

Death Squads versus Democracy: Tom Flanagan's "Joke" directed against Wikileaks Julian Assange

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Tom Flanagan, University of Calgary political science professor, right-wing pundit, and mentor and former senior advisor to Prime Minister Harper, has earned himself more international media attention during the past week than even he may have an appetite for.

On November 30th, Flanagan spoke as one of the regular panelists on CBC Television's national political analysis program, Power and Politics with Evan Solomon. Staring into the camera, while across the bottom of the television screen there appeared a banner reading "WIKILEAKS LATEST: New document mentions PM Stephen Harper," Flanagan had this to say about Julian Assange, the founder and editor of Wikileaks:

"Well, I think Assange should be assassinated, actually. I think Obama should put out a contract and maybe use a drone or something."

Evan Solomon's reaction was delayed—and when it finally came, thumpingly stupid. After letting Flanagan outline for nearly ten seconds his reasons for advocating political murder, he broke in at last, saying: "Tom, that's pretty harsh stuff, just for the record, that's pretty harsh stuff."

Flanagan responded to this interruption with what appears to have been a joke: "Well, I'm feeling very manly today." But making it clear that his initial remarks were seriously intended, he wrapped up his contribution to the program with a parting shot: "I wouldn't feel unhappy if Assange disappeared." This sounds rather as though, after proposing a murder contract and a drone attack, he was offering Obama a third form of assassination: how about a death-squad "disappearance"? Solomon responded, echoing his earlier feebleness: "Well, I've gotta say, Tom Flanagan calling for that, that's pretty strong stuff...."

One of the most lucid comments to date on this disgusting episode has come from Calgary Herald journalist and University of Calgary alumnus Kris Kotarski, in a public letter calling on Dr. Elizabeth Cannon, the university's President, "to condemn Dr. Flanagan in the harshest possible terms."

"Better than most," Kotarski writes, "a professor of political science should understand that academic freedom is not possible without political freedom, and that political freedom cannot survive in a climate where journalists and opponents of a ruling regime hear public intellectuals advocate for their assassination on the nightly news. If this were a Russian, Chinese or Iranian intellectual calling for the murder of a regime opponent, Canadians would be appalled. Considering Canada's proud tradition of political freedom, it is all the more

offensive to hear an active member of the University of Calgary faculty and the former chief of staff and campaign manager for the sitting Prime Minister do the same” (<http://censureflanagan.wordpress.com/>).

As one would expect, there have been attempts both by Flanagan and by his supporters in the media to explain his remarks away as an ill-judged attempt at humour. For example, Sarah Petz has written in *Macleans*: “Joking about the assassination of a major public figure is terrible [...]. However, considering it was obviously a bad joke and not a serious incitation to commit violence, maybe it’s time for everyone to move on.”

Petz likens Flanagan’s comments in the video footage to “something your conservative uncle would say in a drunken argument over an awkward family dinner” (“Let Flanagan’s remarks die,” *Macleans* [4 December 2010]). But while there may have been a note of brutal flippancy in his tone, Flanagan was stone-cold sober. The only jest in his statement was the inane Neo-Con in-joke about “feeling very manly today.” Some people of Flanagan’s political leanings—men like Dick Cheney, John Bolton, and George W. Bush—seem to find the quasi-erotic charge they get from making threats of violence invigorating, even amusing. Others might wonder how manly it is to find one’s pleasure in bullying and terrorizing people.

It’s perhaps just as well that the video footage of this CBC program has gone global, together with explanations of Flanagan’s close links to our current Prime Minister. Julian Assange, let us remind ourselves, is not just the “major public figure” that *Macleans* calls him: he has for several years taken a leading role in what is arguably the most courageous and the most significant journalistic work currently ongoing anywhere in the world.

In an age in which the “memory hole” imagined by George Orwell in his dystopian novel *1984* has become a literal reality, the work of Wikileaks is crucial. Assange has himself pointed out in public lectures and interviews that news reports are now routinely deleted by media corporations, both from their online archives and from their indexes, leaving behind nothing but a “document not found” message for search-engine inquiries; while in the UK some 300 news stories, including one about a deliberate chemical spill that injured over 100,000 people, are currently smothered by court orders that make it illegal even to mention the existence of a court order blocking publication of the facts.

Moreover, the US government has been moving steadily toward a situation in which its agencies possess something approaching what Admiral John Poindexter called “total intelligence awareness,” while citizens are increasingly confined to a corresponding state of ignorance on all matters of importance. Lawrence Davidson explains the strategy:

“Democratic elites have learned that they do not need to rely on the brute force characteristic of dictatorships as long as they can sufficiently control the public media environment. You restrict meaningful free speech to the fringes of the media, to the ‘outliers’ along the information bell curve. You rely on the sociological fact that the vast majority of citizens will either pay no attention to that which they find irrelevant to their immediate lives, or else they will believe the official story line about places and happenings of which they are otherwise ignorant. Once you have identified the official story line with the official policy being pursued, loyalty to the policy comes to equate with patriotism. It is a shockingly simple formula and it usually works.” (“On the Historical Necessity of Wikileaks,” *MWC News* [4 December 2010], <http://mcwnews.net/focus/editorial/7045-historical-necessity-of-wikileaks.html>)

While it is undoubtedly embarrassing for American elites (whom one hesitates to grace with the word “democratic”) to have the dirty linen of their diplomatic double-dealings exposed to the world, their most urgent concern seems to be to ensure that as little as possible of the Wikileaks material becomes known in any organized way to the American public. Hence the censorship being exercised by the New York Times (in contrast to the manner in which The Guardian and Der Spiegel are releasing the material that they all possess)—and hence also the vitriolic hatred expressed toward Julian Assange by Hillary Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and Bill O’Reilly, and the death-threats issued against him by Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, and William Kristol.

