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WikiLeaks and the First Amendment

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WikiLeaks and the First Amendment

Geoffrey R. Stone*

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|---|-----|
| I. INTRODUCTION | 477 |
| II. NATIONAL SECURITY AND FREE SPEECH..... | 479 |
| III. THE DILEMMA | 480 |
| IV. THE RIGHTS OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES..... | 481 |
| V. THE RIGHT TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION | 486 |
| VI. CONCLUSION | 489 |

I. INTRODUCTION

After the controversy over WikiLeaks erupted,¹ members of Congress introduced the proposed SHIELD Act (“the Act”), which would have amended the Espionage Act of 1917 to make it a crime for any person knowingly and willfully to disseminate, in any manner prejudicial to the

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1. WikiLeaks is an international online organization created by Julian Assange that publishes submissions of classified data from anonymous sources. *About: What is WikiLeaks?*, WIKILEAKS, <http://wikileaks.org/About.html> (last visited Apr. 21, 2012). In November 2010, WikiLeaks collaborated with major global media organizations to release thousands of classified U.S. State Department diplomatic cables allegedly leaked to WikiLeaks by Army Private Bradley Manning. *See, e.g., Bradley Manning*, N.Y. TIMES: TIMES TOPICS (Jan. 12, 2012), http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/bradley_e_manning/index.html. The cables included revelations of the views of American diplomats relating to such matters as the Middle East peace process, nuclear disarmament, actions in the War on Terror, climate change, and U.S. intelligence and counterintelligence efforts. *Id.*

safety or interest of the United States, “any classified information”² “concerning the human intelligence activities of the United States or . . . concerning the identity of a classified source or informant”³ working with the intelligence community of the United States.

Although the Act might be constitutional as applied to a government employee, like Bradley Manning, who “leaks” such classified material, it is plainly unconstitutional as applied to others, like Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, who subsequently publish or otherwise disseminate such information. With respect to such other individuals or organizations, the Act violates the First Amendment unless, at the very least, it is expressly limited to situations in which the individual knows that the dissemination of the classified material poses *a clear and present danger of grave harm to the nation*.

The clear and present danger standard, in varying forms, has been a central element of our First Amendment jurisprudence ever since Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes first enunciated it in his 1919 opinion in *Schenck v. United States*.⁴ In the ninety years since *Schenck*, the precise meaning of “clear and present danger” has shifted,⁵ but the principle that animates the standard was stated eloquently by Justice Louis D. Brandeis in his brilliant 1927 concurring opinion in *Whitney v. California*:

Those who won our independence by revolution were not cowards They did not exalt order at the cost of liberty Only an emergency can justify repression. Such must be the rule if authority is to be reconciled with freedom. Such . . . is the command of the Constitution. It is therefore, always open to Americans to challenge a law abridging free speech . . . by showing that there was no emergency justifying it.⁶

With that observation in mind, I will examine two central questions: (1) Does the clear and present danger standard apply to unlawful leaks of classified information by government employees?; and (2) Does the clear and present danger standard apply to the dissemination of classified information derived from those unlawful leaks? These are fundamental

2. 18 U.S.C. § 798(a) (1996).

3. H.R. 6506, 111th Cong. (2010).

4. 249 U.S. 47, 52 (1919).

5. See Frank Strong, *Fifty Years of “Clear and Present Danger”: From Schenck to Brandenburg – and Beyond*, 1969 SUP. CT. REV. 41. Cf. *Schenck*, 249 U.S. at 52; *Dennis v. United States*, 341 U.S. 494 (1951); *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969); *N.Y. Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713 (1971). See generally GEOFFREY R. STONE, *PERILOUS TIMES: FREE SPEECH IN WARTIME FROM THE SEDITION ACT OF 1798 TO THE WAR ON TERRORISM* (2004) [hereinafter *PERILOUS TIMES*].

6. 274 U.S. 357, 377 (1927) (Brandeis, J., concurring), *overruled in part by Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969).

First Amendment questions. Before turning to them, though, a bit of historical context is necessary.

