

EDITORIAL

Zuckerberg or Assange — did Time get it right?

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is a free man again. If he and his legal team are to be believed, he has spent the last week or so locked in solitary confinement, in a basement cell of a dank Victorian prison in southwest London, having been denied contact with the outside world, or access to media of any kind. While anyone with a passing knowledge of the British justice system, with its strict adherence to human rights legislation — and plasma television screens for inmates, if headlines are to be believed — may question the veracity of those claims, one wonders when Assange first discovered that he had been beaten to the title of Time Magazine's Person of the Year by Facebook supremo Mark Zuckerberg.

There has been roaring controversy over this year's choice. Those who see Assange as a crusader for free speech and governmental transparency think Time bowed to pressure from the authorities and big business to deprive him of the title in favor of the more palatable Zuckerberg. Time itself has made a passionate defense of its selection — pointing to his remarkable achievement of managing to attract one twelfth of humankind to his online club.

The two men are similar. Both began as talented computer programmers, with an inhuman knack for seeing meaning and limitless possibility in lines and lines of source code, as easily as most of us scan through the pages of the morning newspaper. Both have rebellious streaks, but while Zuckerberg grew out of his teenage defiance to become the youngest member of the world establishment, Assange never did.

WikiLeaks' recent splurge of previously secret U.S. diplomatic cables has dominated bulletins. He is wanted by many for crimes which have yet to be proven. Aside from his alleged sexual assaults in Sweden, investigators in the U.S. are reportedly working to build a case against WikiLeaks. For many more, Assange is a campaigning investigative journalist, who uses the Internet to stand up for fundamental democratic principles such as public accountability and the freedom of the press, and it is true that much of his site's output has informed political debate for the better.

Despite the conspiracy theories, there seems little doubt that Assange would have won the award, without contest, had the year begun in December. Those with short attention spans might feel 2010 was Assange's year, but while earlier releases of information concerning the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq received widespread coverage, it is only in the last month or so that WikiLeaks' impact on world affairs exploded into the ongoing international saga it is now. By that point, Time's list was probably already finished.

Timing is key for this designation, but that factor raises questions over Zuckerberg's coronation too.

His achievements are stunning. Facebook has 550 million members. Time points out that, if Facebook were a country, it would be the third largest in the world behind only China and India. While Facebook continued its rise this year, its real breakthrough came in 2008 when Zuckerberg's creation became the world's biggest social network. In fact, the site has been embattled by controversies this year over privacy breaches and online security issues.

Perhaps the principal factor in Zuckerberg's rise to prominence this year came from something that was not created by him. While Hollywood's telling of his life-story — The Social Network — painted an unflattering picture of Zuckerberg as a socially-cold, duplicitous, and ultimately lonely young man, its overwhelming critical and commercial success seems to have done far more good than harm for his personal profile.

Surely the most appropriate choice for Person, or rather, People of the Year, would have been the 33 Chilean miners, whose remarkable resurrection after months trapped underground, seemingly beyond hope of rescue, gripped the world for months on end and featured a glorious, life-affirming resolution that offered inspiration to the whole of humankind.

Could it be that their story was too international and not American enough for the U.S.-based Time? While the miners are included as runners-up for the title, alongside Assange, the list also features the Tea Party and Hamid Karzai — both central to U.S. interests to a greater or lesser extent. Might it be that Time is retreating into its core readership to consolidate sales, like many other papers and magazines that are struggling to deal with publishing's financial crisis?

Or perhaps Time is holding off on giving "Los 33" the title until Hollywood releases its version of their story, with Brad Pitt in the leading role.

True morality cannot be legislated

By WILLIAM FANG
Special to The China Post

John Kuan, the president of the Examination Yuan, said on Dec. 14, without naming names, that politically appointed officials should have to bear the political responsibility for wrong policies. Currently, the Legislative Yuan is reviewing the drafts of three laws submitted by the Examination Yuan, including the "Draft Regulations on Political Appointed Officials," which, dubbed the "big mouth clause," specifies the criteria for political officials to step down such as making misstatements.

Kuan indicated that the two blunders frequently committed

by politicians are: misstatements and whitewashing. All political officials must be held accountable for their political, administrative and moral responsibilities, Kuan asserted. But, is there any politician who never makes misstatements or breaks promises? Political behavior should be handled politically by the people.

In recent years, as more and more problems of all sorts are beginning to plague Taiwan, there appears to be a noticeable trend for the government to establish more agencies and enact more laws to cope with the situation. This often leads to unnecessary bureaucratic overlapping. What is generally overlooked is the fact

that the real issue is not the creation of new institutions or passage of new regulations but that of making the existing ones more effective.

