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In salute to disobedient, moral journalism.

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Exposing the Show Trial Against Wikileaks Founder Julian Assange

By Elizabeth Leier

Assange's first extradition hearing took place in London over several weeks from February to September 2020. A decision regarding his extradition is expected to be handed down in the New Year – on January 4, 2021. This hearing is the culmination of a struggle which has lasted a decade, ever since Assange had the courage to publish troves of classified information which revealed, amongst other things, the war crimes committed by Western allies during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

These publications earned Assange and his website many awards which recognized his heroism and contribution to journalism. In spite of this recognition, he now faces the overwhelming might of the United States government which is doing everything in its power to silence him and deny him the protections ordinarily reserved to the press.

This fight is monumental, and Assange's personal future is not the only thing at stake. Fundamental democratic freedoms and the rights to dissent will be shaped by the outcome of this fight. Should he be extradited and, almost certainly found guilty, Assange faces 175 years in a U.S. Federal prison for publishing the truth about American imperialism and the wars that have been waged by its allies.

Case Background

Julian Assange founded Wikileaks in 2006 with the aim of empowering citizens by granting them access to information that is otherwise suppressed by those in power. In 2010, Wikileaks published the famous "Collateral Murder" video which showed the callous murder of two Reuters journalists and other civilians by an American helicopter in an Iraqi suburb. This video was followed by the *Iraq War Logs*, the *Afghanistan War Diaries* and *Cablegate*, which revealed US army field reports and diplomatic cables, thrusting Assange and Wikileaks into the public spotlight.

In 2010, Assange faced allegations of sexual misconduct in Sweden. He always denied the allegations and, contrary to most reports, always sought to answer them, provided guarantees be made against a possible onward extradition to the United States. In 2013, a [Freedom of Information](#)¹ request (FOIA) filed by Italian journalist Stefania Maurizi revealed that the U.K. authorities were pressuring the Swedish prosecution against interviewing Assange in London and dissuading them from dropping the preliminary investigation. Finally, after Assange's expulsion from the Ecuadorian Embassy in 2019, [Sweden officially dropped the case](#)². The U.N Special Rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer investigated the initial allegations made by the Swedish prosecution and declared them to be unusual, in addition to noting several procedural abnormalities.

Countering Disinformation

It is crucial to understand that the only crime Assange has ever been charged with is a bail violation. This charge is highly contestable under international law, given that Assange sought and was granted political asylum by Ecuador in 2012. Assange entered the Ecuadorian embassy, not because he was fleeing from Swedish justice, but because he had a credible fear of persecution from the United States government in relation to his publishing work. He was indeed granted asylum by the left-wing government of Rafael Correa on the strength of these fears, which were clearly justified given the prosecution he now faces. However, the U.K. refused to grant him safe passage out of the country, which resulted in his 7-year de facto imprisonment in the London Embassy.

Despite experiencing harsh conditions within London's Ecuadorian Embassy, such as a daily police presence and constant surveillance, Assange continued to work and publish during his confinement.

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Acceptable Censorship: The extradition farce and media silence on Assange

When do we ever hear about "responsible journalism"? When is morality ever evoked as the guiding tenet of this work?

The reference to "disobedient, moral journalism" at the top of the printed issue is borrowed from John Pilger's article this past September, "[The Stalinist Trial of Julian Assange](#)". Pilger invokes "the exceptions, the dissidents ... who belong to no club" as the vanguard of responsible journalism at a moment where, more than ever, mainstream media is compromised, and journalists who wish to gain or retain stature and a paycheck must keep silent, or follow the media line drawn for them by funders and governments.

This issue looks at both the implication of the trial against Assange on media freedom, and the wider imprint of the *War Diaries* considering the continued engagement of NATO forces across the Middle East. Joining this issue is fellow *Canadian Dimension* contributor, Elizabeth Leier, breaking down the essential points of the persecution of Assange to date in "Exposing the Show Trial Against Wikileaks Founder Julian Assange".