II. NATIONAL SECURITY AND FREE SPEECH

A wartime environment inevitably intensifies the tension between individual liberty and national security. But there are wise and unwise ways to strike the appropriate balance. Throughout American history, our government has excessively restricted public discourse in the name of national security. In 1798, for example, on the eve of a threatened conflict with France, Congress enacted the Sedition Act of 1798, which effectively made it a crime for any person to criticize the president, Congress, or the government itself.⁷ During the Civil War, the government shut down “disloyal” newspapers and imprisoned critics of the president’s policies.⁸ During World War I, the government enacted the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, which made it unlawful for any person to criticize the war, the draft, the government, the president, the flag, the military, or the cause of the United States.⁹ As a consequence, free and open debate was almost completely stifled.¹⁰ Later, during the Cold War, as Americans were whipped into frenzy of fear of the “Red Menace,” loyalty programs, political infiltration, blacklisting, legislative investigations, and criminal prosecutions of supposed Communist “subversives” and sympathizers swept the nation.¹¹

Over time, we have come to understand that these episodes from our past were grievous errors in judgment in which we allowed fear and anxiety to override our good judgment and our essential commitment to individual liberty and democratic self-governance. We have come to understand that, in order to maintain a robust system of democratic self-governance, our government cannot constitutionally be empowered to punish speakers, even in the name of national security without a *compelling* justification.¹² This is especially true in the realm of government secrets, for as James Madison observed, “[a] popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both.”¹³ As Madison warned, if citizens do not know

7. See GEOFFREY R. STONE, *WAR AND LIBERTY: AN AMERICAN DILEMMA: 1790 TO THE PRESENT* 1–21 (2007).

8. See *id.* at 22–40.

9. See *id.* at 41–63.

10. See *id.*

11. See *id.* at 85–106.

12. See STONE, *supra* note 5, at 550–57.

13. JAMES MADISON, 9 *THE WRITINGS OF JAMES MADISON* 103 (Gaillard Hunt ed., G.P. Putnam’s Sons 1910) (1822).

what their own government is doing, then they are hardly in a position to question its judgments or to hold their elected representatives accountable. Government secrecy, although sometimes surely necessary, can also pose a direct threat to the very idea of self-governance.

III. THE DILEMMA

Here, then, is the dilemma: the government often has exclusive possession of information about its policies, programs, processes, and activities that would be of great value to informed public debate. But government officials often insist that such information must be kept secret, even from those to whom they are accountable—the American people. How should we resolve this dilemma? The issue is complex and has many dimensions.

The reasons why government officials want secrecy, for example, are many and varied. They range from the truly compelling to the patently illegitimate. Sometimes, government officials may want secrecy because they fear that the disclosure of certain information might seriously undermine the nation's security (for example, by revealing detailed battle plans on the eve of battle). Sometimes, they may want secrecy because they simply do not want to deal with public criticism of their decisions, or because they do not want the public, Congress, or the courts to be in a position to override their decisions, which they believe to be sound. Sometimes, they may want secrecy because disclosure will expose their own incompetence, foolishness, or wrongdoing. Some of these reasons for secrecy are obviously much more worthy of respect than others. Part of the problem is that government officials who want secrecy for questionable reasons are often tempted to justify their actions by putting forth seemingly compelling, but in reality exaggerated or even disingenuous, justifications.

Adding to the complexity, the contribution of any particular disclosure to informed public discourse may vary widely depending upon the nature of the information and the surrounding circumstances. The disclosure of some classified information may be extremely valuable to public debate (for example, the revelation of possibly unwise or even unlawful or unconstitutional government programs, such as the secret use of coercive interrogation or the secret authorization of widespread electronic surveillance). The disclosure of other confidential information, however, may be of little or no legitimate value to public debate (for example, the publication of the specific identities of covert American agents in Iran for no reason other than exposure).

The most vexing problem arises when the public disclosure of secret information is both harmful to the national security *and* valuable to self-governance. Suppose, for example, the government undertakes a study of

the effectiveness of security measures at the nation's nuclear power plants. The study concludes that several nuclear power plants are especially vulnerable to terrorist attack. Should this study be kept secret or should it be disclosed to the public? On the one hand, publishing the report will reveal our vulnerabilities to terrorists. On the other hand, publishing the report would alert the public to the situation, enable citizens to press government officials to remedy the problems and empower the public to hold accountable those public officials who failed to keep them safe. The public disclosure of such information could both harm and benefit the nation. Should the study be made public?

