

Assange's Rights and Press Freedom Hang in the Balance



BY EVE OTTENBERG / COUNTERPUNCH January 5, 2024

The deadline for Julian Assange's fight against extradition to the United States looms, as British judges will decide his case on February 21. Meanwhile, the American demand that Wikileaks publisher Assange stand trial in Virginia on trumped-up charges is what has kept this journalist locked up in Britain's maximum security Belmarsh jail for four years, and sequestered for refuge in the Ecuadoran embassy in London for seven years before that. Back then, Assange predicted Washington would try to extradite him, but his fair-weather friends in the press pooh-poohed this worry. Guess who assessed U.S. judicial aggression correctly? Hiding from the Empire was the right move. But it took a huge toll. Basically, Assange has been imprisoned in miserable conditions for over a decade – all for the crime of reporting so honestly that it embarrassed American political elites.

So who in the pathetic pantheon of celebrated U.S. mediocrities did Assange offend? Well, he especially irked two wildly narcissistic and entitled bigwigs, Hillary "My Turn to Be President" Clinton and Mike

“Bomb China” Pompeo. You do not want to reveal secrets that put you on the wrong side of either of these two, at least to judge from their schemes for Assange. Clinton famously whined “Can’t we just drone him?” when Assange stayed out of Washington’s reach in the Ecuadoran embassy, while Pompeo reportedly considered having the CIA kidnap or poison, that is murder, Assange. What secrets did Assange reveal that so infuriated this duo? Plenty. And they were big ones.

Assange slipped onto HRC’s bad side via truth so ugly that it revealed presidential candidate Clinton to be quite the hideously high-handed anti-democratic creature. How so? Assange published leaked emails that disclosed the Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee rigging the 2016 presidential primary to knock left-wing populist Bernie Sanders out of the running. In any functioning democracy, this news would have shamed the ruling class into an electoral do-over. But not in twenty-first-century America. Here our rulers focused all their wrath on the messenger, Assange, and let the illegitimately chosen queen keep her primary campaign crown. This affair proved axiomatically that democracy had died here in the U.S., but that did not ruffle any Washington feathers. The inside-the-Beltway crowd had the candidate they wanted and had anointed via subterfuge, and no scruffy news organization was going to alter that immutable fact.

But don’t think acting like nothing had happened meant that HRC and her many parasites intended to take Assange’s truth-telling lying down. I would be very surprised if the media campaign and especially the headlined hysteria regarding the phony Swedish rape charges against Assange did not trace back very circuitously to offended Clintonistas. Not that our pusillanimous press needed much urging to kick a great journalist when he was down. But there were probably lots of Hillary toadies getting their licks in surreptitiously, too.

How Assange offended Pompeo involves national security – of course, because Pompeo was President Trump’s CIA director in 2017, when Assange transgressed by allowing sunlight to beam down on the agency’s secrets. According to the Guardian on September 27, 2021 about events four years earlier, “Pompeo and his top officials were furious about Wikileaks’ publication of ‘Vault 7,’ a set of CIA hacking tools, a breach which the agency deemed to be the biggest data loss in its history.” A former Trump official said “they were seeing blood,” back in 2017. Senior CIA officials and some inside the white house asked for sketches and options for killing Assange. “‘There seemed to be no boundaries,’ a former senior counterterrorism official was quoted as saying.”

So Pompeo looks to have taken Assange’s revelations personally. Le CIA, c’est moi. As did HRC, both thus divulging a truly breathtaking sense of entitlement. These two political hacks let their heads swell to a point where they no longer accurately distinguished where their own personal boundaries stopped and the Empire began. They acted as though they saw themselves as embodiments, indeed avatars of Empire. And in truth, perhaps their narcissism was correct. Perhaps the individuals Hilary Clinton and Mike Pompeo are in reality mere fictions – their true nature, form, substance and destiny best summed up as official imperial bogeymen, out to torment anyone they could convict of decency, honesty or rebellion in the name of justice against their own very personal power.

Despite such lugubrious speculation, here and there hope glimmers. In December, U.S. district court judge for the Southern District of New York John Koeltl ruled in favor of four Americans, journalists and lawyers, suing the CIA in the Assange matter. According to RT on December 20, these Americans “claim their electronic devices were illegally searched on behalf of the agency when they visited Wikileaks founder Julian Assange at the Ecuadoran embassy in London.” The complaint against the embassy’s now-defunct security agency, Mike Pompeo and the CIA did not succeed entirely. Koeltl ruled “that the plaintiffs could not hold Pompeo personally accountable for the alleged violations of their constitutional protection from unreasonable search and seizure.” One wonders why not, given that Pompeo appears to have approached all things Assange with the fury of a gangster lusting for revenge.

But the deceptively inoffensive, minute fact that a case against the CIA and its former director for abrogating Fourth Amendment rights can proceed in these dark times is something. “We are thrilled that the court rejected the CIA’s efforts to silence the plaintiffs, who merely seek to expose the CIA’s attempt to carry out Pompeo’s vendetta against Wikileaks,” said Richard Roth, counsel for the four Americans. Plaintiffs are thrilled and you should be too. This is one of the rare moments, time out of mind, when the CIA has been called to account for its monstrous actions. Incidentally, aside from Politico, no corporate media saw fit to report this development and its implications for the much abused and often discarded Bill of Rights.

These four plaintiffs alleged, according to Kevin Gosztola in the Dissenter December 19, that they had to give their electronic devices to the embassy’s security firm, UC Global. The four Americans charge that this firm was in cahoots with the CIA. Koeltl ruled that whether the firm acted as an agent “of Pompeo and the CIA is a question of fact that cannot be decided on a motion to dismiss.” Earlier, Gosztola reports, “at a November hearing, Koeltl took an interest in the apparent fact that the government had not obtained a warrant to access the contents of the attorneys’ or journalists’ electronics.” Oh ho! With its warrantless snooping, the CIA has rampaged through the founders’ carefully arranged constitutional farmyard for years. But somebody looking out from the halls of justice finally noticed. Could the chickens of CIA abuse at last be coming home to roost?

So there exists a slight chance that the CIA and Pompeo will not get away entirely with violating whoever’s rights they felt like trashing. Given the agency’s grotesquely overblown powers, courtesy of abominations like the Patriot Act, and the agency’s frequent trampling of the Bill of Rights, this is small consolation. But it is better than nothing. And it may be a start. When one judge shows backbone and mildly defies security state tyrants, it emboldens others. Suddenly they begin to take their juridical role as guarantors of constitutional protections more seriously and cower less in the CIA’s shadow. Who knows, Koeltl’s careful, measured decision may even inspire those jurists across the Atlantic who hold Assange’s fate in their hands. They might actually rule in his favor. Justice begets justice. That would be an excellent outcome for Assange, a free press and all the rest of us.

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