Since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, a generation of us have grown up with this US-led war. A generation of us have witnessed friends, still in their teens, enlisting to fight an imperialist war with an enemy that was raised and armed by the US. Now, this same generation has come of age watching the US government persecute Wikileaks founder and publisher Julian Assange for publishing the truth about the nature of US wars and perpetration of war crimes, also laying bare the complicity of allies like Canada, Australia, and the U.K. It is grotesque that in all this time, the only real punishment that has been given out has been against Assange, as he spends most of his time imprisoned in solitary confinement.

As Assange described in his [last interview](#) on September 20, 2018 from the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, "Most human wars have come about as a result of lies, and that seems absolutely clear in democracies. Democracies have to be lied into war." So when mainstream media – which dominates our screens, apps and access – is more concerned with profit than with truth, we must ask the same question Assange then poses: "how many deaths is each journalist responsible for?"

Continued:

Exposing the show trial...

In 2016, Wikileaks published the leaked Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails which showed the extent of corruption within the U.S. Democratic Party. This release drew condemnation from those who falsely equated the revelations to an endorsement of Donald Trump. Having been the object of much disinformation, Assange now found himself embroiled in the absurd Russiagate scandal propagated by the mainstream press (since debunked by journalists such as [Aaron Maté](#)³, [Glenn Greenwald](#)⁴ and [Matt Taibbi](#)⁵). Prior to his expulsion from the Embassy, Assange also faced increasingly cruel smears from the media who made a point of ridiculing him over petty allegations and repeatedly disparaged his character.

The motivations behind his 2019 expulsion and subsequent arrest were made clear as the United States immediately filed their extradition request with U.K. authorities. Having never been charged with a crime or displayed violent behavior, Assange was found guilty of breaching bail by a judge - who thought it appropriate to label him a narcissist - and carted off to HMP Belmarsh, a high-security prison built to house terrorists. In fact, the degree of procedural abuse and bias that has thus far emerged from the Assange case is bewildering.

Beyond the outrageous and politically motivated claims of espionage and treason directed against Assange, the absurdity of this case further emerged as the [secret spying operation](#)⁶ conducted against him in the Ecuadorian Embassy was revealed by the security staff tasked with surveilling him. According to testimony, the company hired by the Ecuadorian state to surveil the Embassy, U.C Global, was in fact spying on Assange as he held legal meetings and transmitting the information to the CIA. That this breach of lawyer-client privilege did not lead to an immediate dismissal of the case is a clear sign of the judicial bias against the Wikileaks founder.

The U.S. Case

The importance of this prosecution can hardly be overstated. The U.S. government is seeking to extradite Assange on the basis of two categories of offenses. First, he is alleged to have conspired with whistleblower Chelsea Manning to hack a password hash, the inference being that this would have enabled her to anonymize her access to sensitive files. There is no evidence either of the hack taking place, or indeed of the motivation for wanting to do so in the first place. As heard in the defense's opening statement, Manning was eventually identified using an I.P address, not through her user identification. Moreover, since she already had access to all the documents she eventually leaked, there was no need for her to require special access.

The second and most dangerous category of offense is being pursued under the 1917 Espionage Act. Under the Act, which was notably used to prosecute union leader Eugene Debs for his outspoken condemnation of the First World War, Assange is alleged to have conspired with Manning to release classified information, causing irreparable harm to U.S. interests and putting the lives of military service members and informants at risk.

What is remarkable about these allegations is that they have already been solidly disproven. During Chelsea Manning's court martial in 2013, the U.S. government tried very hard to come up with evidence of harm caused by the Wikileaks revelations - they found none. In addition, many journalists who worked on the revelations have since attested to Assange's rigorous harm minimization efforts. This is corroborated by the recent [release of a recorded call](#)⁷ where Assange attempts to convince the U.S. State Department to protect at-risk individuals.

As for Manning conspiring with Assange, she has clearly stated on several occasions that she was solely driven by her own morality. Having borne witness to the atrocities of U.S. imperial wars, Manning mobilized her own agency to denounce them. [In chat logs released](#)⁸ by *Wired* magazine in 2011, Manning stated "I want people to see the truth... regardless of who they are... because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public."