In theory, this question can be framed quite simply: do the benefits of disclosure outweigh its costs? That is, does the value of the disclosure to informed public deliberation outweigh its danger to the national security? Alas, as a practical matter this simple framing of the issue is not terribly helpful. It is exceedingly difficult to measure in any objective, consistent, predictable, or coherent manner either the value of the disclosure to public discourse or its danger to national security. And it is even more difficult to balance such incommensurable values against one another.

Moreover, even if we were to agree that this is the right question, we would still have to determine who should decide whether the benefits outweigh the costs of disclosure. Should this be decided by public officials whose responsibility it is to protect the national security? By public officials who might have an incentive to cover up their own mistakes? By low-level public officials who believe their superiors are keeping information secret for inadequate or illegitimate reasons—that is, by leakers? By reporters, editors, bloggers, and others who have gained access to the information? By judges and jurors, in the course of criminal prosecutions of leakers, journalists, and publishers?

I will focus on two questions. First, in what circumstances can the government constitutionally punish a public employee for *disclosing* classified information to a journalist for the purpose of publication? That is, in what circumstances may the government punish leakers? Second, in what circumstances can the government constitutionally punish the *publication or public dissemination* of classified information? Should it matter whether the publisher or disseminator obtained the information through an illegal leak?

IV. THE RIGHTS OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES

The first question concerns the First Amendment rights of public employees. To understand those rights, we must establish a baseline. Let us begin, then, with the rights of individuals who are *not* government employees. That is, in what circumstances may ordinary people, who are

not public employees, be held legally accountable for revealing information to another for the purpose of publication? Answering that question will enable us to establish a baseline definition of First Amendment rights. We can then inquire whether the First Amendment rights of government employees are any different.

In general, an ordinary individual (an individual who is not a government employee) has a broad First Amendment right to reveal information to journalists or others for the purpose of publication. There are a few limitations, however.

First, the Supreme Court has long recognized that there are certain “limited classes of speech,” such as false statements of fact, obscenity, and threats, that “are no essential part of any exposition of ideas” and are therefore of only low First Amendment value.¹⁴ Such speech may be restricted without satisfying the usual demands of the First Amendment. For example, if X makes a knowingly false and defamatory statement about Y to a journalist, with the understanding that the journalist will publish the information, X might be liable to Y for the tort of defamation.¹⁵

Second, private individuals sometimes voluntarily contract with other private individuals to limit their speech. Violation of such a private agreement may be actionable as a breach of contract. For example, if X takes a job as a salesman and agrees as a condition of employment not to disclose his employer’s customer lists to competitors, he might be liable for breach of contract if he reveals the lists to a reporter for a trade journal with the expectation that the journal will publish the list. In such circumstances, the individual has voluntarily agreed to limit what otherwise would be a First Amendment right. Such privately negotiated waivers of constitutional rights are generally enforceable.¹⁶

Third, there may be situations, however rare, in which an individual discloses previously nonpublic information to a journalist in circumstances in which publication of the information would be so dangerous to society that the individual might be punished for disclosing the information to the journalist for purposes of further dissemination. For example, suppose a privately-employed scientist discovers how to manufacture anthrax bacteria at home. The harm caused by the public dissemination of that information might be so likely, imminent, and grave that the scientist could be punished for facilitating its publication.¹⁷

14. *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568, 571–72 (1942).

15. *See Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.*, 418 U.S. 323 (1974).

16. *See Cohen v. Cowles Media Co.*, 501 U.S. 663 (1991).

17. *See United States v. Progressive, Inc.*, 467 F. Supp. 990 (W.D. Wis. 1979).

These examples illustrate the few circumstances in which an individual might be held legally responsible for disclosing information to another for the purpose of public dissemination. In general, however, the First Amendment guarantees individuals *very* broad freedom to share information with others for the purpose of publication.

To what extent is a government employee in a similar position? When we ask about the First Amendment rights of public employees, we must focus on the second of the three situations examined above. That is, it is the waiver of rights issue that poses the critical question. Although the first and third situations can arise in the government employee context, it is the waiver issue that is at the core of the matter.

