asian economic groupings that would exclude the United States,” Alexander Arvizu, the State Department assistant secretary for Regional Security for Japan and Korea, explained. In a report to Obama with the subtitle, “FTA Creates Foothold in Asia,” American diplomats in Seoul noted that the new free trade agreement would firmly entrench America’s regional position: the agreement “is a critical element of our effort to anchor Korea to the United States for the next generation, and likewise anchor the United States in Northeast Asia.”<sup>32</sup>

To create a more highly integrated region, American officials also aspired to incorporate China into the system. With China surpassing Japan as the region’s largest economic Power, United States efforts focussed on integrating China into the existing regional power structure whilst simultaneously constraining its rise. American officials called it a “shaping strategy,” which featured a major build-up of American military assets in the region. “There is something in addition to the standard hedging approach of maintaining a strong U.S. presence in Asia,” Thomas Christensen, a deputy assistant secretary of state, explained. “We believe our presence in the region is a positive shaping force for China’s choices.” According to Campbell, it occurred in response to China’s growing military strength, a fact that “could not be discussed publicly for obvious reasons.”<sup>33</sup>

American experts were quite confident in their plans for China. Although concerned about increasing Chinese military power, most thought that Beijing posed no immediate threat. “China does not believe that its future depends on overturning the fundamental order of the international system,” another State Department deputy secretary, Robert B. Zoellick, explained. Diplomats in China shared the same belief, describing China as a “status quo Power.” Chinese officials might be putting on shows of strength, the diplomats reported, but “the reality of China’s foreign policy for at least the next five years is that China is committed to the international status quo as it

reaps the benefits of U.S.-policed globalization.” Indeed, the diplomats believed that the Chinese government was willing to accept its subordinate position in the international system for the time being. The rise of new Powers has sometimes “resulted in violence and instability, but with China, that has not been the case so far,” a Defense Department official, David Sedney, said. “And we don’t expect it to be the case.”<sup>34</sup>

In short, United States leaders believed that they were succeeding with their strategy for the Asia Pacific. Despite experiencing some frictions with their spokes and facing a significant new challenge from China, they remained confident of maintaining a dominant position in the region: “The United States has been an Asia-Pacific player for two centuries. We will remain so.” Indeed, there would be no Asia for the Asians. It would be a transpacific system with the United States as a dominant hub with many subordinate spokes. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced in 2008, the United States would function “as a resident power and as the ‘straddle power’ across the Asia Pacific.”<sup>35</sup>

Whilst officials and diplomats worked to keep the United States positioned as both an Atlantic and Pacific Power, they pursued an equally ambitious objective for Latin America. Viewing the entire Western Hemisphere as an American sphere of influence, they worked to keep a subordinate Latin America integrated with a dominant United States in a hemispheric system. They maintained this “pan American approach,” as Thomas Shannon, the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemispheric Affairs, called it, because parts of Latin America always seemed to “run the risk of becoming Pluto, of kind of floating off to the far end of the universe and eventually being declared not a planet.” In other words, American officials feared that Latin American countries were always at risk of breaking free from their orbit around the United States. For Shannon, American officialdom must “do everything possible to not allow that to happen, to not allow that break to occur.”<sup>36</sup>

The greatest challenge to the United States hemispheric system came from Latin American leftists, who gained political power across much of region in the early 21st century. American officials were especially concerned that a number of these leaders were trying to break their countries free from the American orbit. Some of them “would like to find a way to exclude us broadly from Latin American discussions,” Shannon warned. They were pursuing “a diplomacy of rupture where they try to break the linkages that have been forged between North America and Central and South America and the Caribbean.”<sup>37</sup>

To address the challenge, the Americans adopted a multi-layered strategy. First, they worked to divide the left, arguing that there were two “lefts” in Latin America. In their formulation, one was the bad left, headed by Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez and Cuba’s Fidel Castro. The other was the good left, led by Brazilian leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. There is

a “difference between Brazil’s view of South American integration, which is modern and intent on engaging a globalized economy, and Chávez’s view, which is inward looking and designed to create a counterweight to the United States,” Shannon explained. Carrying a similar message to Brazilian officials, American ambassador at Brazil, Clifford Sobel, emphasised that Washington saw “Brazil as a crucial counterbalance in the region.”<sup>38</sup>

