

Bradley Manning and the media

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At a military court hearing on Thursday, Army Private Bradley Manning read out a 35-page statement that, in addition to providing a courageous defense of his efforts to reveal the truth about US military actions, contained an extraordinary fact. Before he sent army files to WikiLeaks, he contacted both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, but neither paper responded.

In his statement, Manning said he leaked the material because he believed they were “some of the most significant documents of our time, removing the fog of war and revealing the true nature of 21st century asymmetric warfare.” He explained that he felt morally obligated to alert the American public to war crimes being committed in its name.

The two major newspapers of the American liberal establishment felt no such obligation. Rather, they responded as they have repeatedly before, acting not as sources of information for the American people, but rather adjuncts of the state, censoring and vetting information in order to shape public opinion.

While publishing articles on select items acquired by WikiLeaks months after Manning’s attempt to pass on the material to the papers, neither the *Times* nor the *Post* reported that the soldier had approached them with the documents.

Manning acquired the documents while working as an Army intelligence analyst stationed outside Baghdad. The 25-year-old private explained that he was responsible for managing databases on incident reports from combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The material was not considered to be “very sensitive,” and Manning was required to create backup files of the data. Disturbed by what many of the entries revealed about the brutal nature of the occupations, Manning said he copied the war logs onto a disc and returned on leave to the United States with them saved on his computer.

Like the vast majority of documents and transcripts from the pre-trial hearings at Fort Hoode, Maryland, Manning’s statement is not available to the public or the press. A rush transcript was posted online by journalist Alexa O’Brien, who was present in the courtroom February 28.

“I believe that if the general public, especially the American public, had access to the information,” Manning explained, “this could spark a domestic debate on the role of the military and our foreign policy in general [and] as it related to Iraq and Afghanistan.”

“At this point I decided that it made sense to try to expose the SigAct [war logs] tables to an American newspaper,” he told the court. “I first called my local newspaper, the *Washington Post*, and spoke with a woman saying that she was a reporter. I asked her if the *Washington Post* would be interested in receiving information that would have enormous value to the American public. Although we spoke for about five minutes concerning the general nature of what I possessed, I do not believe she took me seriously.”

Manning continued: “I then decided to contact the most popular newspaper, the *New York Times*.” The public editor’s tip line, Manning explained, routed him through a series of pre-recorded options to a machine. “I left a message stating I had access to information about Iraq and Afghanistan that I believed was very important.” He never received a reply.

After these failed efforts, Manning said he decided to submit the materials to WikiLeaks to “help document the true cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” Manning was arrested five months later, on May 28, 2010. WikiLeaks began publishing the leaked documents two months later.

For this courageous defense of the First Amendment, Manning has been held for more than 1,000 days without trial, subjected to abusive treatment and solitary confinement, and denied whistleblower

protections. The Obama administration has charged him with 22 counts of violating the Espionage Act, including “aiding the enemy,” a crime that carries the death penalty. Government prosecutors are pursuing a sentence of life in prison.

In close coordination with the Obama White House, the media has played an indispensable role in persecuting Manning, and beyond him, WikiLeaks. Although Manning has faced numerous hearings over the course of the past year, the media has effectively boycotted the story. Most news outlets have sought to portray Manning as emotionally unstable and reckless, and have reported next to nothing of his mistreatment in custody, let alone the content of the documents he is charged with leaking.

The *New York Times*, in particular, has offered its services in the witch-hunt of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, whom the Obama administration is seeking to extradite to the US to face trial for espionage. After WikiLeaks published the Iraq war logs in 2010, the *Times* launched a smear campaign against Assange and sought to downplay the significance of what was revealed.

The paper assigned the task to John F. Burns, the journalist who headed the *Times*’ Baghdad bureau in the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq. Burns epitomizes the propaganda role played by “embedded” media personnel in US military and intelligence operations. (See “*New York Times* tries character assassination against WikiLeaks founder Assange”). In its publication of WikiLeaks material, moreover, Bill Keller, who was at the time acting as the newspaper’s executive editor, made clear that he was guided by an effort not to reveal as much as possible to the American people, but to conceal anything that might damage the government’s war aims. (See, “The *New York Times*’ Bill Keller on WikiLeaks: A collapse of democratic sensibility”)

The *Times* has a long and shameful record of coordinating its reporting with the state, including its 2004 decision to sit on revelations that the Bush administration was conducting warrantless wiretapping until after Bush had been re-elected. In 2007, when the *Times* reported that the CIA had destroyed video evidence of waterboarding, the paper acknowledged it did so only after extensive discussions with the government and a long delay.

For more than *Time* year, both the *Washington Post* deliberately concealed the existence of a US drone base in Saudi Arabia that has been the source of many of the CIA’s extra-judicial assassinations. At least two of the drone attack victims have been American citizens. The *Times* suppressed the information until the CIA gave the paper a green light. Referring to an interview with the newspaper’s managing editor Dean Baquet, public editor Margaret Sullivan wrote, “The government’s rationale for asking that the location be withheld was this: Revealing it might jeopardize the existence of the base and harm counterterrorism efforts.”

To the extent that the *Times* and other mass media seek to justify their collaboration with the state, it is on the grounds that they are “responsible,” while WikiLeaks and other independent media are “irresponsible”—i.e., they do not begin with the interests of the state and American capitalism.

The *Times*’ response to Manning and WikiLeaks is entirely of a piece with the Obama administration’s ruthless prosecution, which is itself tied to a wholesale attack on basic democratic rights.



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