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## Whistle-blowing: an act of courage?

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The WikiLeaks saga continues. The US government - particularly the Military - is outraged by the systematic disclosures on internet site, WikiLeaks. Short of charging those concerned with treason and act of war, the military has come down heavily on what they consider to be acts against national interests.

Robert Gates, the US Secretary of Defense, has already claimed that there are two dimensions that needs addressing - the legal and ethical. Stating that the legal issues are under investigation by the FBI and other associated legal authorities, he has gone on to call the entire matter a morally culpable act. In his dictionary, the perpetrators of the leaks have blood on their hands as according to him, the leaked notes have jeopardized the lives of many in active combat while executing the national agenda in Afghanistan. However, in the same breath, Gates has also confirmed that these leaks are not in any way impacting the war strategy of the United States and allied forces. Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the key advisor on all military matters to the US Government, has also said the same if not in so many words.

Truth has always been the first casualty in any war. So, one must take the official position of both these senior government officials with some caution. However, there is no denying there is wide spread anguish in the US government over the impact of all these disclosures, coming as they are so soon after the official expose of the confusion in their ranks. The sudden and abrupt removal of General McChrystal was a case where the pacifist in Obama was compelled to take a stand as his hand was forced given the circumstances of the issue. There was little else he could do as the General's comments were not just unflattering in nature but bordered on ridicule and contempt for the entire top brass in Washington, from the President and Vice President ('Vice President Biden, who's that?') onwards to the entire chain of command in the State Department and Pentagon.

It did not need any whistle-blower to disclose that the operational forces on the ground held many of the senior administrative staff to be utterly foolish and incapable of coherent and cogent steps to tackle the emerging realities of the war in the harsh terrains of Afghanistan. What was surprising was the fact that such a senior and seasoned veteran as General McChrystal chose to give vent to his personal thoughts to a magazine, Rolling Stones! One can only surmise that either the General was convinced that he was above reproach or that his exasperations at the perceived lack of understanding and support from Washington finally led to this outburst. A quick look at history would have served as an adequate reminder that in a civilian run country, the last word would necessarily have to be with the government (the Executive branch of the State) unlike a military junta where the army would always be regarded as above scrutiny. Despite General MacArthur's heroics in the Second World War and in Korea, he had paid a heavy price when he was locked in confrontation with the bureaucratic forces of the President's office. McChrystal (rated very recently by TIME magazine as one of the 100 most influential persons in the world) too fell afoul of the central mandarins. While this incident was by no means a whistle-blowing case, the entire episode brought to light the innards of the organization dynamics in Washington.

What is Whistle-blowing then in the conventional sense? Generally understood to be an act of bringing to light issues, concerns, facts, etc., that have been deliberately hidden from larger or public knowledge by an organization (be it the government or any business organization) due to the illegal, immoral or illegitimate nature of such acts or practices, whistle-blowers have been variously viewed as being upright, public minded citizens or aggrieved and malicious persons with a grudge against authority. In the context of commercial organizations whistle-blowing essentially refers to a situation where a conscientious employee goes public with facts which have been concealed with great deliberation. Such an 'outing of facts' is not only embarrassing to higher management but also perhaps potentially crippling to the financial model and existence of the business entity. Invariably there is a conflict situation where in the employee speaks out at cost detrimental to himself or herself. The latter was quite the case in some of the celebrated cases of whistle-blowing, be it at Enron, WorldCom, or even the FBI. These cases clearly reflected that these large organizations were as guilty of malfeasance and misfeasance as the US government is currently being accused of. The cases are not just historic but also have gone into folklore because TIME magazine chose to showcase Sherron Watkins (Enron), Cynthia Cooper (WorldCom), and Coleen Rowley (FBI) as Persons of the Year in 2002 for their unprecedented and courageous whistle-blowing act in the face of grave personal and professional danger to themselves.

Consequently, the act of becoming a whistle-blower is not an ordinary step but represents the upright behavior of a daring person who has decided to stand up, be counted and has agreed to face the wrath of the establishment knowing that there would be a high likelihood of the full force and fury of the position power of the 'state' being brought upon them. Facing ridicule is one thing but staring at the very real danger of becoming unemployed and losing all financial security (and perhaps their life) can compel most people in this world to placidly comply with the rules of the establishment. Though feted for their action, Sherron Watkins and the other courageous ladies too had to face the consequences of their action. Months later they found that their 'celebrity' status was accompanied by an invisible 'do-not-hire' tag, as jobs were not easily available as their reputation for being honest to a fault was baulking prospective employers from bringing them on board, perhaps scared that they too could potentially be under adverse scrutiny under the stern eyes of the 'upright citizen'!

In this vein the presence of WikiLeaks is truly amazing. Voices of dissent are easily throttled in dictatorship and totalitarian states. That comes as no surprise to anyone. However, even more insidious is the realization that even in free societies some things are not meant to be disclosed. Brushing things under the carpet in the name of state security is one of the oldest tricks in the book, but the added danger today is the fact that large global multinationals too have not hesitated to use their immense financial resources to whitewash matters which are considered to be potentially damaging to their commercial pursuits. The power of lobbying has not been restricted to the tobacco industry but other industries like healthcare (to protect their high margins), agriculture (GM Foods as an instance), etc., are too well known to need recounting.

The only way to find out the facts when the game is being played by smoke and mirrors by major players (be it the State or Multinational firms) is to depend on the lone voices of independent thinkers who willy-nilly may risk all in their pursuit of truth. Be it Greenpeace or WikiLeaks, the institutionalization of whistle-blowers through such bodies is important so that unpalatable facts too can see the light of day.

To conclude, the Afghan leaks have certainly played their part in terms of re-examination of international issues. But it is equally important to understand that what whistle-blowers achieve is that they force the hand of the stronger party in a fight between unequals and by employing the power of public opinion on its side, they compel a reassessment of events that are usually buried deep in the dump yard of official propaganda.

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