The Americans employed subversive tactics against leftist leaders whom they wanted to counter. In Venezuela, they supported Chávez’s opponents, who briefly ousted Chávez in a coup in April 2002. Although the coup failed and Chávez returned to power amidst a popular backlash against the coup leaders, American leaders continued working to oust him. In internal reports, American diplomats in Caracas summarised a strategy that included “Penetrating Chávez’s Political Base,” “Dividing Chávismo,” and “Isolating Chávez internationally.” They believed initially that their strategy was “working,” describing their efforts as “a winnable battle.” Across the Southern Cone, additional American diplomats agreed that there were reasons to remain optimistic. Chávez “presents a formidable foe,” they reported. “But he certainly can be taken.”<sup>39</sup>

A similar approach applied to Cuba, where the primary goal was to overthrow Castro. “Ending this regime is a sacred duty,” a United States Agency for International Development official, Adolfo Franco, announced. American diplomats worked with Castro’s political opponents in Cuba and exile groups in the United States, trying to unite them into a broader movement against Castro. Their basic advice to Castro’s opponents was “to leave political differences to be hammered out later, after they all work together now to change the regime.” The diplomats identified different ways of overthrowing the Cuban government, outlining two in a report titled “Cuba: Two Paths to Regime Change.” The basic strategy was to help opposition groups confront the Cuban government and then seize power. “The dissidents of today will be the nation’s leaders tomorrow,” George W. Bush announced. Once in power, “they will surely remember who stood by them.”<sup>40</sup>

To strengthen the American position in the region, United States officials also sought partners. Making several efforts to form strategic partnerships with countries they believed would help uphold America’s hemispheric hierarchy, they largely focussed their efforts on the Colombian and Mexican governments, two of the United States closest partners in the region. Whilst American diplomats in Bogotá explained that they were working to “maintain U.S. influence needed to lock the GOC [Government of Colombia] in as a strategic partner supporting U.S. interests in Latin America,” those in Mexico City pursued a similar goal, hoping to see Mexico become “a more strategic partner of the U.S.”<sup>41</sup>

In Colombia, American officials pursued their goals through Plan Colombia, a multi-billion dollar assistance programme first implemented

by the Bill Clinton Administration. Although initially designed to target drug traffickers in Colombia, the programme broadened under the Bush Administration to target the country's leftist revolutionaries, especially the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC]. Colombian military forces began "to hit the FARC hard," the assistant secretary for Western Hemispheric Affairs, Roger Noriega, explained. According to diplomats *in situ*, Colombian security forces implemented "a nation-wide, multi-phased campaign to capture or kill key FARC leaders, moved against the FARC in its rural strongholds, and reestablished a presence in the country's 1,098 municipalities." They described the military operations as "a war of attrition."<sup>42</sup> During this war, the Colombian people experienced tremendous hardships. Violence escalated rapidly, exactly as American officials expected. "An estimated 3,000 Colombians per month lose their lives from the violence," the American ambassador at Bogotá, Anne Patterson, observed during the early phases of the war. Moreover, Colombian military forces committed horrific human rights abuses, which American diplomats in Colombia repeatedly described in reports to Washington: "Fifty-one members of the Colombian military were dismissed in 2008 due to alleged involvement in extrajudicial killings, but impunity for such abuses remains a serious problem." Tens of thousands of Colombians died in the war.<sup>43</sup>

Regardless of the violence, American officials viewed Plan Colombia as a great success, using it as a model for a similar programme in Mexico. After Mexican President Felipe Calderón went to war against the country's drug cartels in December 2006, the Bush Administration organised the multi-billion dollar Mérida Initiative to help Mexico City intensify the war. In the assessment of David Johnson, the assistant secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the Mérida Initiative had

a slightly different focus, but I think that we will, insofar as the programs are comparable with things such as the use of aircraft, the types of aircraft we are bringing in, the oversight that we will be able to provide, we fully intend to apply the lessons that we, indeed, have learned in Colombia.<sup>44</sup>