Abuse as Process and the Ongoing Show Trial

Speaking to the United Nations during his Embassy confinement, Assange deftly identified a new and disturbing trend. Having been arbitrarily detained for a decade without charges, he presented his situation as abuse-through-process. He noted how this tactic is increasingly used in cases to intimidate and dissuade dissidents by subjecting them to lengthy and incoherent bureaucratic processes designed to strip them of their energy and will to fight.

There is no doubt that process has been used to abuse Julian Assange. The man who was dragged out of the Ecuadorian Embassy by police in April 2019 had visibly suffered from prolonged isolation and increasing punitive treatment. Visiting him shortly after his arrest and incarceration in Belmarsh, Melzer declared that Assange was exhibiting all the signs associated with psychological torture. Undeterred by these findings, British authorities proceeded to place Assange in solitary confinement and deny him the basic tools needed to adequately prepare his defense, including proper access to his lawyers. In a subsequent demonstration of cruelty and bad faith, the authorities reportedly subjected him to strip searches and other ill-treatment on the first day of his trial.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Assange has further suffered from prolonged isolation, in addition to being arbitrarily kept in an environment where risk of infection is high. As he has been in poor health since his 7-year incarceration in the Embassy, Assange's chances of fatally succumbing to COVID-19 are elevated; accordingly, many doctors [have called for his immediate release](#)⁹ on medical grounds. Authorities have thus far refused calls for his release, despite the fact that he is no longer serving a sentence.

The case against Assange is clearly driven by political interests and malice. The objective is to silence him, whether it be by breaking him to the point of death or to lock him away in a U.S. prison.

Assange's defense has, so far, presented very strong and coherent arguments. They have torn apart the false narratives that underpin the U.S. prosecution. During the evidentiary proceedings in September 2020, they argued against extradition on two points. First, they showed how this prosecution constitutes an abuse of process - as it is both politically motivated and based on a misrepresentation of facts. The political argument is extremely significant and was supported by witness statements attesting to the Trump administration's manifest desire to curtail press freedoms. Secondly, they argued that Assange's rights are highly likely to be violated as he is subjected to the inhumane conditions of U.S. detention. They also stressed his suffering physical and mental health.

Implications for Press Freedoms

This case is tremendously important, as the extradition of the Wikileaks founder not only poses an existential threat to journalism with the risk of setting a precedent, but also charts the course for the recognition of universalized American jurisdiction. Assange is an Australian citizen, not American. Yet, the U.S. government is trying to justify an indictment based on treason laws in a case where the alleged offences occurred outside of their jurisdiction. Incredibly, this prosecution would also preclude the invocation of both a public interest argument and the First Amendment, which serves to protect press freedoms.

This effectively means that any foreign journalist who publishes sensitive information outside of the U.S. is at risk of prosecution. The implications for journalism and freedom of the press are therefore immense and universal. As evidenced by the indictment of journalist Glenn Greenwald in Brazil, other jurisdictions are already following the American example to prosecute members of the press.

Much has been made of the potential (though yet unproven) harm caused by Wikileaks revelations. This has been an effective smokescreen used to mask the actual, empirical harms caused by American imperialism in the context of its illegal wars. Assange revealed war crimes and human rights violations at great personal risk. Indeed, he has paid a great price for his courage. His future now depends on the collective outcry and opposition to the judicial charade taking place in London. We must stand up for Julian Assange and prevent his extradition at all costs.

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Statement from Nils Melzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture

Excerpted from [news item](#) published by the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (December 8, 2020).

"Mr. Assange is not a criminal convict and poses no threat to anyone, so his prolonged solitary confinement in a high security prison is neither necessary nor proportionate and clearly lacks any legal basis [...]"

Prison decongestion measures seen around the world in response to COVID-19 should be extended to all inmates whose imprisonment is not absolutely necessary," the expert said.

"First and foremost, alternative non-custodial measures should be extended to those with specific vulnerabilities such as Mr. Assange who suffers from a pre-existing respiratory health condition [...]"

A sidenote on open access, because a free society is possible only when knowledge itself is free.