Noam Chomsky has remarked that “Perhaps the most dramatic revelation [of the leaked cables] is the bitter hatred of democracy that is revealed both by the U.S. government—Hillary Clinton, [and] others—and also by the diplomatic service” (<http://chomsky.info/interviews/20101130.htm>). The paroxysms of loathing now being directed at Julian Assange are another expression of that same hatred of democracy.

While most Canadians are already aware of our own government’s repeated demonstrations of contempt for democratic principles and practice, understanding the implications of Tom Flanagan’s behaviour remains important. Canada’s standards of public discourse have decayed to the point at which our national broadcaster is not ashamed to carry an open incitement to political murder made by the leading ideologue of the governing party, a former and for all we know continuing close associate of Prime Minister Harper. It is dismaying to recognize that our media system includes, at its centre, people for whom the open-eyed advocacy of lawless violence is something merely to shrug off, like an off-colour joke, as “pretty strong stuff.”

But acceptance of that kind of dismissal is only possible so long as Canadians continue to believe that our governing elites have always operated at a safe distance from such totalitarian tactics as those recommended by Tom Flanagan. Is that in fact the case, or is our belief perhaps conditioned by effective control of what Davidson calls the “public media environment”?

How many of us know about Canada’s central role in the overthrow of Haiti’s duly elected democratic government in February 2004, or about the role of Canada’s military in facilitating—or at the very least doing nothing to prevent—the campaigns of political terror, massacre and rape that followed the coup? Or about the fact that Canada exercised effective control over a post-coup prison system in Haiti that even the Organization of American States condemned as horrifying? (The Deputy Minister of Justice who ran that system was both appointed and paid by the Canadian International Development Agency.) Or about the role of the RCMP in providing training and tutelage for a reconstituted Haitian National Police that engaged in documented death-squad activities against civilians between 2004 and at least 2006, and is suspected of involvement in such crimes as the “disappearance” of human rights activist Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine in August 2007? (Should we not feel some degree of responsibility for these crimes? Might it be in any way significant that Lovinsky was “disappeared” just three weeks after having annoyed Canadian authorities in Haiti by trying to organize a demonstration against Stephen Harper’s brief visit to the island in July?)[1]

The Wikileaks cables apparently include more than 1,800 documents emanating from Ottawa (whether from American diplomats posted there or from Canadian authorities communicating with the US is unclear). Their contents may be entirely confined to banal and routine matters. Or they may perhaps provide further substantiation of the fact that crimes of state terror of the kind Tom Flanagan thought it appropriate to recommend on CBC Television—far from being mere rhetoric, let alone a “joke”—touch Canadians more closely than most of us have been able to recognize.

Should the Wikileaks cables turn out to contain material of this kind, we might expect to hear angry denunciations of Julian Assange from Liberal as well as from Conservative quarters—for Canada’s participation in the Haitian coup of 2004 was decided and acted upon by the governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, whose policies the Harper Conservatives have in this respect merely continued.

One may hope that in such a case, Canadian public opinion would respond with a firm defence of our democratic right to know about and to control the doings of our elected representatives and public servants—and to ensure that their actions remain in conformity with domestic and international law.

As for the present, I note with interest that Vancouver lawyer Gail Davidson has filed a complaint against Tom Flanagan with the Vancouver police and the RCMP (see Charlie Smith, “Police complaint filed after Tom Flanagan calls for assassination of Wikileaks’ Julian Assange, [Straight.com](http://www.straight.com) [4 December 2010], <http://www.straight.com/article-362941/vancouver/lawyer-files-criminal-flanagan-assassination-wikileaks-julian-assan>). I’m happy to endorse a comment posted by ‘Delmazio’ in response to this news: “We need more people like Mr. Julian Assange who are willing to speak truth to power, and encourage the free flow of information which directly affects public policy decisions. If we value freedom of information, transparency, openness, and democracy, we ought to praise not to condemn such efforts.”[2]

Notes

[1] Information on these subjects can be found in my essay “The Dignity of the Haitian Women (and Canada’s Shame).”

[2] Some may be concerned about the news that Sweden’s Public Prosecutor’s Office announced in August 2010 that it intended to arrest Assange on charges of rape, withdrew the arrest warrant on the same day, asserting that there was no evidence, and then resurrected the charges three months later. See the following article by Melbourne barrister James D. Catlin, who acted for Assange in London in October: “When it comes to Assange rape case, the Swedes are making it up as they go along,” *Crikey* (2 December 2010), <http://www.allvoices.com>.

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