The American-backed drug war had a familiar effect. It fuelled drug-related violence rather than ending it. "Beheadings and the prominent placement of dismembered bodies in public places, relatively rare two years ago, are now common throughout the country," Washington learnt. Although American officials repeatedly hailed the military operations as a great success, just as they did in Colombia, they could not deny that violence in Mexico was escalating. "Violence is unprecedented, people are afraid, mayors are being killed," the new American ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pascual, observed. By then, tens of thousands of Mexicans had perished in this war.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of the surge in violence, American officials continued the programmes, viewing them as key elements of a broader effort to maintain their



system of hemispheric order. The violence and instability that resulted from their constant meddling never changed their beliefs about their strategic priorities. “We have to be there all the time,” Shannon insisted. “We cannot afford to take a time out. We cannot afford to step aside for a moment.” Convinced of the need to remain active throughout the region, American officials kept working to oust their enemies, divide the left, and create new pillars of hemispheric order. They were fully committed to keeping Latin America in the American orbit regardless of the consequences for the people of the region.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst they considered Latin America critically important to their plans for hemispheric order, they considered the Middle East to be central to their global plans. “The Middle East is now and will remain one of the most strategically important parts of the world for our national interests and for international security,” Bush’s secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, explained. Viewing the Middle East as a key component of their global strategy, the Americans committed to playing a permanent role in the region. “We are there to stay,” Rice insisted. “Our interests there are enduring.”<sup>47</sup> American officials favoured the Middle East for its petroleum, believing that if they could control the production and distribution of the region’s oil, they could shape the development of many parts of the world. “America has major strategic and economic interests in the Middle East that are dictated by the region’s vast energy supplies,” Jimmy Carter’s former national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, explained in 2004. “Not only does America benefit economically from the relatively low costs of Middle Eastern oil, but America’s security role in the region gives it indirect but politically critical leverage on the European and Asian economies.” In other words, Americans could exploit the region’s oil to acquire even more power over Europe and Asia. As Brzezinski posited, “strategic domination over the area, even if cloaked by cooperative arrangements, would be a globally decisive hegemonic asset.”<sup>48</sup>

Given their focus on the region’s oil, American officials attributed special importance to Saudi Arabia, the country with the largest known petroleum reserves in the area. They especially valued the country for the central role that it played in the global oil market. In an assessment by a Bush advisor, Philip Zelikow: “As the holder of approximately one-quarter of the world’s oil reserves, the Kingdom is obviously important to the United States, and the rest of the world.” American officials believed that Saudi Arabia was the key to achieving a globally decisive hegemonic asset. Certainly, “few countries in the world today matter more to American interests than Saudi Arabia,” William Burns, the under-secretary for Political Affairs, said. “And few are more consequential for the kind of international order we seek.”<sup>49</sup>

With their sights on Saudi Arabia, American officials made significant efforts to gain more secure access to the country’s oil. After an attempted



terrorist attack on the Abqaiq oil facility in February 2006, Washington began offering the Saudi government help to safeguard more effectively its oil infrastructure. “We are now moving to apply in Saudi Arabia the same model we use to protect nuclear facilities internationally—a highly rigorous, mathematical, and engineering-based model,” the Embassy at Riyadh reported. As part of the programme, Americans helped the Saudi government train a new 35,000-member security force, one “organized and trained for defensive and offensive missions in the protection of oil, gas, national power, and other sites.” American officials also organised an unprecedented \$60 billion arms deal for the Saudis. The deal “will enhance Saudi Arabia’s ability to deter and defend against threats to its borders and to its oil infrastructure, which is critical to our economic interests,” Obama’s assistant secretary for Political-Military Affairs, Andrew Shapiro, explained.<sup>50</sup>

