

John Pilger's Investigation Into the War on WikiLeaks and His Interview With Julian Assange

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John Pilger | Friday 14 January 2011



The attacks on WikiLeaks and its founder, Julian Assange, are a response to an information revolution that threatens old power orders in politics and journalism. The incitement to murder trumpeted by public figures in the United States, together with attempts by the Obama administration to corrupt the law and send Assange to a hell-hole prison for the rest of his life, are the reactions of a rapacious system exposed as never before.

In recent weeks, the US Justice Department has established a secret grand jury just across the river from Washington in the eastern district of the state of Virginia. The object is to indict Assange under a discredited espionage act used to arrest peace activists during the First World War, or one of the "war on terror" conspiracy statutes that have degraded American justice. Judicial

experts describe the jury as a "deliberate set up," pointing out that this corner of Virginia is home to the employees and families of the Pentagon, CIA, Department of Homeland Security, and other pillars of American power.

"This is not good news," Assange told me when we spoke this past week, his voice dark and concerned. He says he can have "bad days - but I recover." When we met in London last year, I said, "You are making some very serious enemies, not least of all the most powerful government engaged in two wars. How do you deal with that sense of danger?" His reply was characteristically analytical. "It's not that fear is absent. But courage is really the intellectual mastery over fear - by an understanding of what the risks are and how to navigate a path through them."

Regardless of the threats to his freedom and safety, he says the US is not WikiLeaks' main "technological enemy." "China is the worst offender. China has aggressive, sophisticated interception technology that places itself between every reader inside China and every information source outside China. We've been fighting a running battle to make sure we can get information through, and there are now all sorts of ways Chinese readers can get on to our site."

It was in this spirit of "getting information through" that WikiLeaks was founded in 2006, but with a moral dimension. "The goal is justice," wrote Assange on the homepage, "the method is transparency." Contrary to a current media mantra, WikiLeaks material is not "dumped." Less than one percent of the 251,000 US embassy cables have been released. As Assange points out, the task of interpreting material and editing that which might harm innocent individuals demands

"standards [befitting] higher levels of information and primary sources." To secretive power, this is journalism at its most dangerous.

On 18 March 2008, a war on WikiLeaks was foretold in a secret Pentagon document prepared by the "Cyber Counterintelligence Assessments Branch." US intelligence, it said, intended to destroy the feeling of "trust," which is WikiLeaks' "center of gravity." It planned to do this with threats to "exposure [and] criminal prosecution." Silencing and criminalizing this rare source of independent journalism was the aim: smear the method. Hell hath no fury like imperial Mafiosi scorned.

Others, also scorned, have lately played a supporting part, intentionally or not, in the hounding of Assange, some for reasons of petty jealousy. Sordid and shabby describe their behavior, which serves only to highlight the injustice against a man who has courageously revealed what we have a right to know.

As the US Justice Department, in its hunt for Assange, subpoenas the Twitter and email accounts, banking and credit card records of people around the world - as if we are all subjects of the United States - much of the "free" media on both sides of the Atlantic direct their indignation at the hunted.

"So, Julian, why won't you go back to Sweden now?" demanded the headline over Catherine Bennett's Observer column on 19 December, which questioned Assange's response to allegations of sexual misconduct with two women in Stockholm last August. "To keep delaying the moment of truth, for this champion of fearless disclosure and total openness," wrote Bennett, "could soon begin to look pretty dishonest, as well as inconsistent." Not a word in Bennett's vitriol considered the looming threats to Assange's basic human rights and his physical safety, as described by Geoffrey Robertson QC, in the extradition hearing in London on 11 January.

In response to Bennett, the editor of the online Nordic News Network in Sweden, Al Burke, wrote to the Observer explaining, "plausible answers to Catherine Bennett's tendentious question" were both critically important and freely available. Assange had remained in Sweden for more than five weeks after the rape allegation was made - and subsequently dismissed by the chief prosecutor in Stockholm - and that repeated attempts by him and his Swedish lawyer to meet a second prosecutor, who reopened the case following the intervention of a government politician, had failed. And yet, as Burke pointed out, this prosecutor had granted him permission to fly to London where "he also offered to be interviewed - a normal practice in such cases." So, it seems odd, at the very least, that the prosecutor then issued a European arrest warrant. The Observer did not publish Burke's letter.

This record straightening is crucial because it describes the perfidious behavior of the Swedish authorities - a bizarre sequence confirmed to me by other journalists in Stockholm and by Assange's Swedish lawyer Bjorn Hurtig. Not only that, Burke cataloged the unforeseen danger Assange faces should he be extradited to Sweden. "Documents released by WikiLeaks since Assange moved to England," he wrote, "clearly indicate that Sweden has consistently submitted to pressure from the United States in matters relating to civil rights. There is ample reason for concern that if Assange were to be taken into custody by Swedish authorities, he could be turned over to the United States without due consideration of his legal rights."