Just as Assange was criticized for not being a 'proper journalist', we are witnessing increasing attacks on higher profile progressive news, from *The Canary* and *Black Agenda Report*, to *Consortium News*, the *Grayzone*, *Mint Press News*, and many other publications that are breaking news that runs counter to the narratives of establishment outlets and their corporate sponsors. Vetting initiatives by Google, Twitter and Facebook promote Silicon Valley-approved publications, while censoring or rigging the reach of independent news. At the mercy of algorithms and corporate or state-controlled criteria, adversarial journalists and publications are deemed illegitimate on these platforms, or don't even stand the chance to reach audiences.

The discipline of journalism itself is also becoming increasingly elitist: a trade that has become relegated to academic degree farms, pursued by middle and upper-middle classes. This institutionalization and class divide that strikes through the practice of journalism, fuels media as business, not media as a moral duty. Not only ostracizing the working class from even pursuing opportunities in publishing, it turns reporting into another careerist ladder to conquer, a battleground of slick personalities, and a practice to be "theorized" from the safety of lecture halls.

Who has the resources, the audience, the editorial support, and the legal protection to do this work? Even "progressive" journalism means carefully treading the line of acceptable politics that offer no challenge to the status quo. Independent journalists are increasingly atomized, having to publish on their own without the support of a publication and collective—those that attain 'success' alone often have the benefit of greater social and economic capital. Even many "progressives" have abandoned and shunned Assange despite the immense implications of his prosecution, to protect their own reputations and incomes. What does this mean for the coverage of vital and complicated stories, when those who are left to do the work are all the more exposed and vulnerable?

The truth of war often comes late, rarely seen or exposed by journalists who "embed" with militaries, who often glorify their witness to the danger and immediacy of carnage. And yet, more than ever, the coverage of anti-imperialist, anti-war stories is inseparable from the academic industry, the degree-mills that have bastardized environments of learning and education, and increased the divide between those who can be verified members of "the fourth estate".

Attacks on media are intrinsically connected with the privatization and ownership of scholarly research—the ownership and restriction of knowledge as capital, as secret. Remember the work of Aaron Swartz, who courageously advocated for open access, breaking the silos of universities with direct action that took publically funded research out from behind paywalls and put it back into the hands of the people.

Swartz died on January 11, 2013, hanging himself at home. He was ultimately punished by the US government for his brave actions against the corporate monopoly over academic research. The young man was backed into a corner with charges of 35 years in prison under the US federal government's anti-hacking statute, the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, but his legacy has inspired many and has only grown in relevance, no less with the glaring lack of transparency of our own governments.

Knowledge is threatening. It is the most volatile form of empowerment. Free access removes the illusion of meritocracy that underpins education-for-profit and a society that sees knowledge as a commodity rather than a right. Fundamentally, there is no democracy without transparency.

What Assange and Wikileaks revealed was material that would likely never be made available by government agencies responding to FOIA (or here in Canada, ATI) requests.

As anyone who has attempted to file ATI requests in Canada knows, the value of "transparent governance" that the Canadian government - and particularly the branch of Global Affairs Canada - appears to champion, is an artificial veneer. ATI requests are not only severely backlogged, but are often returned with heavy redactions that need to be contested in court. In many cases, they are vetted by concerned corporations before being released to journalists. This creates additional risks, especially for those working independently to investigate state contractors. So what does this say about the mechanisms by which the public is meant to hold elected governments accountable?

It is all too obvious that without clear accountability, we do not live under the advanced democracy our politicians invoke. We need to know what private corporations we fund through so-called "public-private" partnerships, how many bombs, drones, and guns our paychecks are sponsoring, and how many lives we have collectively ended through our ignorance, apathy and silence.

As Tunisian writer and critic Mustapha Khayati once wrote - on a parallel form of liberation, that of words - "words will not cease to work until people do". Now more than ever, we need the independent spirit of rebellious journalism and guerilla publishing, of knowledge for the sake of it, exchange out of generosity, and publishing whenever, wherever possible - perhaps even (to borrow from the Situationists) "vulgarly".

The Spoils of War

A decade after publication, what have we really learned from the War Diaries?

