

“This administration clearly wants to go after journalists”

Chelsea Manning restates her refusal to testify against Julian Assange as new grand jury subpoena looms

By Niles Niemuth
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Whistleblower and political prisoner Chelsea Manning spoke out Sunday in defense of her principled refusal to testify before any grand jury impaneled to bring frame-up charges against journalist and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Manning spent 62 days in a jail in Alexandria, Virginia, including a month in solitary confinement, after a federal judge found her in contempt of court for refusing to testify before the grand jury impaneled there to prosecute Assange.

Despite several legal appeals, she was released Thursday morning only after the term of the Alexandria grand jury expired. Almost simultaneously she was served with a subpoena to appear before a new grand jury, which is seeking to ask her the same questions about her alleged interactions with WikiLeaks. Manning could be back in jail as soon as Thursday.

The former Army specialist already served seven years of a 35-year sentence in a military prison, including a year in solitary confinement, after she was convicted of leaking evidence of American war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan to WikiLeaks. President Barack Obama commuted Manning's sentence on his last day in office without giving her the full pardon that would have expunged her criminal record.

Speaking on CNN's "Reliable Sources" program just three days after being released, Manning made clear that she will resist the new grand jury subpoena, even at the cost of being sent back to prison.

"I am going to refuse," Manning explained when asked by host Brian Stelter if she would comply with the new subpoena. "I think that this grand jury is an

improper—I think that all grand juries are improper. I don't like the secrecy of it."

Manning explained that she hoped her attorney's appeal to quash the subpoena would be successful and she would not have to return to jail. "We're certainly going to raise every single legal challenge," she said. "We have a very strong case." Manning already answered all of the questions raised by the grand jury during her testimony at trial in 2013.

While Manning did not mention Assange by name, she made clear that she was taking a stand in an effort to protect him and other journalists from persecution by the Trump administration.

"This administration clearly wants to go after journalists," Manning told Stelter. "I think that if the administration gets its way as it's laid out in repeated statements—like, 'The media is the enemy of the people' kind of thing—you know, then I think that we're going to see the national security journalists and a lot of disruptive, for this administration, press—we're probably going to see indictments and charges."

"Whenever a journalist makes a misstep, I think that they are put on notice now that the FBI and the Department of Justice are going to go after them on the administration's behalf," Manning added.

Stelter seemed taken aback by the appearance of someone on his program who is willing to sacrifice her personal comfort for political principles. "We talk all the time about unprincipled politicians. And what you are doing is an act of principle. Whether viewers agree with it or not, I can see that," he concluded.

Assange is currently being held in Belmarsh Prison, a

high security facility in London typically reserved for those convicted of murder and terrorism, after being sentenced to 50 weeks in prison over a bail-jumping charge that arose from trumped-up sexual assault allegations in Sweden. The investigation of those allegations was closed two years ago without any charges being lodged.

Assange now awaits extradition to the United States, where he faces an initial charge of computer hacking that carries a possible five-year sentence. Further charges are expected to be unsealed once he is renditioned to the US, including under the Espionage Act, which carries the possibility of the death penalty.

On April 11, the WikiLeaks founder was dragged by a police snatch squad from the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he had been forced to remain by the British government after being granted political asylum by the Ecuadorian government in 2012. The abduction was carried out after the current president of Ecuador, Lenin Moreno, illegally withdrew Assange's asylum status.

El Pais reported Sunday that Ecuador has agreed to hand over to US prosecutors any documents, cell phones, computer files, computers, hard drives and other devices left behind in the embassy by Assange.

According to the report, cooperation between the US and Ecuador to ensnare Assange began several months ago when Moreno agreed to allow investigators to take statements. In the final months of his asylum in the embassy, Assange was placed under constant electronic surveillance. His attorneys expect that the surveillance recordings and other documents have also been turned over the US in order to undermine his defense efforts.

On Thursday, just as Manning was being released from jail, the US Justice Department arrested and charged former NSA intelligence analyst Daniel Hale under the Espionage Act for leaking information about the Obama administration's drone assassination program to the *Intercept*.

Hale is the fourth person to be pursued under the Espionage Act by the Trump administration's Justice Department. However, the effort to crack down on those who expose the truth about the operations of American imperialism is a bipartisan effort. Under Obama, the government brought Espionage Act charges against seven individuals, more than all previous administrations combined. Those indicted

included NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden and former CIA analyst John Kiriakou, who exposed the torture of detainees by means of waterboarding.

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