By George Friedman

Julian Assange has declared that geopolitics will be separated into pre-"Cablegate" and post-"Cablegate" eras. That was a bold claim. However, given the intense interest that the leaks produced, it is a claim that ought to be carefully considered. Several weeks have passed since the first of the diplomatic cables were released, and it is time now to address the following questions: First, how significant were the leaks? Second, how could they have happened? Third, was their release a crime? Fourth, what were their consequences? Finally, and most important, is the WikiLeaks premise that releasing government secrets is a healthy and appropriate act a tenable position?

Let's begin by recalling that the U.S. State Department documents constituted the third wave of leaks. The first two consisted of battlefield reports from Iraq and Afghanistan. Looking back on those as a benchmark, it is difficult to argue that they revealed information that ran counter to informed opinion. I use the term "informed opinion" deliberately. For someone who was watching Iraq and Afghanistan with some care over the previous years, the leaks might have provided interesting details but they would not have provided any startling distinction between the reality that was known and what was revealed. If, on the other hand, you weren't paying close attention, and WikiLeaks provided your first and only view of the battlefields in any detail, you might have been surprised.

Let's consider the most controversial revelation, one of the tens of thousands of reports released on Iraq and Afghanistan and one in which a video indicated that civilians were deliberately targeted by U.S. troops. The first point, of course, is that the insurgents, in violation of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, did not go into combat wearing armbands or other distinctive clothing to distinguish themselves from non-combatants. The Geneva Conventions have always been adamant on this requirement because they regarded combatants operating under the cover of civilians as being responsible for putting those civilians in harm's way, not the uniformed troops who were forced to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants when the combatants deliberately chose to act in violation of the Geneva Conventions.

It follows from this that such actions against civilians are inevitable in the kind of war Iraqi insurgents chose to wage. Obviously, this particular event has to be carefully analyzed, but in a war in which combatants blend with non-combatants, civilian casualties will occur, and so will criminal actions by uniformed troops. Hundreds of thousands of troops have fought in Iraq, and the idea that criminal acts would be absent is absurd. What is most startling is not the presence of potentially criminal actions but their scarcity. Anyone who has been close to combat or who has read histories of World War II would be struck not by the presence of war crimes but by the fact that in all the WikiLeaks files so few potential cases are found. War is controlled violence, and when controls fail — as they inevitably do — uncontrolled and potentially criminal violence occurs. However, the case cited by WikiLeaks with much fanfare did not clearly show criminal actions on the part of American troops as much as it did the consequences of the insurgents violating the Geneva Conventions.

Only those who were not paying attention to the fact that there was a war going on, or who had no understanding of war, or who wanted to pretend to be shocked for political reasons, missed two crucial points: It was the insurgents who would be held responsible for criminal acts under the Geneva Conventions for posing as non-combatants, and there were extraordinarily few cases of potential war crimes that were contained in the leaks.

The diplomatic leaks are similar. There is precious little that was revealed that was unknown to the informed observer. For example, anyone reading STRATFOR knows we have argued that it was not only the Israelis but also the Saudis that were most concerned about Iranian power and most insistent that the United States do something about it. While the media treated this as a significant revelation, it required a profound lack of understanding of the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf to regard U.S. diplomatic cables on the subject as surprising.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates' statement in the leaks that the Saudis were always prepared to fight to the last American was embarrassing, in the sense that Gates would have to meet with Saudi leaders in the future and would do so with them knowing what he thinks of them. Of course, the Saudis are canny politicians and diplomats and they already knew how the American leadership regarded their demands.

There were other embarrassments also known by the informed observer. Almost anyone who worries about such things is aware that Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is close to the Russians and likes to party with young women. The latest batch of leaks revealed that the American diplomatic service was also aware of this. And now Berlusconi is aware that they know of these things, which will make it hard for diplomats to pretend that they don't know of these things. Of course, Berlusconi was aware that everyone knew of these things and clearly didn't care, since the charges were all over Italian media.

I am not cherry-picking the Saudi or Italian memos. The consistent reality of the leaks is that they do not reveal anything new to the informed but do provide some amusement over certain comments, such as Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitri Medvedev being called "Batman and Robin." That's amusing, but it isn't significant. Amusing and interesting but almost never significant is what I come away with having read through all three waves of leaks.