Even whilst concentrating much of their attention on Saudi Arabia, American officials sensed additional opportunities throughout the region. They were especially optimistic about the potential for Iraq, another oil-rich state. After the Bush Administration invaded Iraq in March 2003 to oust the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, and create a new government, American officials began working to open the country’s oil industry to international oil companies. When the new Iraqi government began awarding contracts in 2009, American diplomats in Iraq filed a report titled “First Oil Bid Round: The Greatest Show on Earth.” The bidding process, the diplomats explained, triggered a “black gold-rush” that quickly turned into an “Oil Stampede.” Although international oil companies based outside of the United States won many of the new contracts, the diplomats deemed the bidding process a success for American foreign policy: “The impact should be largely positive, and U.S. firms will participate in nearly one third of Iraq’s new, future oil production.”<sup>51</sup>

Concurrent American actions had significant consequences for the people of the region. During the American-led military occupation of Iraq, the country quickly devolved into horrific sectarian violence. The Bush Administration had empowered a Shia government that waged a sectarian war against the country’s minority Sunni population. According to American diplomats in Baghdad, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki believed in using “a hard fist against the Sunni Arab-dominated insurgency even at the expense of human rights violations.” From 2006 to 2008, the Maliki regime oversaw the sectarian cleansing of Baghdad’s Sunni residents. “The concentration of Sunnis into limited enclaves surrounded by Shia areas,” American diplomats reported, “makes it easier for Shia militias to push toward a final ‘cleansing’ of the city’s Sunnis.” The Bush Administration’s highly touted “surge” of additional American soldiers into Baghdad failed to end the violence. The country remained in the grip of a “grinding daily repetition

of violent death.” By the time that Obama entered office in January 2009, the war had cost an estimated 100,000 Iraqi civilians killed.<sup>52</sup>

American actions in Saudi Arabia added to the suffering. By providing extensive political and military support to Riyadh, American officials empowered a repressive monarchy that exercised total control over the Saudi people: “regime critics have been exiled or marginalized abroad and co-opted or muzzled at home.” Given the situation, the diplomats expected that the ruling Al Saud family “should be able to maintain absolute control of the kingdom for the foreseeable future.”<sup>53</sup> Just as alarming, American officials knew that Saudi Arabia lay at the heart of a regional terrorist network. In their internal reports, they acknowledged that Saudi donors funded the terrorist groups fighting American and allied forces in the region and around the world. As the State Department reported, “donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.” The country “remains a critical financial support base for al-Qa’ida, the Taliban, LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba], and other terrorist groups.”<sup>54</sup>

In spite of their knowledge, American officials maintained their same overall approach to the region. Rather than prioritising the fight against terrorism or supporting democratic values, they endeavoured to build their globally decisive hegemonic asset. They worked with the Saudi tyranny to gain more secure access to the country’s oil and supported the new sectarian regime in Iraq, especially as it opened the country’s oil industry to international oil companies. Their main priority, all along, was maximising American influence over the production and distribution of oil, whatever the consequences for the people of the region. “While many regions of the world offer great oil opportunities, the Middle East with two thirds of the world’s oil and the lowest cost, is still where the prize ultimately lies,” Bush’s soon-to-be vice-president, Dick Cheney, said.<sup>55</sup>

Whilst pursuing their strategic objectives in the Middle East, American officials also saw an opportunity to expand their influence in adjacent South Asia. In 2003, the American ambassador to Pakistan, Nancy Powell, reckoned that South Asia featured “perhaps the highest level of untapped human and economic potential anywhere—potential that, if fully exploited, could change the international economic and social landscape in fundamental ways.” American officials were especially attracted to the region’s location at the heart of the Asian continent, imagining they could transform the area into a kind of strategic hub that influenced how the surrounding regions integrated with one another. South Asia could function as “an economic bridge linking together China, Central Asia, and the Middle East,” a State Department official, John Gastright, explained.<sup>56</sup>

As they pursued their vision for South Asia, American officials took the most direct action in Afghanistan. After the Bush Administration invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to overthrow the Taliban and create a new Afghan

government, American officials began transforming the country into a new node in a broader regional system. “Our goal is to reestablish Afghanistan’s historic role as a switching point for regional trade and commerce,” the American ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, explained. In particular, American officials viewed the country as a land bridge that could revive regional trading networks. Afghanistan “has the potential to be a land bridge connecting the vast Kazakh steppes and beyond with the great ports of the Indian Ocean and greater Asia,” the assistant secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, Richard Boucher, commented. “This broad idea is merely a revival of the fundamental basis for the Silk Road.”<sup>57</sup>