At its most bold, the government's position is simple: just like a private individual, the government should be able to enter into contracts with people in which they voluntarily agree to waive their constitutional rights. As long as the waiver is voluntary, that should end the matter. That is not the law, however. The Supreme Court has long recognized that, unlike private entities, the government *cannot* constitutionally insist that individuals surrender their constitutional rights as a condition of public employment or receipt of other government benefits.¹⁸ It would be unconstitutional, for example, for the government to require individuals to agree as a condition of government employment that they will never criticize the president, never practice the Muslim faith, never have an abortion, or never assert their constitutional right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures.¹⁹

It would be no answer for the government to point out that the individuals had *voluntarily* agreed not to criticize the president, practice their faith, have an abortion, or assert their Fourth Amendment rights, for even if individuals consent to surrender their constitutional rights in order to obtain a government job, the government cannot constitutionally condition employment on the waiver of those rights. The government cannot legitimately use its leverage over jobs, welfare benefits, driver's licenses, tax deductions, zoning waivers, and the like to extract waivers of individual freedoms.²⁰

This does not mean, however, that the government can *never* require individuals to waive their constitutional rights as a condition of public

18. See, e.g., *Cowles Media Co.*, 501 U.S. at 663.

19. See *Perry v. Sinderman*, 408 U.S. 593, 597 (1972) (“[E]ven though a person has no ‘right’ to a valuable government benefit and even though the government may deny him the benefit for any number of reasons,” it may not do so “on a basis that infringes his constitutionally protected interests—especially, his interest in freedom of speech.”).

20. See Cass R. Sunstein, *Government Control of Information*, 74 CAL. L. REV. 889, 915 (1986).

employment. There are at least two circumstances, relevant here, in which the government may restrict the First Amendment rights of its employees. First, as the Supreme Court recognized in its 1968 decision in *Pickering v. Board of Education of Township High School District 205*, the government “has interests as an employer in regulating the speech of its employees that differ significantly from those it possesses in connection with regulation of the speech of the citizenry in general.”²¹ The problem, the Court said, is to arrive at a sensible balance between the interests of the public employee, as a citizen, in commenting upon matters of public concern, and the interest of the government, as an employer, in promoting the efficiency of its activities.²²

The Hatch Act, for instance, prohibits government employees from taking an active part in political campaigns.²³ The goal is to insulate government employees from undue political pressure and improper influence. To enable government employees to perform their jobs properly, the government may require them to waive what would otherwise be the First Amendment right to participate in partisan political activities.²⁴ Similarly, a government employee’s disclosure of confidential information to a journalist might jeopardize the government’s ability to function effectively. For example, if an IRS employee gives X’s confidential tax records to a reporter, this might seriously impair the public’s confidence in the tax system and thus undermine the government’s capacity to function efficiently.

A second reason why the government may sometimes restrict what otherwise would be the protected First Amendment rights of government employees is that the employee learns the information *only* by virtue of his government employment. Arguably, it is one thing for the government to prohibit its employees from speaking in ways other citizens can speak, but something else entirely for it to prohibit them from speaking in ways other citizens *cannot* speak. If a government employee gains access to confidential information only *because* of his public employment, then prohibiting him from disclosing that information to anyone outside the government might be said not to substantially restrict his First Amendment rights, because he had no right to know the information in the first place.²⁵

21. 391 U.S. 563, 568 (1968).

22. *Id.*

23. 7 U.S.C. § 361(a) (2006).

24. See U.S. Civil Serv. Comm’n v. Nat’l Ass’n of Letter Carriers, 413 U.S. 548 (1973); *United Public Workers v. Mitchell*, 330 U.S. 75 (1947).

25. See *Seattle Times Co. v. Rhinehart*, 467 U.S. 20 (1984); Robert C. Post, *The Management of Speech: Discretion and Rights*, 1984 SUP. CT. REV. 169.

There is little clear law on this question. In its 1980 decision in *Snepp v. United States*, however, the Supreme Court held that a former employee of the CIA could constitutionally be held to his agreement not to publish “any information or material relating to the [CIA]” without prior approval.²⁶ The Court did not suggest that *every* government employee can be required to abide by such a rule. Rather, it emphasized that a “former intelligence agent’s publication of . . . material relating to intelligence activities can be detrimental to vital national interests.”²⁷ In light of *Snepp* and *Pickering*, it seems reasonable to assume that a public employee who discloses to a journalist or other disseminator classified information, the disclosure of which could appreciably harm the national security, has violated his position of trust and ordinarily may be discharged and even criminally punished without violating the First Amendment.