Obviously, the leaks are being used by foreign politicians to their own advantage. For example, the Russians feigned shock that NATO would be reassuring the Balts about defense against a potential Russian invasion or the Poles using the leaks to claim that solid U.S.-Polish relations are an illusion. The Russians know well of NATO plans for defending the Baltic states against a hypothetical Russian invasion, and the Poles know equally well that U.S.-Polish relations are complex but far from illusory. The leaks provide an opportunity for feigning shock and anger and extracting possible minor concessions or controlling atmospherics. They do not, however, change the structure of geopolitics.

Indeed, U.S. diplomats come away looking sharp, insightful and decent. While their public statements after a conference may be vacuous, it is encouraging to see that their read of the situation and of foreign leaders is unsentimental and astute. Everything from memos on senior leaders to anonymous snippets from apparently junior diplomats not only are on target (in the sense that STRATFOR agrees with them) but are also well-written and clear. I would argue that the leaks paint a flattering picture overall of the intellect of U.S. officials without revealing, for the most part, anything particularly embarrassing.

At the same time, there were snarky and foolish remarks in some of the leaks, particularly personal comments about leaders and sometimes their families that were unnecessarily offensive. Some of these will damage diplomatic careers, most generated a good deal of personal tension and none of their authors will likely return to the countries in which they served. Much was indeed unprofessional, but the task of a diplomat is to provide a sense of place in its smallest details, and none expect their observations ever to be seen by the wrong people. Nor do nations ever shift geopolitical course over such insults, not in the long run. These personal insults were by far the most significant embarrassments to be found in the latest release. Personal tension is not, however, international tension.

This raises the question of why diplomats can't always simply state their minds rather than publicly mouth preposterous platitudes. It could be as simple as this: My son was a terrible pianist. He completely lacked talent. After his recitals at age 10, I would pretend to be enthralled. He knew he was awful and he knew I knew he was awful, but it was appropriate that I not admit what I knew. It is called politeness and sometimes affection. There is rarely affection among nations, but politeness calls for behaving differently when a person is in the company of certain other people than when that person is with colleagues talking about those people. This is the simplest of human rules. Not admitting what you know about others is the foundation of civilization. The same is true among diplomats and nations.

And in the end, this is all I found in the latest WikiLeaks release: a great deal of information about people who aren't American that others certainly knew and were aware that the Americans knew, and now they have all seen it in writing. It would take someone who truly doesn't understand how geopolitics really works to think that this would make a difference. Some diplomats may wind up in other postings, and perhaps some careers will be ended. But the idea that this would somehow change the geopolitics of our time is really hard to fathom. I have yet to see Assange point to something so significant that that it would justify his claim. It may well be that the United States is hiding secrets that would reveal it to be monstrous. If so, it is not to be found in what has been released so far.

There is, of course, the question of whether states should hold secrets, which is at the root of the WikiLeaks issue. Assange claims that by revealing these secrets WikiLeaks is doing a service. His ultimate maxim, as he has said on several occasions, is that if money and resources are being spent on keeping something secret, then the reasons must be insidious. Nations have secrets for many reasons, from protecting a military or intelligence advantage to seeking some advantage in negotiations to, at times, hiding nefarious plans. But it is difficult to imagine a state — or a business or a church — acting without confidentiality. Imagine that everything you wrote and said in an attempt to figure out a problem was made public? Every

stupid idea that you discarded or clueless comment you expressed would now be pinned on you. But more than that, when you argue that nations should engage in diplomacy rather than war, taking away privacy makes diplomacy impossible. If what you really think of the guy on the other side of the table is made public, how can diplomacy work?

This is the contradiction at the heart of the WikiLeaks project. Given what I have read Assange saying, he seems to me to be an opponent of war and a supporter of peace. Yet what he did in leaking these documents, if the leaking did anything at all, is make diplomacy more difficult. It is not that it will lead to war by any means; it is simply that one cannot advocate negotiations and then demand that negotiators be denied confidentiality in which to conduct their negotiations. No business could do that, nor could any other institution. Note how vigorously WikiLeaks hides the inner workings of its own organization, from how it is funded to the people it employs.