These documents have been virtually ignored in Britain. They show that the Swedish political class has moved far from the perceived neutrality of a generation ago and that the country's

military and intelligence apparatus is all but absorbed into Washington's matrix around NATO. In a 2007 cable, the US Embassy in Stockholm lauds the Swedish government dominated by the conservative Moderate Party of Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt as coming "from a new political generation and not bound by [anti-US] traditions [and] in practice a pragmatic and strong partner with NATO, having troops under NATO command in Kosovo and Afghanistan."

The cable reveals how foreign policy is largely controlled by Carl Bildt, the current foreign minister, whose career has been based on a loyalty to the United States that goes back to the Vietnam War when he attacked Swedish public television for broadcasting evidence that the US was bombing civilian targets. Bildt played a leading role in the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, a lobby group with close ties to the White House of George W. Bush, the CIA and the far right of the Republican Party.

"The significance of all this for the Assange case," notes Burke in a recent study, "is that it will be Carl Bildt and perhaps other members of the Reinfeldt government who will decide - openly or, more likely, furtively behind a façade of legal formality - on whether or not to approve the anticipated US request for extradition. Everything in their past clearly indicates that such a request will be granted."

For example, in December 2001, with the "war on terror" under way, the Swedish government abruptly revoked the political refugee status of two Egyptians, Ahmed Agiza and Mohammed al-Zari. They were handed to a CIA kidnap squad at Stockholm airport and "rendered" to Egypt, where they were tortured. When the Swedish ombudsman for justice investigated and found that their human rights had been "seriously violated," it was too late.

The implications for the Assange case are clear. Both men were removed without due process of law and before their lawyers could file appeals to the European Human Rights Court and in response to a US threat to impose a trade embargo on Sweden. Last year, Assange applied for residency in Sweden, hoping to base WikiLeaks there. It is widely believed that Washington warned Sweden through mutual intelligence contacts of the potential consequences. In December, prosecutor Marianne Ny, who reactivated the Assange case, discussed the possibility of Assange's extradition to the US on her web site.

Almost six months after the sex allegations were first made public, Assange has been charged with no crime, but his right to a presumption of innocence has been willfully denied. The unfolding events in Sweden have been farcical, at best. The Australian barrister James Catlin, who acted for Assange in October, describes the Swedish justice system as "a laughing stock ... There is no precedent for it. The Swedes are making it up as they go along." He says that Assange, apart from noting contradictions in the case, has not publicly criticized the women who made the allegations against him. It was the police who tipped off the Swedish equivalent of the Sun, Expressen, with defamatory material about them, initiating a trial by media across the world.

In Britain, this trial has welcomed yet more eager prosecutors, with the BBC to the fore. There was no presumption of innocence in Kirsty Wark's "Newsnight" court in December. "Why don't you just apologise to the women?" she demanded of Assange, followed by: "Do we have your word of honour that you won't abscond?" On Radio 4's "Today" program, John Humphrys, the partner of Bennett, told Assange that he was obliged to go back to Sweden "because the law says you must." The hectoring Humphrys, however, had more pressing interests. "Are you a sexual

predator?" he asked. Assange replied that the suggestion was ridiculous, to which Humphrys demanded to know how many women he had slept with.

"Would even Fox News have descended to that level?" wondered the American historian William Blum. "I wish Assange had been raised in the streets of Brooklyn, as I was. He then would have known precisely how to reply to such a question: 'You mean including your mother?'"

What is most striking about these "interviews" is not so much their arrogance and lack of intellectual and moral humility; it is their indifference to fundamental issues of justice and freedom and their imposition of narrow, prurient terms of reference. Fixing these boundaries allows the interviewer to diminish the journalistic credibility of Assange and WikiLeaks, whose remarkable achievements stand in vivid contrast to their own. It is like watching the old and stale, guardians of the status quo, struggling to prevent the emergence of the new.

In this media trial, there is a tragic dimension, obviously for Assange, but also for the best of mainstream journalism. Having published a slew of professionally brilliant editions with the WikiLeaks disclosures, feted all over the world, The Guardian recovered its establishment propriety on 17 December by turning on its besieged source. A major article by the paper's senior correspondent Nick Davies claimed that he had been given the "complete" Swedish police file with its "new" and "revealing" salacious morsels.

Assange's Swedish lawyer Hurtig says that crucial evidence is missing from the file given to Davies, including "the fact that the women were re-interviewed and given an opportunity to change their stories" and the tweets and SMS messages between them, which are "critical to bringing justice in this case." Vital exculpatory evidence is also omitted, such as the statement by the original prosecutor, Eva Finne, that "Julian Assange is not suspected of rape."

Having reviewed the Davies article, Assange's former barrister James Catlin wrote to me: "The complete absence of due process is the story and Davies ignores it. Why does due process matter? Because the massive powers of two arms of government are being brought to bear against the individual whose liberty and reputation are at stake." I would add: so is his life.

