

Julian Assange's life is in danger

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Following Thursday's arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in London, the governments of the US, Britain and Ecuador are engaged in a conspiracy to facilitate the whistleblower's extraordinary rendition to the US. Julian Assange's life and liberty is in imminent danger. It is necessary to mobilize all supporters of free speech to prevent him from falling into the hands of the American government.

Over 40 years ago, a Rand Corporation analyst Daniel Ellsberg provided the *Washington Post* with evidence regarding the US government's illegal activity in the Vietnam War. Yesterday, Ellsberg issued the following statement:

It's a very serious assault on the First Amendment. A clear attempt to rescind the freedom of the press...This is the first indictment of a journalist and editor or publisher, Julian Assange. And if it's successful it will not be the last. This is clearly is a part of President Trump's war on the press, what he calls the enemy of the state. And if he succeeds in putting Julian Assange in prison, where I think he'll be for life, if he goes there at all, probably the first charge against him is only a few years. But that's probably just the first of many.

The official pretext being used to extradite Assange is a transparent lie. In a previously-sealed indictment made public Thursday, the US Department of Justice charged Assange only with violating a federal law against conspiring to break passwords to government computers.

The fact that the crime carries only a 5-year sentence and does not fall under the Espionage Act provides all involved parties with a cover for handing Assange over to the Americans. In particular, the US-UK extradition treaty excludes transfer for "political offenses," including espionage. Citing the Justice Department document, the British government will claim in courts that Assange's extradition will not be prevented by this exclusion.

The Ecuadoran government, moreover, claims it could revoke Assange's asylum because the indictment shows he will not face the threat of the death penalty.

In fact, once Assange is in the hands of the United States, he will quickly confront a series of additional charges, including espionage. The efforts to downplay the threat to the freedom of the press and understate the charge against Assange are aimed at sowing complacency in the population and distracting from the core free speech issues at stake.

The language of the indictment itself makes clear the government is targeting Assange for political reasons, despite the official charge at its conclusion. It asserts: "The primary purpose of the conspiracy was to facilitate [Chelsea] Manning's acquisition and transmission of classified information related to the national defense of the United

States so that WikiLeaks could publicly disseminate the information on its website."

The indictment notes that the information WikiLeaks released to the public included "approximately 90,000 Afghanistan war-related significant activity reports, 400,000 Iraq war-related significant activities reports, 800 Guantanamo Bay detainee assessment briefs, and 250,000 U.S. Department of State cables. Many of these records were classified pursuant to Executive Order No. 13526," signed by Barack Obama in 2009. The indictment claims these releases "reasonably could be expected to cause serious damage to the national security."

This language mirrors the text of the Espionage Act, which bars releasing information "relating to the national defense." The Espionage Act criminalizes anyone who "communicates, delivers, transmits or causes to be communicated, delivered or transmitted" such information.

Based on the language of the indictment, both Assange and Manning could face criminal persecution under this law. By announcing that Assange is being prosecuted based explicitly on Manning's activity, the government is demonstrating her future is at risk as well. In fact, the first two words of the indictment are "Chelsea Manning."

This language also confirms last year's "inadvertent" release by prosecutors of documents arguing Assange should be extradited because there are "charges"—plural—against him. Prosecutors convened a secret grand jury to investigate Assange at least as far back as 2011, and the US government sought warrants to spy on WikiLeaks employees based on allegations of "espionage" in 2012.

Only the complicit or the naïve could accept that a secret grand jury spent over eight years to charge Assange with just one count of password manipulation.

The response of leading political figures in the US, as well as previous statements, makes clear that the ruling elite is eager to seize Assange and lock him up for life—if not impose worse punishments.

Democratic Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer tweeted, "I hope he will soon be held to account for his meddling in our elections on behalf of Putin and the Russian government." Democratic Senator Mark Warner called Assange "a direct participant in Russian efforts to weaken the West and undermine American security. I hope British courts will quickly transfer him to U.S. custody so he can finally get the justice he deserves."

Prosecuting Assange on the basis of the unfounded allegations of "meddling" would be charges of espionage.

Like a dungeonmaster who has been handed his latest victim, Democratic Senator Joe Manchin declared: "He is our property and we can get the facts and the truth from him." On the basis of this statement, Assange is being transferred to the US for the purpose of interrogation—which would fall under the category of extraordinary rendition, not extradition.