For example, President Ma Ying-jeou has vowed to establish a new and more powerful agency to fight corruption, and his idea reportedly has gained considerable support. But, there are also those who point to the need of recruiting conscientious, capable and devoted government employees to staff the existing institutions. Without doing so, all other efforts to effect political reforms will be of little avail.

As to measures to discipline public officials, the Control Yuan,

for one, is empowered by the Constitution to censure or impeach officials for dereliction of duty or violation of laws. Is the nation's highest watchdog body perceived to fulfill its constitutional responsibilities? Has it done anything about Chen Chu, the mayor of Kaohsiung, who, along with her two deputy mayors, clearly committed acts of dereliction of duty and lying about her whereabouts during the heavy flooding of the city triggered by a typhoon in September? Even with solid criminal evidence against Chen, the district court did not indict her. So what?

Taiwan, as a modern democracy, is unique in the sense that

its government operations have come under profound ethnic and ideological influence, so much so that once these two factors are injected, the question of right and wrong is sidelined.

Kuan said when officials reach certain positions, they must, in their minds, have a yardstick obliging them to take into consideration public perceptions and expectations from their superiors while discharging their duties. Here is a question of conscience, not legal limitations. It is impossible to legislate morality because it is a conviction and a subjective value judgment, an inner voice urging one to behave in a certain way.

Tax deal offers slim hope of cutting US budget deficit

By KEVIN DRAWBAUGH
WASHINGTON, Reuters

The US\$858 billion tax deal approved by Congress on Thursday is "all candy and no spinach," but at least it shows that President Barack Obama and Republicans can cooperate on fiscal issues.

But their new detente will be tested early next year when the budget deficit looms larger on the political landscape. Analysts are skeptical this week's pact can be leveraged into a broad deficit-cutting program, and fear the deficit issue could be kicked forward to the 2012 election.

The tax deal makes the deficit bigger — just the opposite of what bond markets want — and it threatens to move taxes off the bargaining table in next year's struggles over federal spending and raising the government debt ceiling.

At the same time, it was expected to give the economy a boost, and if that gets more Americans working, meaningful deficit reduction could be a little easier.

A presidential commission's aggressive plan to slash the US\$1.3 trillion deficit earlier this month won more bipartisan support than expected.

"It's very likely that parts of the commission's plan end up in the president's budget. ... Otherwise, he sends some very disturbing signals," said Maya MacGuineas, fiscal policy director at the New America Foundation think tank.

Newly elected Republicans are moving the deficit to center stage, even as Congress wrestles this weekend with a stopgap funding measure to keep the government running.

Still, analysts said they were not holding their breath the momentum toward stemming Washington's flow of red ink would result in a major deficit reduction package in 2011-2012.

The tax package "was, as usual,

all candy and no spinach," said Brookings Institution fellow Isabel Sawhill.

"It should have been combined with a phased-in reduction of the deficit over the longer term. ... It doesn't send the right signals to our foreign creditors and it doesn't give one much confidence that elected officials are willing to take the tough and painful steps that are needed," she said.

Still, she added, "The package does suggest that the president is moving toward the center and this could open the door to more bipartisan deals in the new Congress."

Tax Deal Easy by Comparison

The U.S. House of Representatives voted on Thursday to extend for two years tax cuts enacted under former President George W. Bush for nearly all working Americans, while renewing unemployment insurance and providing additional tax relief.

The Senate had earlier approved the measure, which was expected to boost the economy, but add to the deficit and the nation's ballooning national debt of US\$13.8 trillion.

To win passage of the tax package, Obama retreated from his earlier position that the Bush-era tax cuts not be extended for the wealthy, while Republicans gave ground on unemployment.

Despite the drama surrounding it, the tax deal will look simple compared with the far-reaching compromises that would have to be made in any serious plan to cut the deficit, likely beginning only after the economy stabilizes, analysts said.

"It's much easier to have a compromise that makes the deficit bigger than it is to have one that makes the deficit smaller," said Michael Linden, associate director for tax and budget policy at the Center for American Progress.

Lift of sanctions finally turning the page for Iraq

By JOHN J. METZLER
UNITED NATIONS, Special to The China Post

A lingering set of political and economic sanctions, most dating from Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and its aftermath, have finally been lifted from Iraq.

A high-level Ministerial meeting of the fifteen member U.N. Security Council, decided to repeal the residue of remaining restrictions on Iraqi petroleum revenues, as well as sanctions on Saddam Hussein's quest for weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The moves, in effect, allow the new democratic Iraqi government full sovereignty from the shadow of economic sanctions, and turn the page on nearly two decades of U.N. oversight.