The Guardian has profited hugely from the WikiLeaks disclosures, in many ways. On the other hand, WikiLeaks, which survives on mostly small donations and can no longer receive funds through many banks and credit companies thanks to the bullying of Washington, has received nothing from the paper. In February, Random House will publish a Guardian book that is sure to be a lucrative best seller, which Amazon is advertising as "The End of Secrecy: the Rise and Fall of WikiLeaks." When I asked David Leigh, the Guardian executive in charge of the book, what was meant by "fall," he replied that Amazon was wrong and that the working title had been "The Rise (and Fall?) of WikiLeaks." "Note parenthesis and query," he wrote, "Not meant for publication anyway." (The book is now described on the Guardian web site as "WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy.") Still, with all that duly noted, the sense is that "real" journalists are back in the saddle. Too bad about the new boy, who never really belonged.

On 11 January, Assange's first extradition hearing was held at Belmarsh Magistrates Court, an infamous address because it is here that people were, before the advent of control orders, consigned to Britain's own Guantanamo, Belmarsh prison. The change from ordinary Westminster magistrates' court was due to a lack of press facilities, according to the authorities.

That they announced this on the day Vice President Joe Biden declared Assange a "high tech terrorist" was no doubt coincidental, though the message was not.

For his part, Assange is just as worried about what will happen to Bradley Manning, the alleged whistleblower, being held in horrific conditions which the US National Commission on Prisons calls "tortuous." At 23, Private Manning is the world's pre-eminent prisoner of conscience, having remained true to the Nuremberg principle that every soldier has the right to "a moral choice." His suffering mocks the notion of the land of the free.

"Government whistleblowers," said Barack Obama, running for president in 2008, "are part of a healthy democracy and must be protected from reprisal." Obama has since pursued and prosecuted more whistleblowers than any other president in American history.

"Cracking Bradley Manning is the first step," Assange told me. "The aim clearly is to break him and force a confession that he somehow conspired with me to harm the national security of the United States. In fact, I'd never heard his name before it was published in the press. WikiLeaks technology was designed from the very beginning to make sure that we never knew the identities or names of people submitting material. We are as untraceable as we are uncensorable. That's the only way to assure sources they are protected."

He adds: "I think what's emerging in the mainstream media is the awareness that if I can be indicted, other journalists can, too. Even the New York Times is worried. This used not to be the case. If a whistleblower was prosecuted, publishers and reporters were protected by the First Amendment that journalists took for granted. That's being lost. The release of the Iraq and Afghanistan war logs, with their evidence of the killing of civilians, hasn't caused this - it's the exposure and embarrassment of the political class: the truth of what governments say in secret, how they lie in public; how wars are started. They don't want the public to know these things and scapegoats must be found."

What about the allusions to the "fall" of WikiLeaks? "There is no fall," he said. "We have never published as much as we are now. WikiLeaks is now mirrored on more than 2,000 websites. I can't keep track of the of the spin-off sites: those who are doing their own WikiLeaks ... If something happens to me or to WikiLeaks, 'insurance' files will be released. They speak more of the same truth to power, including the media. There are 504 US embassy cables on one broadcasting organisation and there are cables on Murdoch and Newscorp."

The latest propaganda about the "damage" caused by WikiLeaks is a warning by the US State Department to "hundreds of human rights activists, foreign government officials and business people identified in leaked diplomatic cables of possible threats to their safety." This was how The New York Times dutifully relayed it on 8 January, and it is bogus. In a letter to Congress, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has admitted that no sensitive intelligence sources have been compromised. On 28 November, McClatchy Newspapers reported, "US officials conceded they have no evidence to date that the [prior] release of documents led to anyone's death." NATO in Kabul told CNN it could not find a single person who needed protecting.

The great American playwright Arthur Miller wrote: "The thought that the state ... is punishing so many innocent people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied." What WikiLeaks has given us is truth, including rare and precious insight into how and why so many innocent people have suffered in reigns of terror disguised as wars and executed in our name;

and how the United States has secretly and wantonly intervened in democratic governments from Latin America to its most loyal ally in Britain.

Javier Moreno, the editor of El Pais, which published the WikiLeaks logs in Spain, wrote, "I believe that the global interest sparked by the WikiLeaks papers is mainly due to the simple fact that they conclusively reveal the extent to which politicians in the West have been lying to their citizens."

Crushing individuals like Assange and Manning is not difficult for a great power, however craven. The point is, we should not allow it to happen, which means those of us meant to keep the record straight should not collaborate in any way. Transparency and information, to paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, are the "currency" of democratic freedom. "Every news organisation," a leading American constitutional lawyer told me, "should recognize that Julian Assange is one of them and that his prosecution will have a huge and chilling effect on journalism."

My favorite secret document - leaked by WikiLeaks, of course - is from the Ministry of Defense in London. It describes journalists who serve the public without fear or favor as "subversive" and "threats." Such a badge of honor.

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