Still, American officials faced significant regional challenges. First, they struggled to build a stable government in Afghanistan. When discussing the matter with the new Afghan leader, Hamid Karzai, in April 2003, an American congressman, Dana Rohrabacher, said that the “challenge was to integrate the warlords,” who could be “a positive force” in the new Afghan government. Although the Afghan people largely resented the warlords, who had spent years devastating the country in a brutal civil war, American officials insisted on bringing them into the new government. Earlier in American history, Rohrabacher explained, “many of the Wild West’s most famous sheriffs were former outlaws,” with the result that “law and order was maintained in those times primarily by local militias.”<sup>58</sup>

The decision to integrate warlords into the new Afghan government created serious problems. In the first place, they remained far more interested in maximising their own power: “Mujahadin commanders and warlords continue to hold both appointed and elected positions and often put tribal and ethnic interests ahead of the nation’s.” In addition, the presence of the warlords in the new regime undermined its legitimacy. Instead of bringing law and order to the nation, the warlords spread corruption and criminality throughout the government. “This group is way beyond the pale in terms of corruption,” Gates believed. American General David Petraeus agreed, describing the new Afghan government as “a criminal syndicate.”<sup>59</sup>

Adding to these problems, American officials faced significant challenges from the two main Powers in the region. Many of their biggest challenges came from Pakistan, the country that lay at the heart of a regional terrorist network. The country’s terrorist infrastructure “spews out fighters that go into Kashmir, as well as into Afghanistan,” the American former special envoy to Afghanistan, Peter Tomsen, observed. In a study of the issue, a career Central Intelligence Agency analyst, Bruce Riedel, described the Pakistani government as “one of the most prolific state sponsors of terror aimed at advancing its national security interests.” Although the Bush Administration forged a strategic alliance with Islamabad, designating Pakistan a “Major Non-NATO Ally” in June 2004, American officials knew that they were supporting a government that used terrorist groups to

destabilise the area. “There is no chance that Pakistan will view enhanced assistance levels in any field as sufficient compensation for abandoning support to these groups, which it sees as an important part of its national security apparatus against India,” American diplomats reported.<sup>60</sup>

In the meantime, American officials struggled to work with India, the main target of the Pakistani government’s actions. Whilst insisting in their public statements that they were making significant progress in efforts to form a strategic partnership with the Indian government, American officials often felt that very little was changing in the relationship. At one point, the American ambassador, David Mulford, privately complained to Indian officials about the “stark difference between the broad strategic vision and the harsh on-the-ground realities that trouble the USG [United States Government] and private sector players doing business in India.” In many cases, Mulford said, “the rhetoric is so far above the actual contours of the relationship as to risk the impression that the Emperor has no clothes.” American diplomats in India vented similar frustrations to their superiors in Washington: “problems are multiplying, festering and being deepened, and attitudes here are out of step with our stated goals.” In one racist tirade, the diplomats complained, “the Indian government’s attitude remains surly, unwelcoming, suspicious, and small minded.”<sup>61</sup>

Adding to their frustrations, the Americans encountered a serious challenge from the ongoing rivalry between India and Pakistan. No matter how many times they envisioned a new regional hub that tied together the countries in the region, they could never overcome the fact that India and Pakistan were nuclear weapons states that were constantly preparing to go to war with one another. “Pakistan is producing nuclear weapons at a faster rate than any other country in the world,” an American intelligence official, Peter Lavoy, reported. Meanwhile, the Indian government kept conducting “Cold Start” military exercises to prepare for a military incursion into Pakistan. The Indian government’s “Cold Start Doctrine” “calls for a rapid, time- and distance-limited penetration into Pakistani territory with the goal of quickly punishing Pakistan,” American diplomats in India explained. Although the diplomats doubted “the willingness of the GOI [Government of India] to implement Cold Start in any form and thus roll the nuclear dice,” they knew that it was difficult to predict how either side would act in a conflict.<sup>62</sup>

