

PELOSI: MEMBERS ARE TAKING VOTES ... YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE VOTING ON

In his review of the Wikileaks material on Afghanistan, Marc Ambinder notes that John Kerry referred to “serious questions about the reality of America’s policy toward Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

Will it raise skepticism in Congress? Absolutely. The chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, John Kerry, said in a statement that “[h]owever illegally these documents came to light, they raise serious questions about the reality of America’s policy toward Pakistan and Afghanistan. Those policies are at a critical stage and these documents may very well underscore the stakes and make the calibrations needed to get the policy right more urgent.”

As Siun notes, the leak comes just before the House votes on an Afghan supplemental.

But what about the Senate, which voted on Thursday to pass the supplemental? If John Kerry, the Chairman of the SFRC and no slouch on Afghanistan policy, suggests these leaks shed new light on our Afghan policy, does that mean he and the rest of the Senate had enough information to vote to escalate the war in Afghanistan in the first place?

The degree to which Administrations—Republican and Democratic—withhold information and then ask Congress to endorse actions inflected by that information was a central theme of my discussion with Nancy Pelosi (and Jan Schakowsky) on Saturday. In a discussion of the way Administrations limit briefings on important issues to the Gang of Four or Eight, she

describes realizing—after she became Ranking Member of the House Intelligence Committee—the degree to which other members of Congress were voting on policies they knew nothing about. “When I became Ranking Member I was in a room all the time on this and that ... and then members are taking votes and you’re thinking ‘you don’t even know what you’re voting on.’” Schakowsky followed up on Pelosi’s point to note how central that ignorance was when Congress authorized the Iraq War.

Now, Pelosi and other members of the Gang of Four bear some responsibility for perpetuating this system that asks Congress to authorize Executive Branch actions in ignorance.

But as I’ll show in my longer post on Pelosi’s comments, that’s precisely why she’s holding out for GAO oversight of the intelligence community and—more directly on point—expanded briefing beyond the Gang of Four.

I’m not sure there is anything in the new WikiLeaks bunch that would have convinced Congress that we can’t continue to dump money into Afghanistan (I’ll take a look at the WikiLeaks documents once I’m done transcribing this interview). But the lessons of the last week—notably, a reconsideration of the degree to which much of the intelligence community has been privatized and hidden in opaque contracts, as well as the WikiLeaks demonstration that the White House isn’t completely forthcoming about the problems in its war in Afghanistan—all demonstrate the need to give Congress the real oversight ability they lack now.