By Lital Khaikin

“Dead Bastards”

What has changed about the memory of the wrongfully murdered civilians in Iraq since the words of a US Air force crew resounded around the world? Perhaps it was the primacy of US killings laid bare that triggered the public outrage to the now infamous “[Collateral Murder](#)”¹ video that was released by Wikileaks in April 2010. On July 12, 2007, US soldiers shot from an Apache helicopter over a suburb of Baghdad killing 11 civilians, including a Reuters photographer and his fixer, and wounding two children. *Look at those dead bastards.*

Thousands of war logs published as the Afghan and Iraq War Diaries exposed the crimes committed by US troops, the complicity of NATO allies, and undermined the establishment narratives that both justified perpetual war and manipulated the public into believing these campaigns were more successful in eradicating “terrorism” than they really were. The significance of the logs has been diminished in mainstream media over the years, amid the more persistent character attacks on Assange that have distracted from the substance of the publications, the role of his journalism, and even continued analysis of the leaked documents themselves.

Wikileaks’ release of the Afghan and Iraq War Diaries has been condemned for revealing the names of informants working abroad for the US within the massive archives, but more insidiously, also for turning the public support of entire nations away from the US-led wars. When the War Diaries were released, US veterans from Iraq Veterans Against the War—many of whom were deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan—condemned the lack of accountability and [described the incidents on film](#)² as “not isolated cases of ‘a few bad soldiers’ but rather, part of the nature of these wars.”

The [superseding indictment of May 2019](#)³ against Julian Assange assumes the intention of the War Diaries’ publication: “with reason to believe that the information was to be used to the injury of the United States or the advantage of any foreign nation”. This is a crucial point, as it suggests that publications that don’t serve the exclusive interests of the United States are public enemy number one. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—who has so aggressively pursued billions in arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—accused WikiLeaks of being a “[hostile intelligence service](#)”⁴ in his first speech as CIA Director in 2017.

As a publisher and clearinghouse of documents, this is an insidious claim to make against Wikileaks, opening the door for accusations of espionage and “hostile intelligence” for other publications that deign to make public the reality of western military operations, and shatter official narratives that justify these wars.

Yet, a war waged in the name of “anti-terrorism” inevitably unveiled itself to be a geopolitical power-grab over the vast resources of the Middle East and Central Asia. As historian Rashid Khalidi wrote in *Resurrecting Empire*—published shortly after the US invasion of Iraq—decrying the imperialist invasions of the Middle East has been construed by politicians as supporting ‘anti-Americanism’: “Claims that the United States might be engaging in imperialist behavior meet indignant rejections in these quarters, usually leavened with insults about the “anti-Americanism” and lack of patriotism of those making these assertions”.

Certainly this continues to resonate in the rhetoric used against Wikileaks, and opposition not only to perpetual wars but economic and political interventions staged by the US and its allies as “defending democracy”. It also hits close to home, as over the past few years, the research branch of the Canadian military has been quietly funding development of a tool [to screen social media](#)⁵ for supposedly “anti-western” rhetoric.

Canada joined the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Fueled by the narrative of the “War on Terror”, the Canadian Armed Forces saw [ballooning recruitment](#)⁶, despite the dramatic increase of [Canadian casualties](#)⁷ following the launch of Operation Medusa in 2006. Canadian troops were engaged in combat until 2011, but troops remained in Afghanistan until 2014—after widespread protest against the war threatened Conservative hold on power prior to the 2015 federal election.

Canadians were barraged with propaganda that claimed the war was, in the words of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, a “[noble and necessary](#)”⁸ cause. Yet, in a convenient erasure of history, the Canadian government website that outlines the [history of Canada’s involvement](#)⁹ describes the Taliban coming to power after the withdrawal of Soviet forces in the 80s, but fails to mention the US role of funding and arming their early cells (not even the heat-seeking Stinger missiles that the CIA supplied and later failed to buy back, [suddenly remembered by US media](#)¹⁰ after the 9/11 attacks).