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon set the stage stating, "The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's regime two decades ago and its legacy caused widespread suffering among the peoples of both countries and in neighboring states as well."

Equally the Security Council has decided to end "all residual activities under the Oil for Food program."

This complex and scandal-ridden plan processed Iraqi petroleum revenues through a U.N. committee, which in turn provided for humanitarian assistance for the Iraqi people. By June 2011, Iraq regains total control of its oil revenues.

Alluding to the scandal-prone Oil for Food Program, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari told the assembled delegates, "This program was marred with a web of mismanagement and misappropriation and its termination lifts another burden on Iraq's recovery."

Naturally since the overthrow of Saddam's regime in 2003, and through the slow but certain evolution of rebuilt democratic political institutions, and still fractious governments, Iraq is returning to

normal, however slowly.

But as Ban Ki-moon said, "The country's development needs are considerable. It remains essential to restore the basic services that make daily life bearable." He added, "Iraq's development vision should also encompass its mosques, churches and shrines, its archaeological artifacts, its magnificent environment."

One should also stress protection for the embattled Christian minority who has suffered intimidation and attacks on Churches and seen the killing of priests and parishioners.

Indeed massive international development assistance especially from the United States has helped the country slowly rebuild. Equally Japan has played strong role; US\$5 billion in aid as well as debt relief of US\$6.7 billion.

Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Hisashi Tokunaga, informed the Council that, "Japan intends to continue its assistance for economic and social development in Iraq."

So nearly twenty years after the conflict with Kuwait began, there's a form of closure.

How many U.S. Presidents have been haunted by the specter of Saddam, even after the dictator's death?

George HW Bush, Bill Clinton (two terms), George W. Bush (two terms), and Barack Obama.

And since the Anglo-American overthrow of Saddam in 2003, how many American troops have made the ultimate sacrifice and been killed (4,430) in combat, or the many thousands more wounded?

While the military surge ordered by President George W. Bush in 2007 proved decisive in turning the tide from a seemingly unstoppable insurgency, Iraq still faces entrenched al-Qaida terrorists and

militant Islamic militias.

Though formal combat operations have ended, 50,000 American troops remain.

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden who chaired the Security Council meeting made an important policy statement, "The Security Council reaffirms its commitment to the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Iraq and emphasizes the importance of stability and security of Iraq for its people, the region and the international community."

His comments reflect the fragile ethnic and political fault-lines inside Iraq.

Separatism lurks in the Kurdish regions.

The quest for a stable and ethnically representative government remains elusive. Terrorism poses a threat despite much-diminished levels.

Interestingly, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu told the Council's delegates, "After two major wars and years of instability, Iraq has come a long way in rejoining the family of nations as a fully sovereign and responsible partner. The achievements to date have been both impressive and encouraging."

By formally ending the vestiges of remaining de jure sanctions, the international community has turned the page on Iraq. It's now the responsibility of a sovereign Baghdad government to write a new saga without the Security Council looking over its shoulder. As Vice President Biden reaffirmed, the "dark era of Saddam Hussein is now over."

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An ever shifting strategy in the long Afghanistan war

WASHINGTON, AFP

The United States and its allies have waged war in Afghanistan for more than nine years, longer than the Soviet army in the 1980s, but the White House said Thursday a troop buildup would pave the way for an eventual withdrawal by 2015.

Since the war began in 2001, the strategy of the U.S.-led force has changed dramatically.

— War On Terror: 2001

Less than a month after the Sept. 11 attacks, then president George W. Bush — declaring a "war on terror" — launches an assault on Afghanistan to strike at al-Qaida, and to topple the Taliban regime for giving safe harbor to Osama bin Laden's network.

The Americans rely on a small force of CIA paramilitary teams, special operations forces and U.S. warplanes to back up the Taliban's Afghan rivals — the Northern Alliance.

The Taliban fall from power within days as al-Qaida training bases are knocked out, but bin Laden and his associates flee over the border into Pakistan.

— Forgotten War: 2002-2007

The U.S. focus shifts to Iraq, as Bush orders an attack on Iraq in 2003 to "disarm" Saddam Hussein's regime. U.S. forces struggle against an Iraqi insurgency and spiraling sectarian violence, overshadowing the war in Afghanistan.

The Taliban and other Islamist militants regroup and re-emerge by 2005, exploiting sanctuaries in neighboring Pakistan while staking out strongholds along the eastern border and in the mainly Pash-tun south. U.S. troop levels hover around 20,000, rising to 27,000 in February 2007.

