

What Are U.S. Assurances Worth?

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In the film 2001: A Space Odyssey, the sentient computer HAL becomes unreliable and eventually homicidal. The cause of this is a contradiction in HAL's programming. While programmed to act on and dispense information in a straightforward and accurate fashion, HAL is simultaneously programmed to lie about the true nature of his mission. As his human supervisor puts it in the movie's sequel, 2010: The Year We Make Contact, HAL "was told to lie by people who find it very easy to lie." Those people were the one's running the U.S. government.

This is, of course, a bit of cinema fiction. However, the sentiment described about government lying, that it is done in an all too easy manner, is accurate and prevails in the real world. Indeed, so prevalent are government's lies that citizens have long been cynical of political speech, while political leaders consider those who, in a public way, expose their practice of official duplicity, to be criminals.

Punishing “Those Who Told”

Take the case of Julian Assange, the man who established WikiLeaks and used it to reveal the crimes of the George W. Bush administration in Iraq. Assange is now in jail in Great Britain awaiting likely extradition to the U.S. where his fate is, at best, a lifetime of incarceration. What is Assange’s crime according to the American government? He exposed its lies, its deadly misrepresentations. One might object that Assange’s crime is also that he told “official secrets.” Yes, that is certainly true. However, these were secrets which hid war crimes—crimes which are illegal both under U.S. and international law. So the whole “revealing secrets” accusation is flawed and can only stand as legitimate before the public if, as is likely, they conveniently ignore the war crimes side of the equation.

Now the British high court says it will allow Assange’s extradition if the U.S. government, the same government that WikiLeaks has shown to have been habitually lying, gives assurances that Assange will not be (1) denied of his right to free speech, (2) be discriminated against because he is not a U.S. citizen, (3) not be subjected to the death penalty.

We might legitimately ask what U.S. assurances generally, and particularly in the case of Julian Assange, can possibly be worth? After all, those who will give these assurances will be the agents (more on this below) of an institution that has standardized official lying?

Among other things, this proposed arrangement tells us that there may be a sort of agreed upon gullibility among the higher echelon institutions of governments across the globe. After all, if I, a retired college professor, can figure out the illogic in this situation, so can the British judges. But it makes no difference. They are playing to political standards that do not care about logic, much less justice.

Nonsensical Assurances

Consider the required assurance of Assange’s “right of free speech.” Assange, not being a U.S. citizen, has no rights under the U.S. Constitution. Agents of the U.S. government’s executive branch may say to the British judges, well in this case we assure that Assange will be treated like a citizen and be accorded 1st Amendment rights. This would also satisfy the second demand that the U.S. will not bias Assange because he is a non-citizen. However, even if these agents are sincere (which we can reasonably doubt), it doesn’t mean much because the judiciary is a separate branch of government here in the U.S. and is not bound by any non-constitutional promises given by the executive. A prosecutor can even ignore the assurance that there will be no death penalty. Broadening the charges against Assange to include espionage would bring the death penalty into play.

In this case, what really is the goal of the intellects in the U.S. government? Here is what Jonathan Cook, an award-winning British journalist, says: “Five years on, Assange is still caged in Belmarsh [Britain’s] high-security prison, convicted of absolutely nothing. The British and US establishment’s aim is to keep the WikiLeaks founder permanently disappeared from view — a warning to others not to expose state crimes, as Assange did in publishing details of British and US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

Conclusion

This is revenge writ large. The state’s (any state’s) ability to pursue this sort of retribution is a function of institutional or bureaucratic power. In other words, the power of any one or a few individuals standing alone, to scare off a nation’s journalists, and take revenge against those who defy them is, at best, local. But if you have control of a bureaucracy claiming to represent law and order and the ability to direct its agents against a target, your power increases exponentially.

And what of the willingness of these agents to do their job? Keep in mind that external environments we live in are major shapers of our behavior. The environment you spend your adult life working in is a major component of this process. Roughly 2 million people work for the executive branch of the U.S.

government (excluding the armed forces). These people operate within a hierarchical subculture that has its own specialized worldview incorporating ideas of patriotism and dedication. To this can be added the simple fact that many employees are career bureaucrats, economically locked into their jobs.

Such bureaucratic positions are, as noted, usually hierarchical. That is they are top-down where one has designated duties defined by superiors. Much like in the military, following one's orders is a mark of group loyalty and a path to career success. Those who concoct the lies (and, like HAL's masters, do so easily) are usually situated at the top of the organization, and those who act in the real world on the basis of the lies are those below. For the lower echelons, the lie comes to constitute truth within their operational subculture. Finally, the number of those familiar with the legal/constitutional limits to U.S. government action is miniscule. The number of those who would act on such knowledge where necessary is smaller still.

The need to lie seems always to have been a part of "political leadership." We often try to soft-pedal its harmfulness by relating it to morale boosting. George W. Bush lied to the American people about the reasons for the Iraq war. Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning caught him at that lie and, through the auspices of WikiLeaks, "told the world about him." Subsequent U.S. leaders, using their institutional and bureaucratic power have chased Assange down, cornered him in London, and now seek to extradite him to the U.S. For those agents who are acting the role of a government posse, the war and its death and devastation, the lies told to justify it, and ex-president Bush's position of immunity, are taken as legal givens. What stands out for them is the "crime" of exposing the lie —making public the leader and his institution's sin.

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