While Wikileaks confirmed the widespread use of torture in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, significant evidence existed before the publication, pointing to the consistent disregard for human life and dignity, and complicity shown by NATO allies throughout their engagement. The realities of Abu Ghraib, for example, were explored in depth by journalist Seymour Hersh who, in his 2004 book *Chain of Command*, described a pattern of activity linking the interrogation processes in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Iraq War Diaries ultimately confirmed the extent to which US officials [ignored evidence](#)¹¹ of torture.

Canada, one of the early proponents of the UN Convention Against Torture, was not too concerned about being an instrument to torture in these campaigns. Canadian troops notoriously transferred Afghan detainees to US and Afghan forces under Afghanistan’s Karzai government, knowing that they would be tortured. Canadian officials denied evidence of abuse in Afghan prisons and [refused to monitor prisoners](#)¹² until 2007—even going against the explicit advice of its own generals.

Wikileaks also contributed to lifting the veil on the manufactured narrative of Iraq’s widespread development of weapons of mass destruction that justified the US-led invasion of the country in 2003. Convinced of yet another noble mission, Canada joined the US-led offensive in 2003, providing [far more tactical support](#)¹³ than Canadian politicians initially let on. Today, an undisclosed number of Canadian troops still remain in the country, [stationed at a US base](#)¹⁴ in Erbil, Kurdistan.

Despite the years of unfolding evidence of torture and murder of civilians, the impunity with which NATO forces operate in the Middle East has not diminished. Most recently, outgoing US President Donald Trump granted pardon to [four Blackwater contractors](#)¹⁵ who had opened in indiscriminate fire—with machine guns, grenades, and sniper fire—on a crowd of civilians in Iraq in 2004. Earlier in September, the US had also [blacklisted](#)¹⁶ International Criminal Court prosecutor Fatou Bensouda for her decisive action to investigate war crimes committed by the Taliban, and Afghan and US forces in Afghanistan.

Canada remains involved in restructuring Afghanistan, claiming that [additional funding announced on November 24, 2020](#)¹⁷ is committed to the “expansion of progress made over the past 19 years, most notably on the rights of women and girls, the rule of law and democratic institutions.” But what 19 years of progress does this refer to, with the Taliban’s continued hold on power, much less the deteriorated rights of women and girls?

As journalist and historian Steve Coll wrote in *Ghost Wars*—his exhaustive study of the US administration’s role and evolution since the CIA started putting bounties on Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan—the Taliban’s misogynistic regulations against women as they gained greater power in the 90s were met with “little protest” from the US State Department, as cables from Washington showed that the US hoped to “engage the new Taliban ‘interim government’ at an early stage”. In Canada, the rights and economic opportunities of women and girls are an oft-cited impetus for non-profits, foundations and private contractors to receive millions in funding from Global Affairs Canada, in countries where the US has waged or attempted coups and economic reforms.

Continued:

The spoils of war

Birds of a feather

Mounting evidence of NATO allies' war crimes continues to be made public, with the appalling findings on the conduct of Australian Defence Forces (ADF), who were deployed to Orūzgān province in Afghanistan. Despite a purported focus on [reconstruction activities](#)¹⁸ in the country since 2002, the recent publication of the Brereton report confirms the [unlawful killings of at least 39 people](#)¹⁹ by Australian soldiers, and mistreatment of two non-combatants that could amount to war crimes.

The [heavily redacted](#)²⁰ Brereton report was published on November 19, following a detailed four-year investigation by Australian judge and Army reserve Major General Paul Brereton. The report describes the practice of "blooding" by Australian Special Forces – a rite of passage where patrol commanders [required junior soldiers](#)²¹ to shoot and slit the throats of farmers and civilians to initiate their first kill. In response to the crimes described in the report, Australia's Chief of the Defence Force, General Angus Campbell, confirmed: "None were alleged to have occurred in circumstances in which the intent of the perpetrator was unclear, confused or mistaken. And every person spoken to by the Inquiry thoroughly understood the Law of Armed Conflict and the Rules of Engagement under which they operated. These findings allege the most serious breaches of military conduct and professional values."