Assange has also faced open death threats in the press and from the government over the past several years. Rightwing radio personality Rush Limbaugh called for Assange to receive “a bullet to the brain.” Former Fox News host Bill O’Reilly told Assange: “We’re going to hang you.” Former Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich said, “Julian Assange is engaged in terrorism and should be treated as an enemy combatant.” Democratic Vice President Joe Biden called Assange a “high-tech terrorist.” Democratic operative Bob Beckel said, “this guy’s a traitor” and the US should “illegally shoot the son of a b***h.”

Another function of the indictment is to provide the corrupt and lying media with a cover for applauding Assange’s arrest. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have played a particularly criminal role in downplaying the indictment by claiming the use of a lesser charge means prosecuting Assange poses no threat to free speech.

In an editorial board statement yesterday, the *New York Times* wrote: “The government charged Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, not with publishing classified government information, but with stealing it, skirting—for now—critical First Amendment questions.”

The single count against Assange, the *Times* wrote, means the arrest does not pose “a direct challenge to the distinction between a journalist exposing abuse of power through leaked materials—something traditional newspapers like the *Times* do all the time—and a foreign agent seeking to undermine the security of the United States through theft or subterfuge... The administration has begun well by charging Mr. Assange with an indisputable crime.”

The *Washington Post*’s editorial is titled, “Julian Assange is not a free-press hero. And he is long overdue for personal accountability.”

The *Post* wrote, “Mr. Assange’s case could conclude as a victory for the rule of law, not the defeat for civil liberties of which his defenders mistakenly warn.” The *Post* labeled concerns over Assange’s safety as “pro-WikiLeaks propaganda.” The fact that the indictment does not charge Assange with violating the Espionage Act proves he “had no legitimate fears for his life, either at the hands of CIA assassins or, via extradition, the US death penalty.”

The *Post* explained that “Britain should not fear that sending him for trial on that hacking count would endanger freedom of the press” because Assange is “unethical” and not a “real journalist” because he “dumped material into the public domain without any effort independently to verify its factuality or give named individuals an opportunity to comment.”

Who are the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to lecture about “real journalism”? These statements expose the *Times* and the *Post* as nothing but government propaganda organs.

The *Times* is synonymous with peddling the Bush administration’s false claim of “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq, and the *Post* is owned by Jeff Bezos, the billionaire CEO of Amazon, which recently reached a \$600 million service contract with the Pentagon.

The conspiracy against Assange underscores the collapse of any constituency in the political establishment and corporate media for the defense of democratic rights. If Ellsberg approached the *Post* today with photocopies of Pentagon-commissioned Rand reports on the war, the *Post* would call the FBI and have him arrested for threatening “national security.”

The *Times* and the *Post* may convince their affluent readers that Assange aided Russia by publishing evidence showing Hillary Clinton received hundreds of thousands of dollars secretly telling audiences of bankers and CEOs she would represent their interests if elected

president. Meanwhile, the Democrats have made common cause with the leaders of the military and intelligence agencies responsible for the crimes Assange has revealed. The rightwing character of the Democrats’ opposition to Trump is exposed by the fact that they support his administration’s attacks on Assange.

The defense of Julian Assange, along with Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, is now a central political question that confronts the working class. Attitudes toward these whistleblowers break down largely upon class lines. As the ruling class cracks down on free speech and freedom of the press, class conflict is intensifying across the world.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* make the broadest appeal to all those who are serious about defending democratic rights to join the fight to defend Assange, Manning and Snowden. Workers and youth internationally must mobilize immediately to defend these class war prisoners. Their lives depend on it.

The fight for Assange’s freedom is the spearhead of the political struggle in defense of democratic rights, against imperialist militarism and capitalism. Only to the extent that the power of the working class can be harnessed can a defense of these whistleblowers be mounted.

As Socialist Equality Party (Australia) National Committee member Nick Beams said at Friday’s emergency rally in Sydney, “the attack on democracy is a symptom of a profound disease. There is no defense of democracy without tackling the problem at its source, that is, the profit system of global capitalism, a system in crisis that has played out its historic role and now has to tear up, trample, defile even the democratic rights that it once stood for. We have to begin as part of this struggle the part for a socialist perspective. Only then can the world be cleansed of all the horrors that it is conjuring up.”

Eric London

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