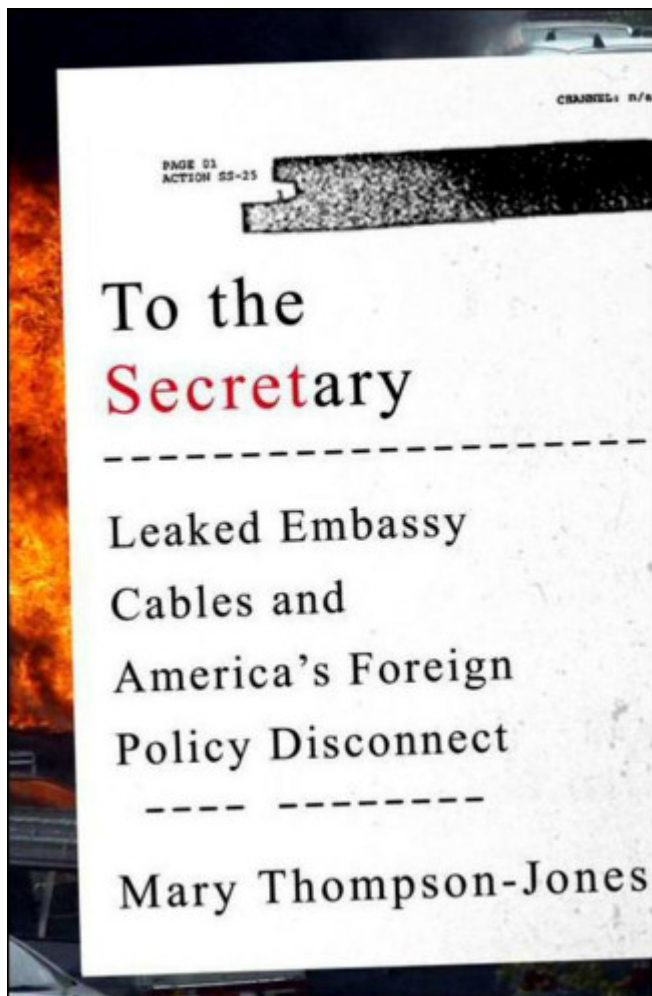


‘To the secretary’ hard to put down

Posted: Sunday, August 14, 2016

“To the Secretary: Leaked Embassy Cables and America’s Foreign Policy Disconnect” by Mary Thompson-Jones. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016, 320 pages, \$27.95.



“Every day, hundreds of cables flood into the State Department from its missions around the world,” Mary Thompson-Jones explains near the beginning of *“To the Secretary: Leaked Embassy Cables and America’s Foreign Policy Disconnect,”* her new exploration of our role in shaping the international geopolitical landscape. “Dozens of bureaus are filled with personnel assigned to read them and take action. Understanding the flow of diplomatic reporting to and from Washington is a story of both too much and too little, and often not at the right time.”

“Knowing by instinct when and what to communicate back home is what makes a good diplomat,” she continues. “Their reporting must walk a fine line between loyally carrying out assignments from Washington, while making essential, sometimes contradictory, points to a foreign policy establishment that does not always want to hear them.”

The world Thompson-Jones describes in *“To the Secretary”* is one most Americans have little understanding of or appreciation for; certainly, the average citizen is blissfully unaware of the inner workings of our embassies around the

globe. More than anything else, the author provides an insider’s view of a process whose purpose and methods are shrouded in mystery and often serve as a breeding ground for conspiracy theories. This makes the profession infinitely seductive as fodder for countless novels and motion pictures centered on international intrigue and clandestine operations. After reading some of the real-life scenarios and shenanigans described in this superbly crafted volume, however, I was left with the relatively self-evident conclusion that truth really is stranger than fiction.

“To the Secretary” is extensively researched, with 25 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the prologue, nine chapters and an epilogue comprising the main narrative. Drawing heavily from the 251,287 State Department cables released by Julian Assange in 2010, the picture Thompson-Jones paints is often at odds with what has been widely reported in the mainstream media. As many will recall, Assange, the Australian editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, has consistently claimed that the information made public through these cables overwhelmingly demonstrates that the United States

was – and no doubt still is – engaged in reprehensible and self-serving initiatives designed to maintain and reinforce its economic, political and military dominance.

By meticulously dissecting the actual content of many of those electronic messages, Thompson-Jones makes a rather convincing case that, although somewhat embarrassing and detrimental to the personal and professional relationships of some of the key players profiled in the book, ultimately they do not support the notion that the State Department is arbitrarily and recklessly meddling in the internal and foreign affairs of other countries.

Thompson-Jones is director of the global studies and international relations program at Northeastern University. Before assuming her current position, she spent 23 years in the State Department serving as deputy staff director for the Public Diplomacy Advisory Commission, senior press officer in the Bureau of European Affairs, deputy policy coordinator for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs and branch chief for International Educational Advising. A former dean of international graduate programs at Endicott College, she has undergraduate degrees in journalism and political science from California State University, a master's degree in law and diplomacy from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and a doctorate in education from the University of Pennsylvania. This is her first book.

Beyond the insights into how our government works steadfastly to defend its interests and reinforce its security both domestically and abroad, I was fascinated by her depiction of how many nations treat their own citizens. And although I am not an advocate of so-called American exceptionalism, it is difficult not to feel a slight sense of superiority when reading passages such as the following from “Corruption: Immunity, Impunity, and Impudence,” the seventh chapter and one of my personal favorites:

“Bulgaria is a culture so thoroughly permeated by corruption it is difficult for outsiders to conceptualize it – even with vivid examples provided by the embassy. Not even soccer is exempt. Most teams in the country are owned or controlled by organized crime figures, who use them as fronts for money laundering and tax evasion. The last three presidents of the team Lokomotiv Plovdiv were all assassinated. Years of blatant match fixing have disgusted fans, who now stay away, no small thing in a country whose defeat of Germany in the 1994 World Cup advanced it to the semifinals.”

Finally, those who are following the U.S. presidential campaigns will find the ninth chapter, “Hillary Clinton: The Good Enough Secretary,” to be – depending on your particular political persuasion – either a wonderful expose of arrogance and power run amok or a carefully-calculated smear job of a dedicated public servant. Indeed, there were some very revealing moments captured in this chapter, which in the end I found to be a fair and balanced treatment of an issue that continues to haunt Clinton.

“These cables matter, because Clinton’s record as secretary of state says a good deal about how she would manage foreign policy as president,” Thompson-Jones writes. “Her willingness to consider and act upon messages from American officers on the front lines of diplomacy is of direct relevance, especially when those messages diverged from her own views or contradicted conventional wisdom.”

“To the Secretary” offers a glimpse inside the complex and murky world of international diplomacy. The author’s intimate awareness of her subject matter gives her work a credibility often lacking in similar efforts. I think many readers would find this one hard to put down.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.