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WikiLeaks, A Post Postscript

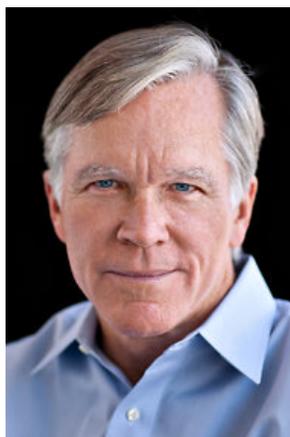
By BILL KELLER

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AS rumors build about the potential financial blockade against the New York Times by Visa, Mastercard, and American Express for hosting U.S. government cables published by WikiLeaks, I find myself in the awkward position of having to defend WikiLeaks.

During the [House Judiciary Subcommittee hearing](#) on July 11th, several Republicans made it clear they also want New York Times journalists charged under the Espionage Act for their recent stories on President Obama's 'Kill List' and secret US cyber attacks against Iran.



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As those of you who have followed my [turbulent relationship](#) with WikiLeaks and its Guru-In-Chief Julian Assange know, I am first in line when it comes to distancing myself from his brand of transparency without government checks and balances. You don't have to embrace Assange as a kindred spirit to believe that what he did in publishing those cables falls under the protection of the First Amendment. The backroom pressures by the Obama Administration's State Department to expand its financial blockade targeting WikiLeaks to include news organizations that host information from their trove of pilfered documents goes too far.

I've said repeatedly, in print and in a variety of public forums, that I would regard an attempt to criminalize WikiLeaks' publication of these documents as an attack on all of us, and I believe the mainstream media should come to his defense. Obama has clearly not lived up to his 2008 campaign promises to protect whistleblowers, rather his policy is more like China's treatment of dissidents. In fact the Syrian government has even decided against financial embargos or prosecution of Wikileaks despite their recent email dump.

The ACLU has shown through its government [FOIA requests](#) of WikiLeaks published cables, pretending secrets are secret after they are public isn't easy. While I am confident that news organizations will not succumb to these Orwellian tactics, this new chapter in the WikiLeaks

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Nicholas Blechman

Saga makes me long for the era when The Times and other mainstream media, were the responsible gatekeepers of information.

One of the most difficult roles of editor-in-chief is deciding when to hold back a story that your investigative journalists are willing to [risk going to jail for](#). These decisions are never easy. I was confronted with this dilemma as editor at The Times with the story of the [NSA's](#)

[warrantless wiretapping](#) of American citizens. [As I wrote](#) in my December 16, 2005 statement justifying my decision to hold publication of the NSA story for a year, I came to the conclusion that the Bush Administration's arguments to suppress outweighed the public's right to know:

"Officials also assured senior editors of The Times that a variety of legal checks had been imposed that satisfied everyone involved that the program raised no legal questions. As we have done before in rare instances when faced with a convincing national security argument, we agreed not to publish at that time."

Had The Times had exclusive access to the WikiLeaks cables, we could have pursued a similar government-review-before-publication policy, thus safeguarding national security from legal and public scrutiny. Though I must say I have yet to hear of any actual harm or consequences from the nearly 260,000 cables released in 2010.

Although PayPal's courageous refusal to participate in the expanded blockade against The New York Times strikes me as a slightly disingenuous given that The Times doesn't accept subscription payment through PayPal, their position is nonetheless admirable and should be applauded. How it will impact their [original defense](#) of the WikiLeaks blockade remains to be seen. However we may need their services should a blockade be imposed by the major credit card companies.

Even after Wikileaks's first [victory against Visa](#) in Iceland, I still must urge Visa, Mastercard, and American Express to take a similar stand against the use of financial embargos to prohibit supporters from contributing or subscribing to media organizations protected by the First Amendment and free speech laws. Even though journalism should work in unison with government, I fear the calls for limited free speech rights by upstart radical groups like [Block The New York Times](#) and [Accuracy in Media](#).

I wish these were my final words on the existential drama that is WikiLeaks, but don't get your hopes up. With an ongoing grand jury, extradition ruling, and Bradley Manning's court martial, the WikiLeaks Postscript has only just begun. I fear I am condemned to a life in Sartre's No Exit (or is it Kafka's The Trial?).

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