— Wake Up Call: 2008

With Taliban attacks on the rise, the Bush administration faces mounting criticism that Afghanistan has been neglected. Both presidential candidates promise to send more troops, with Barack Obama arguing that Iraq has served as a "distraction."

The U.S. commander, General David McKiernan, appeals for

major reinforcements, advocating a counter-insurgency strategy designed to win over Afghans instead of merely targeting Taliban forces. At the end of his term, Bush orders thousands of troops to Afghanistan, but far less than the 30,000 requested by McKiernan.

— Obama's War: 2009

During the first months of his presidency, Obama decides to double the number of troops on the ground, with the force rising to 68,000, while unveiling plans to end the Iraq mission. He says the aim of the war is to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat" al-Qaida.

After a protracted debate inside the administration that pits U.S. military commanders against some advisers in the White House, Obama announces in December a "surge" of 30,000 additional troops, bringing the U.S. contingent to nearly 100,000 along with nearly 50,000 allied troops.

The strategy focuses on securing key towns in the Taliban's southern strongholds while building up Afghan forces. At the same time, the CIA expands a covert bombing campaign against al-Qaida and Taliban leaders in neighboring Pakistan, using unmanned aircraft.

Along with the troop buildup, Obama sets a deadline of July 2011 to start the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces, but the pace of the drawdown remains unclear.

— The Way Out: 2014

Given frustrations with the Kabul government and the drawn-out war, U.S. officials in 2010 talk about "Afghan good enough," looking for more realistic goals to clear the way for an eventual exit.

At a November summit, NATO backs a plan for Afghan forces to take over security by the end of 2014, with the transition starting in 2011. Pentagon officials say the 2014 date is an "aspirational" goal.

The White House policy review issued Thursday calls for handing over security to the Afghans in some districts in "early" 2011 but acknowledges the persistent problem of militant sanctuaries in Pakistan.

A patient slog in Pakistan

By TRUDY RUBIN
ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, MCT

Will Pakistani assistance to Afghan militants doom America's efforts in Afghanistan?

This question continues to haunt the Afghan conflict as President Obama released a review of war strategy and mourned the death of his top civilian envoy to the region, Richard Holbrooke.

Two new U.S. intelligence estimates contend that success is unlikely so long as Pakistan permits Afghan militants to find sanctuary in its border areas. Add to this the long-standing claims, fueled anew by WikiLeaks documents, that Pakistan's spy agency is duping its American ally by aiding militants while the country is hauling in US\$1 billion a year in U.S. military aid.

So expect congressional calls for harsher pressure on Islamabad.

Yet a trip here with the chairman of the joint chiefs, Adm. Mike Mullen, presents a very different picture. Despite constant frustrations, top U.S. military officials don't believe threats will get results here. They are determined to slog away at building trusting relationships with their Pakistani counterparts that may produce a better outcome in the long run.

This may be a hard sell in Washington. Yet the approach of Mullen and other military officials makes painful sense because it recognizes hard realities on the ground.

Although Mullen recognizes the need for short-term results, he is focused on the long term, trying to align U.S. and Pakistani objectives to the greatest extent possible. Until 2007, those objectives diverged greatly: Pakistan's military was ready to cut deals with some militants; it viewed Afghan Taliban groups as a hedge in its long-running conflict with India.

However, in the last two years, the Pakistani military has been forced to confront militants after they began to attack government and military installations. Mullen points to progress: Kayani has transferred large numbers of troops from the Indian border to the border with Afghanistan, waged substantial campaigns against militant groups, and taken heavy casualties.

U.S. military trainers, once unwelcome, now work extensively with Pakistanis, especially with the Frontier Corps, which guards the Afghan border. However, the Pakistani military is still focused on fighting Pakistani Taliban and has not confronted Afghan militants such as the Haqqani group in North Waziristan, the scourge of U.S. forces in eastern Afghanistan. For critics, this is evidence that the Mullen strategy won't work.

Yet Mullen still believes he can convince his Pakistani counterpart that, when it comes to confronting militancy, his interests are parallel to America's. He tells Kayani that all militant groups are linked in one syndicate that also threatens Pakistan.

However, Kayani's forces are overstretched, all the more so because a devastating flood diverted thousands of his men and vital military transport. The worst-case scenario, U.S. military officials say, would be for Kayani to move against the Haqqanis before his military has enough capacity — and lose.

That raises the question of whether Kayani will ever make that move. Yes, he will, says a U.S. defense official here, "so long as we are patient." Many Pakistani officers serving on the Afghan border are already changing their thinking, he says, especially now that they understand that U.S. troops won't all be leaving Afghanistan in 2011.

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