

Bradley Manning's court martial begins

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After 1,100 days in prison, Army private Bradley Manning faced a military court martial Monday. Day one of the trial, like the months' long series of pre-trial hearings before it, was characterized by government secrecy, vindictiveness and lies.

Manning, accused of leaking some 700,000 military and diplomatic files to whistleblower organization WikiLeaks, faces a possible life sentence if convicted on 20 charges, the most serious of which is "aiding the enemy" under the Espionage Act. The Obama administration prosecutors argue that Manning knowingly provided intelligence information to al Qaeda because anyone, including terrorists, could access it on the WikiLeaks web site.

In a statement before military judge Colonel Denise Lind in February, Manning explained that he transmitted the material in order to expose the crimes of the US government and military being carried out in the name of the American people. His aim, he said, was to spark "worldwide discussion, debates, and reforms."

Lind ruled that the questions of motive or conscience were irrelevant to the case, stripping the 25-year-old soldier of the ability to mount a whistleblower defense, and ruling inadmissible any discussion of the content of the leaked material.

Manning offered to plead guilty on several charges in order to reduce the possible sentence. The Obama administration rejected the possibility of a plea deal, seeking to secure the maximum possible sentence.

Manning's is the most prominent case of a systematic attack on whistleblowers by the Obama administration, which has prosecuted more individuals under the Espionage Act than all other administrations in US history combined. Over the course of his three-year-long ordeal, Manning has been subjected to conditions tantamount to torture, including being held in solitary confinement 23 hours a day for months at a time, forced nudity and sleep deprivation.

The government intends to make an example of Manning for other would-be leakers. The case likewise sets a dangerous precedent for journalists, Internet sites and all those who access information the government considers sensitive or detrimental to its "interests."

The implications of the arguments advanced in the prosecution of Manning were indicated in the revelation earlier this month that the Obama administration had alleged criminal activity on the part of a Fox New reporter for arranging to obtain classified information from a government informant—a basic element of newsgathering. The administration is seeking to criminalize media activity that exposes secret government activities, part of a broader criminalization of political dissent.

Even as Manning is prosecuted to the fullest extent for seeking to reveal war crimes, those whose criminality were exposed in the leaked material not only remain free, but are being actively protected by the Obama administration.

A Kafkaesque atmosphere surrounds the proceedings. Much of the trial, scheduled over the next three months at Fort Meade, Maryland, will be held behind closed doors. Military prosecutors intend to present a large amount of classified material as evidence and will call on 24 witnesses who will testify anonymously, in disguise, within only limited view of the public and the press.

Lind argued that the extraordinary arrangements were necessary to prevent "spillage of classified information"; reportedly, several of the secret witnesses were members of the Navy Seals team that assassinated Osama bin Laden in 2011. The defense team will not be allowed to cross-examine the secret witnesses on anything involving the Abbottabad raid or their personal backgrounds.

Lind ruled that documents published on WikiLeaks must remain classified and cannot be mentioned in

open court.

The Center for Constitutional Rights has pointed out that Manning's legal hearings have been "more restrictive than military tribunals at Guantanamo Bay." At least 30,000 documents have been produced over the past three years in relation to the case, very little of it unclassified. This unprecedented censorship exposes the entire process as an anti-democratic frame-up. It suggests a great nervousness on the part of the political and military establishment over the growing opposition to American imperialism.

Only 16 seats are available for the public to attend in the courtroom; a trailer on the base has 35 additional seats for public viewing of a video feed. Only 10 credentialed media personnel are allowed in.

The *Washington Post* noted that the courtroom was packed on Monday, with several of Manning's relatives in attendance. Supporters of the whistleblower have held rallies outside the gates of the base for the past few days.

On Monday, lead prosecutor Captain Joe Morrow delivered an hour-long opening argument in which he laid out new allegations, including that Manning was taking direction from WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. WikiLeaks has never acknowledged or denied that Manning contacted the organization at all. Morrow's assertions were predicated on a blatant attempt at character assassination. He told the court that Manning was driven to "gain the notoriety he craved."

"If you had unprecedented access to classified networks 14 hours a day 7 days a week for 8 months, what would you do?" Morrow asked, quoting a statement Manning made in a private chat later handed over to the government by hacker-turned-informant Adrian Lamo.

Morrow declared, "This is not a case about a government official making discreet disclosures. This is a case about a soldier who harvested hundreds of thousands of documents and dumped them on the Internet where they would be available to the enemy." The prosecutor added that it was about "what happens when arrogance meets access to information."

Manning, he said, knew there was a "great value to our adversaries and in particular our enemies." Morrow concluded his remarks with a reference to Osama bin Laden, who the government claims had digital copies of some material publicly available on WikiLeaks.

David Coombs, Manning's civilian defense lawyer, opened by describing an incident in Iraq on December 24, 2009. A US military convoy, traveling along a roadway, forced a vehicle carrying five civilians onto the side of the road. They struck a roadside bomb.

At Forward Operating Base Hammer, where Manning was stationed, he and other intelligence officers watched the event unfold. The other soldiers erupted in cheers because the US forces were unhurt, Coombs said. Manning was disturbed. "He couldn't forget about the life that was lost on that day. He couldn't forget about the lives and that family that was lost on that Christmas Eve."

Coombs explained that the young private struggled over a sense of moral obligation, leading him to decide he "needed to do something to make a difference in the world. He needed to do something to help improve what he was seeing."

In releasing the Iraq War Logs, which documented many similar atrocities, and the "Collateral Murder" video of a helicopter gunship attack on civilians and journalists, Coombs argued that Manning thought "the American people should know what is happening on a day-to-day basis... When he decided to release this information, he believed this information showed how we value human life. He was troubled by it and he believed if the American public saw it they too would be troubled by it and maybe things might change."



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