Now, it is important to note that this conclusion is specific to government employees. It does not govern those who are not government employees. Unlike government employees, who have agreed to abide by constitutionally permissible restrictions of their speech, journalists and others who might disseminate such information have not agreed to waive their rights. This distinction between government employees and other individuals is critical in the context of confidential information. Information the government wants to keep secret may be of great value to the public. The public disclosure of an individual’s tax return may undermine the public’s confidence in the tax system, but it may also reveal important information, for example, about a political candidate’s finances.

In theory, of course, it would be possible for courts to decide in each instance whether the First Amendment protects an unauthorized disclosure of confidential information by a government employee by deciding whether the value of the information to the public outweighs the government’s interest in secrecy. But, as already noted, such case-by-case judgments would put courts in an exceedingly awkward and difficult position and would in effect convert the First Amendment into a constitutional Freedom of Information Act. The Supreme Court has eschewed that approach and has instead granted the government considerable deference in deciding whether and when government employees have a constitutional right to disclose confidential government information. In short, the courts have generally held that the government may punish a government employee for the unauthorized disclosure of classified information, as long as the disclosure would be “potentially damaging to the United States.”²⁸

26. 444 U.S. 507, 508 (1980).

27. *Id.* at 511–12; *see also* Haig v. Agee, 453 U.S. 280 (1981).

28. *United States v. Morison*, 844 F.2d 1057, 1071 (4th Cir. 1988); *United States v.*

This is a far cry from requiring the government to prove that the disclosure will create a clear and present danger of grave harm to the nation. The gap between these two standards represents the difference between the rights of government employees and the rights of other individuals. It is what the government employee surrenders as a condition of his employment; it is the effect of *Pickering* balancing; and it is a measure of the deference we grant the government in the management of its internal affairs.

There is, of course, a fundamental disadvantage in this approach. Information may be both potentially dangerous to national security and valuable to public debate. Consider, for example, evaluations of new weapons systems or government policies regulating the permissible conduct of covert agents. One might reasonably argue that this information should be available to the public to enable informed public discussion of such policies. But the approach to government employee speech just described ordinarily will empower the government to forbid the disclosure of such information, regardless of its value to public discourse. We accept this approach largely for the sake of simplicity and ease of administration. We should be under no illusions, however, about its impact. This standard gives inordinate weight to secrecy at the expense of accountability and public deliberation.

V. THE RIGHT TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION

This, then, presents the second question: in what circumstances may the government constitutionally prohibit an individual or organization from publishing or disseminating unlawfully leaked classified information? In the entire history of the United States, the government has never prosecuted *anyone* (other than a government employee) for publicly disseminating such information.²⁹

Because there has never been such a prosecution, the Supreme Court has never had occasion to rule on such a case. The closest it has come to such a situation was *New York Times Co. v. United States*, commonly known as the Pentagon Papers case, in which the Court held unconstitutional the government's effort to enjoin the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* from publishing a purloined copy of a top secret Defense Department study of the Vietnam War.³⁰ Justice Potter Stewart's opinion best captures the view of the Court. "We are asked," he wrote:

Rosen, No. 1:05cr225, slip op. at 25 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2006).

29. See generally *Perry v. Sinderman*, 408 U.S. 593 (1972); Sunstein, *supra* note 20.

30. 403 U.S. 713 (1971).

[T]o prevent the publication . . . of material that the Executive Branch insists should not, in the national interest, be published. I am convinced that the Executive is correct with respect to some of the documents involved. But I cannot say that disclosure of any of them will *surely result in direct, immediate, and irreparable damage to our Nation or its people*.³¹

Thus, in the Pentagon Papers case, the Court held that although elected officials have broad authority to keep classified information secret, once that information gets into other hands the government has only very limited authority to prevent its further dissemination. This may seem an awkward, even incoherent, state of affairs. If the government can constitutionally prohibit public employees from disclosing classified information to others, why can't it enjoin the recipients of that material from disseminating it further?

But one could just as easily flip the question. If individuals have a First Amendment right to publish classified information unless publication will "surely result in direct, immediate, and irreparable damage to our Nation or its people," why should the government be allowed to prohibit its employees from disclosing that information to others merely because it poses a potential danger to national security?³² If we view the issue from the perspective of either the public's interest in informed discourse or the government's interest in secrecy, it would seem that the same rule logically should apply to both public employees and those who would disseminate the information. The very different standards governing government employees on the one hand, and other speakers on the other, thus present a puzzle.