In spite of these challenges, Americans moved forward with their regional strategy. Convinced that with enough effort they could eventually transform the region into an inter-connected strategic hub, they continued supporting the gangster state that they had created in Afghanistan, confident that they could transform the country into a land bridge connecting South and Central Asia. Continued support went to the Indian and Pakistani governments, providing them with weapons and assistance despite the possibility that the two Powers might go to war—not even Islamabad’s ongoing support of

terrorism deterred them from their plans. In the end, United States officials remained convinced that they could weave the countries together to create a new strategic space. “Let’s work together to create a new Silk Road,” Clinton said.<sup>63</sup>

In working to create a new Silk Road in Asia, American officials saw comparable possibilities for Africa. Perhaps the most exploited region in the modern world, Africa held much appeal for officials in Washington. Especial excitement centred on the prospect of opening more regional markets to American businesses and investors. In the view of Charles Snyder, the assistant secretary for African affairs: “There really is a large emerging market there, a serious one, maybe the last one that’s open for grabs in any real sense that doesn’t have preexisting patterns that can’t be broken at this point.” Sensing that the region’s markets remained “open for grabs,” American officials insisted that they could gain greater access to the region’s wealth whilst further enriching American businesses. “Africa is an exciting place for business now,” Gregory Garland, the State Department’s media and outreach coordinator in the Bureau of African Affairs, insisted. “It is truly a frontier awaiting those with vision.”<sup>64</sup>

Hoping to tap more effectively into African markets, American officials devised their own special model for the continent, essentially carving Africa into a series of sub-regions and key countries that would provide easier American access to the continent. “The first cut of our approach to our Africa policy is this strategic understanding of the importance of the sub-regions,” Jendayi Frazer, Bush’s ambassador at South Africa, explained. Identifying five distinct sub-regions—West Africa, Southern Africa, East Africa, the Horn of Africa, and Central Africa—American officials tried to identify a key country for each, marking them as anchors for sub-regional engagement. In Frazer’s estimate, the focus was “the big important countries in terms of power projection.”<sup>65</sup>

Amongst the key countries, American officials singled out Nigeria and South Africa for their special importance. Both “are strategic in every sense of the word, in terms of their influence diplomatically, in terms of providing peacekeeping forces, in terms of the size of their economy... . They represent over 60 percent of the GDP of the continent as a whole” and had “serious strategic resources, from oil in Nigeria, to platinum in South Africa.” For these reasons, American officials viewed both countries as the primary gateways to Africa. For Frazer, they “are big, influential countries” that “stand apart from the rest.” They “influence all of our interests across the continent.”<sup>66</sup>

Despite their modelling, American officials experienced significant complications to their plans. In the first place, they encountered significant friction with the South African government, largely because of their decision to treat a number of its most prominent leaders as terrorists. Their approach

dated back to the 1980s, when the Ronald Reagan Administration classified the African National Congress [ANC], now governing South Africa, as a terrorist organisation: “Many prominent ANC figures—including Nelson Mandela—remain on the official USG list of terrorists banned from travel to the States,” the American Embassy in Pretoria reported. Their “only crime was fighting the odious apartheid regime.” Although the American Congress passed new legislation in 2008 that enabled the White House to revise the classification status of ANC members, American officials continued to include prominent ANC members on their terrorist watch list.<sup>67</sup>

Nigeria presented more serious complications. America collaborated with a notoriously venal government: “Corruption is endemic and pervasive in Nigeria.” According to an American National Intelligence Estimate, Nigerian leaders had spent years looting the country’s oil revenues. It appears that “most of the country’s oil wealth has either been stolen or squandered,” American consuls in Nigeria explained. Even whilst publicly praising their Nigerian partners for taking steps to reduce corruption, they understood that the country’s leaders continued systematically to plunder the wealth of the nation. “And it has been stolen by individuals mostly occupying government positions, both at the national level and at the state and local level,” Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson acknowledged.<sup>68</sup>

