

ROTC, WikiLeaks, and Academic Freedom

If we can prohibit ROTC cadets from reading material from WikiLeaks, what would stop us from prohibiting students from, for example, reading material critical of U.S. military actions in Iraq or Vietnam?

In my more than 15 years teaching at the University of San Francisco, I have found ROTC cadets to be among my favorite students, most of them being unusually bright, motivated, disciplined and a pleasure to work with. Indeed, I have felt honored to teach them.

It was with great consternation, therefore, to learn that, according to a memo sent to ROTC programs at the University of San Francisco and other colleges and universities last month, they have effectively been prohibited from completing any assignments that professors may make involving any material released through WikiLeaks.

According to a Dec. 8 memo from Col. Charles M. Evans, commanding officer of the 8th Brigade, U.S. Army Cadet Command, "using the classified information found on WikiLeaks for research papers, presentations, etc. is prohibited." A follow-up memo from the cadet commander at the University of San Francisco advised against even talking about it, precluding ROTC students from taking part in classroom discussions regarding WikiLeaks material.

The rationale appears to be that downloading, reading, referencing or discussing WikiLeaks material could jeopardize receiving a security clearance. This has little rational basis, however, since much of the material was apparently made available by a U.S. Army private who had access to it and -- for better or worse -- this material is now widely available publicly.

It strains credulity as to what harm would be caused by cadets viewing material easily accessible to everyone else, including America's enemies.

Whatever the reason, this puts both professors and students in a dilemma.

Those of us teaching courses in such fields as constitutional law, U.S. foreign policy, Middle Eastern politics and media studies are considering using WikiLeaks material in the coming semester. This means that if any of us were to give such an assignment, ROTC students would be forced to choose between not completing it or putting their careers in jeopardy.

I could make special accommodations for ROTC cadets. I could offer an alternative reading assignment. I could not reduce participation grades if the students did not take part in a discussion. I could excuse them from viewing a documentary that might include film clips, images or other proscribed contents. I could write up special quizzes or exams.

However, in doing so, I would effectively be allowing the military to control part of my curriculum. This raises sensitive issues regarding academic freedom. If the military can effectively tell its cadets to refuse to complete assignments by civilian professors, it sets a very dangerous precedent.

Indeed, if they can prohibit ROTC cadets from reading material from WikiLeaks, what would stop them from prohibiting students from, for example, reading material critical of U.S. military actions in Iraq or Vietnam?

The University of San Francisco administration appears to be taking this threat against academic freedom seriously and has asked for clarifications from ROTC commanders and others in the federal government. Thus far, however, nothing has been forthcoming.

There are plenty of thoughtful and diverse opinions at the University of San Francisco and elsewhere regarding the legality, ethics and wisdom of releasing classified material via WikiLeaks. Since the material is now in the public domain, however, the U.S. military has no right to dictate how it might be used in the classroom. Indeed, this kind of interference has no place in a democracy.