In fact, there are quite sensible reasons for this seemingly awkward state of affairs. Although the government has broad authority to prohibit public employees from leaking classified information, that rule is based not on a careful or definitive balancing of the government's need for secrecy against the public's interest in the information, but on the need for a clear and easily administrable rule for government employees.³³ For the sake of simplicity, the law governing public employees overprotects the government's legitimate interest in secrecy relative to the public's legitimate interest in learning about the activities of the government. But the need for a simple rule for public employees has nothing to do with the rights of others who would publish the information or the needs of the public for an informed public discourse. And under ordinary First Amendment standards, those who wish to disseminate such information

31. *Id.* at 730 (Stewart, J., concurring) (emphasis added).

32. *Id.*

33. 5 U.S.C. § 7324(a)(2) (2006).

have the right to do so—unless the government can demonstrate that the publication presents a clear and present danger of grave harm. In this situation, the law arguably overprotects the right to publish, as compared to a case-by-case balancing of costs and benefits.

As Justice Stewart observed in the Pentagon Papers case, even though the publication of some of the materials at issue might harm “the national interest,” their dissemination could not constitutionally be prohibited unless their dissemination would “surely result in direct, immediate, and irreparable damage to our Nation or its people.”³⁴ It is important to note that there are sound reasons for this conclusion.

First, the mere fact that dissemination might harm the national interest does not mean that that harm outweighs the benefits of publication. Second, a case-by-case balancing of harm against benefit would ultimately prove unwieldy, unpredictable, and impracticable. Thus, just as in the government employee situation, there is a compelling need for a clear and predictable rule. Third, as we have learned from our own history, there are great pressures that lead both government officials and the public itself to underestimate the benefits of publication and overstate the potential harm of publication in times of national anxiety. A strict clear and present danger standard serves as a barrier to protect us against this danger.

Finally, a central principle of the First Amendment is that the suppression of public speech must be the government’s last rather than its first resort in addressing a potential problem. If there are other means by which government can prevent or reduce the danger, it must exhaust those other means before it can suppress the freedom of speech. This, too, is an essential premise of the clear and present danger standard. In the secrecy situation, the most obvious way for government to prevent the danger is by ensuring that seriously damaging information is not leaked in the first place. Indeed, the Supreme Court made this point quite clearly in its 2001 decision in *Bartnicki v. Vopper*, in which a radio commentator received in the mail from an anonymous source a tape recording of an unlawfully intercepted telephone conversation, which the commentator then played on the air.³⁵ The Court held that the broadcast was protected by the First Amendment, even though the anonymous source could be prosecuted for committing the unlawful wiretap.³⁶ As the Court explained, when an individual receives information “from a source who has obtained it unlawfully,” an individual may not be punished for publicly disseminating information relevant to public discourse, “absent a need . . . of the highest

34. *Perry*, 403 U.S. at 730.

35. 532 U.S. 514 (2001).

36. *Id.*

order.”³⁷ The Court reasoned that if “the sanctions that presently attach to [unlawful wiretapping] do not provide sufficient deterrence,” then “perhaps those sanctions should be made more severe,” but “it would be quite remarkable to hold” that an individual can constitutionally be punished merely for disseminating information because the government failed to “deter conduct by a non-law-abiding third party.”³⁸

VI. CONCLUSION

This is surely a “disorderly situation,” but it seems the best possible solution.³⁹ If we grant the government too much power to punish those who disseminate information useful to public debate, then we risk too great a sacrifice of public deliberation. If we grant the government too little power to control confidentiality at the source, then we risk too great a sacrifice of secrecy and government efficiency.⁴⁰ The solution is thus to attempt to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable values of secrecy and accountability by guaranteeing *both* a strong authority of the government to prohibit leaks *and* an expansive right of others to disseminate them.

Three questions remain: first, does the same constitutional standard govern criminal prosecutions and prior restraints? Second, what sorts of disclosures might satisfy the clear and present danger standard? And third, how should we deal with information that both satisfies the clear and present danger standard *and* contributes significantly to public debate?