Commissioned by the ADF, Brereton's report is also informed by the findings covering the period of 2005-2016 by Australian military sociologist Dr. Samantha Cromptoets. Initially conducting research on the culture of Australian Special Forces, Cromptoets documented the first-hand testimonies of veterans as they revealed to her a [widespread practice](#)²² of killing civilians.

The revelations should be of great concern for Canadians, as Australia is one of Canada's closest allies. Since the publication of the Brereton report, however, Canada's response has predictably been to pacify the public, instead of outright condemn a NATO ally's perpetration of war crimes.

The collaboration between Canadian and Australian forces in Afghanistan in light of the report has likewise been downplayed by the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM). As *Global News* reported on November 24, [a spokesperson stated](#)²³: "CANSOFCOM was not aware of these allegations until this inquiry was launched. No concerns were raised by CANSOFCOM personnel who worked with their ADF counterparts in Afghanistan." That no concerns were raised is concerning on its own, suggesting that if Canadian personnel knew of the Australian Special Forces' practice of blooding, their silence helped cover up the Australian war crimes. This would be consistent with the ADF's own "[code of silence](#)"²⁴ in Special Operations Task Groups.

Additional reports from a Dutch veteran whistleblower this December also reveal how the Dutch military may have killed civilians in Orūzgān, where they were deployed with the Australians. Dutch prosecutors are presently investigating allegations by a veteran that commanders [violated the Dutch army's rules of engagement](#)²⁵ to order him to fire heavy artillery at a house of civilians in the Chora Valley in 2007.

The statement by the US Iraq Veterans Against War a decade ago, triggered by the Wikileaks publication, continues to resonate. It's not a matter of a few 'bad apples', but the nature of these wars, and lack of accountability, that has revealed a glaring hypocrisy when western countries commit human rights atrocities with impunity.

The hand that feeds

Far from combatting extremism through the "War on Terror", the US and its allies have seeded poverty and deepened resentment, fueled illicit human and drug trafficking, and spurred wider proliferation of weapons. In a self-perpetuating cycle, this growth of violent extremism appears to justify ever more 'counter-insurgency' interventions.

The US and Taliban (or the unrecognized Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) [signed an agreement](#)²⁶ on February 29, 2020 which outlines a plan for US and Coalition withdrawal of troops; the release of prisoners; lobbying the UN for removal of sanctions and rewards on members of the Taliban; security cooperation between the US and Taliban; and "positive relations ... between the United States and the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government". A [second round of peace talks](#)²⁷ between the Taliban and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government is currently scheduled to begin on January 5 in Doha, Qatar. The Taliban has maintained a political office in Qatar since 2013, while the country has [long provided financial aid](#)²⁸ and haven to members of the Taliban and al-Qaida, as well as the al-Nusra Front operating in Syria.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has raised questions around the withdrawal of other NATO troops by May 1, 2021 – while also pointing toward the deteriorating cohesion and integrity of the NATO alliance. As journalist Murray Brewster [reported](#)²⁹ on November 24, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's statement on other NATO members having to make a "decision" on staying or leaving may inaccurately suggest that they have a genuine choice: "Stoltenberg staked his ground on the possibly quaint notion that the alliance is free to make its own collective decision about whether to follow the U.S. out the door next spring."

As development researcher Hanif Sufizada [summarized earlier this month](#)³⁰, the Taliban reportedly brought in \$1.6 billion in the fiscal year that ended in March 2020, with the majority of their income coming from opium production and mining overseen by the Da Dabaro Commission (the Taliban's Stone and Mines Commission). With not only rich oil, iron and copper deposits, but substantial known deposits of lithium that have been [compared to Bolivia's](#)³¹ and valued shortly after discovery in 2007 at [nearly \\$1 trillion](#)³², the "positive relations" the US seeks with the Taliban and Afghan government are thrown into stark contrast against the neoliberal reforms that Washington and NATO-funded non-profits and foundations have so carefully nursed with "stabilization" programs in the country.