Assange's claims are made even more interesting in terms of his "thermonuclear" threat. Apparently there are massive files that will be revealed if any harm comes to him. Implicit is the idea that they will not be revealed if he is unharmed — otherwise the threat makes no sense. So, Assange's position is that he has secrets and will keep them secret if he is not harmed. I regard this as a perfectly reasonable and plausible position. One of the best uses for secrets is to control what the other side does to you. So Assange is absolutely committed to revealing the truth unless it serves his interests not to, in which case the public has no need to know.

It is difficult to see what harm the leaks have done, beyond embarrassment. It is also difficult to understand why WikiLeaks thinks it has changed history or why Assange lacks a sufficient sense of irony not to see the contradiction between his position on openness and his willingness to keep secrets when they benefit him. But there is also something important here, which is how this all was leaked in the first place.

To begin that explanation, we have to go back to 9/11 and the feeling in its aftermath that the failure of various government entities to share information contributed to the disaster. The answer was to share information so that intelligence analysts could draw intelligence from all sources in order to connect the dots. Intelligence organizations hate sharing information because it makes vast amounts of information vulnerable. Compartmentalization makes it hard to connect dots, but it also makes it harder to have a WikiLeaks release. The tension between intelligence and security is eternal, and there will never be a clear solution.

The real issue is who had access to this mass of files and what controls were put on them. Did the IT department track all external drives or e-mails? One of the reasons to be casual is that this was information that was classified secret and below, with the vast majority being at the confidential, no-foreign-distribution level. This information was not considered highly sensitive by the U.S. government. Based on the latest trove, it is hard to figure out how the U.S. government decides to classify material. But it has to be remembered that given their level of classification these files did not have the highest security around them because they were not seen as highly sensitive.

Still, a crime occurred. According to the case of Daniel Ellsberg, who gave a copy of the Pentagon Papers on Vietnam to a New York Times reporter, it is a crime for someone with a

security clearance to provide classified material for publication but not a crime for a publisher to publish it, or so it has become practice since the Ellsberg case. Legal experts can debate the nuances, but this has been the practice for almost 40 years. The bright line is whether the publisher in any way encouraged or participated in either the theft of the information or in having it passed on to him. In the Ellsberg case, he handed it to reporters without them even knowing what it was. Assange has been insisting that he was the passive recipient of information that he had nothing to do with securing.

Now it is interesting whether the sheer existence of WikiLeaks constituted encouragement or conspiracy with anyone willing to pass on classified information to him. But more interesting by far is the sequence of events that led a U.S. Army private first class not only to secure the material but to know where to send it and how to get it there. If Pfc. Bradley Manning conceived and executed the theft by himself, and gave the information to WikiLeaks unprompted, Assange is clear. But anyone who assisted Manning or encouraged him is probably guilty of conspiracy, and if Assange knew what was being done, he is probably guilty, too. There was talk about some people at MIT helping Manning. Unscrambling the sequence is what the Justice Department is undoubtedly doing now. Assange cannot be guilty of treason, since he isn't a U.S. citizen. But he could be guilty of espionage. His best defense will be that he can't be guilty of espionage because the material that was stolen was so trivial.

I have no idea whether or when he got involved in the acquisition of the material. I do know — given the material leaked so far — that there is little beyond minor embarrassments contained within it. Therefore, Assange's claim that geopolitics has changed is as false as it is bold. Whether he committed any crime, including rape, is something I have no idea about. What he is clearly guilty of is hyperbole. But contrary to what he intended, he did do a service to the United States. New controls will be placed on the kind of low-grade material he published. Secretary of Defense Gates made the following point on this:

"Now, I've heard the impact of these releases on our foreign policy described as a meltdown, as a game-changer, and so on. I think those descriptions are fairly significantly overwrought. The fact is, governments deal with the United States because it's in their interest, not because they like us, not because they trust us, and not because they believe we can keep secrets. Many governments — some governments — deal with us because they fear us, some because they respect us, most because they need us. We are still essentially, as has been said before, the indispensable nation."

"Is this embarrassing? Yes. Is it awkward? Yes. Consequences for U.S. foreign policy? I think fairly modest."

I don't like to give anyone else the final word, but in this case Robert Gates' view is definitive. One can pretend that WikiLeaks has redefined geopolitics, but it hasn't come close.