First, in the Pentagon Papers case, the Court emphasized that it was dealing with an injunction against speech. An injunction is a prior restraint, a type of speech restriction that, in the Court’s words, bears a particularly “‘heavy presumption’ against its constitutional validity.”⁴¹ This raises the question whether the test stated in the Pentagon Papers case should govern criminal prosecutions as well as prior restraints.

In dealing with expression at the very heart of the First Amendment—speech about the conduct of government itself—the distinction between prior restraint and criminal prosecution should not carry much weight. The standard applied in the Pentagon Papers case is essentially the same standard the Court would apply in a criminal prosecution of an organization or individual for publicly disseminating information about the conduct of

37. *Id.* at 528.

38. *Id.* at 529–30.

39. ALEXANDER BICKEL, *THE MORALITY OF CONSENT* 80 (1975).

40. *Id.* at 79–92.

41. *See* *N.Y. Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713, 723 (1971); *see also id.* at 730–31 (White, J., concurring).

government. The clear and present danger standard has never been limited to cases of prior restraint.

Second, is there *any* speech that could constitutionally be punished under this standard? The examples traditionally offered include the sailing dates of transports or the precise location of combat troops in wartime. The publication of such information would instantly make American troops vulnerable to enemy attack and thwart battle plans already underway. Other examples might include publication of the identities of covert CIA operatives in Iran, or public disclosure that the government has broken the Taliban's secret code, thus alerting the enemy to change its cipher. In situations like these, the harm from publication might be sufficiently likely, imminent, and grave to warrant punishing the disclosure.

Third, an important feature of these examples often passes unnoticed. What makes these situations so compelling is not only the likelihood, imminence, and magnitude of the harm, but also the implicit assumption that this sort of information do not meaningfully contribute to public debate. In most circumstances, there is no evident need for the public to know the secret sailing dates of transports or the secret location of American troops on the eve of battle. It is not as if these matters will instantly be topics of political discussion. After the fact, of course, such information may be critical in evaluating the effectiveness of our military leaders, but at the very moment the ships are set to sail or the troops are set to attack, it is less clear what contribution the information would make to public debate. The point is not that these examples involve low value speech in the conventional sense of the term, but rather that they involve information that does not seem particularly newsworthy at the moment of publication. It is this factor that seems to play an implicit role in making the illustrations so compelling.

The failure to notice this feature of these hypotheticals can lead to a critical failure of analysis. Interestingly, an analogous failure was implicit in the famous example Justice Holmes first used to elucidate the clear and present danger test—the false cry of fire in a crowded theatre.⁴² Why can the false cry of fire be restricted? Because it creates a clear and present danger of a mad dash to the exits. Therefore, Holmes reasoned, the test for restricting speech must be whether it creates a clear and present danger of serious harm.

But Holmes's reasoning was incomplete. Suppose the cry of fire is true? In that case, we would not punish the speech—even though it still causes a mad dash to the exits—because the value of the speech outweighs

42. *Schenck v. United States*, 249 U.S. 47, 52 (1919).

the harm it creates. Thus, at least two factors must be considered in analyzing this situation—the harm caused by the speech *and* the value of the speech. Suppose, for example, a newspaper accurately reports that American troops in Afghanistan recently murdered twenty members of the Taliban in cold blood. As a result of this publication, members of the Taliban predictably kidnap and murder twenty American citizens. Can the newspaper constitutionally be punished for disclosing the initial massacre? The answer must be no. Even if there were a clear and present danger that the retaliation would follow, and even if we agree—as we must—that this were a grave harm, the information is simply too important to the American people to punish its disclosure.

What this suggests is that to justify the criminal punishment of the press for publishing classified information, the government must prove not only that the defendant published classified information, the publication of which would result in likely, imminent, and grave harm to national security, but also that the publication would *not* significantly contribute to public debate.

The bottom line is this: the proposed SHIELD Act is plainly unconstitutional. At the very least, its prohibition must be limited to those circumstances in which the individual who publicly disseminates classified information knew that the dissemination would create a clear and present danger of grave harm to the nation or its people. A criminal prosecution of Julian Assange or WikiLeaks would thus violate the First Amendment. On the other hand, as a government employee, Bradley Manning was subject to more significant restrictions on his freedom to leak classified information. He is therefore in a much more vulnerable position.