Even the withdrawal of troops may prove to be superficial. The withdrawal of US troops that were stationed in Somalia earlier this year was simply a shift [into Kenya and Djibouti](#)³³. Similarly, as Omar al Bashir's government moved to normalize relations with Israel and pay out \$335 million in damages for the 1998 Embassy attacks, Trump [agreed to remove sanctions](#)³⁴ on Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism. But the US role in Sudan has long been downplayed by mainstream media, from the domino effect of the CIA's early sponsorship of the *mujahedeen* in Afghanistan through the 80s to how the CIA watched over Osama bin Laden's terrorist training camps in Sudan, planting the early seeds of some of the deepest problems with extremism that have since plagued the Sahel region.

How successful has this "War on Terror" been when branches of al-Qaida have spread far through Central and Southeast Asia, to the Caucasus, and throughout Northern Africa? Across Northern Africa, the sustained conflict from al-Qaida and ISIS branches gives incentive for colonial forces to remain stationed, where there are major stakes by NATO members and private corporations in African resources. [Just look at Mali](#)³⁶, where the French military maintains its counter-terrorism mission, clearly unable or unwilling to deal with the al-Qaida and ISIS cells that have only grown and spread deeper through the Sahel, while activists cry foul on the corruption of the African Union and the vast privatization imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as signs of African progress and democracy. Meanwhile, these al-Qaida and ISIS cells have been largely armed by weapons that were smuggled out of Ghaddafi's storehouses following the US coup in Libya.

Amid this rotation of US and NATO troops through ceaseless wars that have done more to seed violence than end it, what is the real legacy of Wikileaks and the War Diaries? As inconvenient as it is for those who make their business on war, the leaks undermined the arrogant banner of the "War on Terror" and the "democratic values" espoused by the NATO coalition, awakening the public to the behavior of politicians, commanders, and troops waging war in our names and funded with our money. And as Canada continues to arm the Saudi and UAE coalition in a proxy war in Yemen that continues to claim civilian lives, what can we honestly say we have learned? How many more "dead bastards" can we continue to justify?

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The visual artifacts of war

The visual and material character of the evidence of war crimes plays an important part in the public's response to western imperialist wars, especially as the theatre of war becomes increasingly automated.

The "Collateral Damage" video has become an artifact of cultural memory – not only the evidence of the heinous crime committed by US soldiers and covered up by the state, but marking a turning point in public perception of NATO's imperialist wars. Was this outrage triggered in part because the public witnessed war crimes through the immediacy of the first-person perspective of the viewfinder? Did this framing subconsciously place more emphasis on the viewer's experience precisely *as* an observer to war crimes?

The "Collateral Damage" video shocked the public with an evil that had previously been assigned to the enemies of the West. Through careful vetting of "embedded" journalists, publics in Canada and the US are safe from the more disturbing realities of the wars we fund. A controlled depiction of our militaries' engagement would funnel images of lungee (turban) -wearing troops, sometimes holding smiling children against dusty scenery. Visceral reactions could instead be spared for videos of ISIS beheadings or for the occasional Saudi public executions that disturb our screens. Islamic State videos of beheadings – which especially peaked in 2014 – have since spurred analysis of the use of aesthetics and digital media as a tool of terror, and a marked obsession by western mainstream media with the so-called "[production value](#)" of these videos. The West, it turned out, is not alone in appreciating the power of image composition to impose and intimidate.

But while the trigger in "Collateral Damage" was pulled by a person, over a decade following the murders, this video recalls the urgency of automation in the theatre of war. Since Wikileaks confirmed that NATO forces were using Reaper drones from a base in Nevada, the development of drones and lethal autonomous weapons systems has become this century's defining arms race. War is no longer just communicated to civilians as image – it is fought through image.

Video-based transmissions are communicated by lethal drones, from Syria, to Ukraine, to Nagorno-Karabakh, sometimes without human input into the decision to intercept, shoot and kill. Increasingly, the decisions and consequences of war are dissociated from the flesh and blood of victims – to the flat planes of screens and data. Along with a growing trend of outsourcing the dirty work to private military contractors, the growing depersonalization and automation of war presents new concerns for accountability and preventing future war crimes. But as private and government investment in developing the technology of automated war races ahead, our moral and legal safeguards have not kept up. What cost do we still stand to pay?

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