In fact, American officials knew that their partners in the Nigerian government were routinely breaking the law to maintain their hold on power. They recognised, for example, that some Nigerian politicians had their rivals assassinated: “Many politicians at all levels, both inside and outside government, are involved in assassinating their enemies.” American officials also understood that Nigerian politicians were consistently manipulating the country’s elections, having learnt that “rigging and violence were effective ways to maintain control of the political process.” The country’s dominant political party has been “shamelessly willing to rig the results.”<sup>69</sup>

Nonetheless, American officials maintained their same overall approach to Africa. They continued to view both Nigeria and South Africa as the keys to the continent, never seeming to care how their Nigerian allies nor any other African partners had gained political power, as long as they opened their markets to the United States. “We will work with anybody; we know how to open markets,” Clinton explained. “The United States is an expert at opening markets.” Indeed, American officialdom remained convinced that it was far more important to achieve the strategic goal of securing more of the continent’s markets for American businesses than to end centuries of exploitation of Africa. It was imperative to “wrench open those markets,” as Clinton put it. “I mean, for goodness sakes, this is the 21st century,” she added. “We’ve got to get over what happened 50, 100, 200 years ago, and let’s make money for everybody.”<sup>70</sup>

The American approach to Africa was consistent with its pattern of behaviour throughout the rest of the world. As the WikiLeaks cables reveal, American officials were operating in comparable ways in every area of the globe. Their actions perhaps remain best understood within the first world/third world framework that Manning identified when she sent the cables to WikiLeaks. In the first world, American officials worked to harness the power of Europe and the Asia Pacific, two of the major centres of global power. They sought to maintain structures that kept both regions positioned as powerful but subordinate areas of the global economy and international system. At the same time, in the third world—Latin America, the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Africa—American officials sought direct forms of exploitation. Perceiving major economic and strategic advantages, the Americans worked to keep the third world open to permanent exploitation.

Undoubtedly, the WikiLeaks cables provide critically important insights into how American officials pursued their imperial goals. When integrated with source material already in the public domain, the cables reveal many of the specific ways in which American officials worked to keep each area of the world performing its own special function in the world system. Despite several signs that point in other directions, such as officials in Washington denying Manning's claims about what the cables revealed about American diplomacy, their supporters in the American mass media ignoring Manning's perspective, and American diplomatic historians largely dismissing the entire archive, Manning had it right all along. The cables document disturbing American activity that affects everyone on the planet. They show how the United States exploits the world, in detail, from an internal perspective, just as Manning suggested they did. She should feel vindicated.<sup>71</sup>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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## Notes

1. Chelsea Elizabeth Manning, born Bradley Edward Manning, is a transgender woman. During a private chat in late May 2010, Manning explained, “i [sic] wouldn’t mind going to prison for the rest of my life, or being executed so much, if it wasn’t for the possibility of having pictures of me ... plastered all over the world press ... as [a] boy.” See Evan Hansen, “Manning-Lamo Chat Logs Revealed,” *Wired*, 13 July 2011 <https://www.wired.com/2011/07/manning-lamo-logs/>. On 22 August 2013, Manning announced, “I am Chelsea Manning. I am a female.” Please “refer to me by my new name and use the feminine pronoun.” See “‘I am Chelsea’: Read Manning’s full statement,” *Today* (22 August 2013) <https://www.today.com/news/i-am-chelsea-read-mannings-full-statement-6C10974052>. On 8 December 2014, Manning confirmed that she had served in the United States Army as a transgender woman “in secret.” See Chelsea Manning, “I am a transgender woman and the government is denying my civil rights,” *Guardian* (8 December 2014): <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/08/chelsea-manning-transgender-rights>. When Manning petitioned the American government to commute her sentence, she explained that she is a transgender woman. “I am not Bradley Manning,” she wrote. “I really never was. I am Chelsea Manning, a proud woman who is transgender and who, through this application, is respectfully requesting a first chance at life.” See Matthew Shaer, “The Long, Lonely Road of Chelsea Manning,” *New York Times Magazine*, 12 June 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/12/magazine/the-long-lonely-road-of-chelsea-manning.html>.
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