

Bradley Manning prosecution pushes for maximum 136-year sentence

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The sentencing phase of the court-martial of Private Bradley Manning began Wednesday, following an eight-week trial in which Col. Denise Lind, the presiding judge, found Manning guilty of 20 charges, including six under the Espionage Act.

On the first day of the sentencing proceedings, the prosecution maintained its vindictive posture, urging the judge to impose the maximum sentence of 136 years on the 25-year-old whistle-blower. Manning has been convicted in a show trial based on trumped-up charges of espionage because he had the courage to reveal to the American people details of war crimes committed by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as documents concerning the abusive treatment of detainees at the Guantanamo prison camp and diplomatic cables exposing the diplomatic intrigues of Washington around the world.

The prosecution and conviction of Manning, who was held for more than three years before even being charged, much of that time in solitary confinement and under abusive conditions, are intended to intimidate popular opposition to Washington's wars and further discipline an already cowed media. The conviction of Manning on espionage charges is a frontal attack on First Amendment guarantees of press and speech freedom. It sets a precedent for branding as a spy and traitor any individual who exposes government crimes that the state wishes to conceal, as well as any journalist or publisher who makes such material known to the public.

In the first instance, it paves the way for the criminal indictment for espionage of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who has been forced to live at the Ecuadorean embassy in London for more than a year to avoid extradition to face bogus sex charges in Sweden and near certain transfer for prosecution to the US.

Manning passed on some 700,000 classified military reports and State Department cables to WikiLeaks in May of 2010.

From the outset, the Obama administration has been determined to punish Manning and make an example of him to others who might wish to expose the criminal actions of the government abroad or its conspiracies against the democratic rights of the people at home. This has become an even greater priority for the administration since former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden began releasing documents revealing massive and illegal spying programs targeting the entire US population and untold millions of people internationally.

The first day of the sentencing phase, which could take weeks to complete, exposed the concocted character of the charges against Manning. The prosecution was unable to produce any specific or credible evidence to back its claim that Manning's leaking of classified documents damaged US military and intelligence operations and compromised the safety of American forces.

The prosecution first called retired Gen. Robert Carr to testify. Carr headed a government panel that was given the task of assessing the purported damage done to national security by Manning's leaks. His testimony underscored the immense resources the government dedicated to the legal vendetta against Manning.

Carr's group spent more than 10 months assessing the alleged damage. One of those months saw the panel staffed with over 125 people for 24 hours each day, seven days each week. The cost of operating the group was \$6.2 million.

However, for all the time and money spent on the project, nothing that could aid the prosecution's case was found. On Wednesday, Carr contended that at least

one Afghan national was killed as a result of Manning's exposures. His conclusion was based on a Taliban statement that the group had killed the man in question.

"If the adversary had more clarity as to which people in the village were collaborating with the US forces," Carr said, "then there is a chance that those folks could be at greater risk."

Upon cross-examination, however, Carr admitted that his task force was unable to identify the individual by name. As a result, Judge Lind ruled that she would not allow the killing of the Afghan collaborator to be admitted into the record.

Manning's attorneys have requested that the military judge merge two of his espionage convictions and two of his theft convictions, which would bring the maximum sentence down to 116 years.

The prosecution has said it plans to call as many as 20 witnesses, many of whom will testify about classified information in closed court. These witnesses include "experts" on counterintelligence, strategic planning and terrorism.

Following Judge Lind's verdict on Tuesday, various individuals and organizations have issued statements commenting on the precedent being set by the Manning trial.

Julian Assange stated, "Bradley Manning's alleged disclosures have exposed war crimes, sparked revolutions, and induced democratic reform. He is the quintessential whistle-blower."

"This is the first-ever espionage conviction against a whistleblower," Assange continued. "It is a dangerous precedent and an example of national security extremism. It is a shortsighted judgment that cannot be tolerated and must be reversed. It can never be that conveying true information to the public is 'espionage'..."

"The prosecution did not present evidence that—or even claim that—a single person came to harm as a result of Bradley Manning's disclosures. The government never claimed Mr. Manning was working for a foreign power."

The Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) also issued a statement in response to the verdict, declaring: "While the 'aiding the enemy' charges (on which Manning was rightly acquitted) received the most attention from the mainstream media, the Espionage

Act itself is a discredited relic of the WWI era, created as a tool to suppress political dissent and antiwar activism, and it is outrageous that the government chose to invoke it in the first place against Manning. Government employees who blow the whistle on war crimes, other abuses and government incompetence should be protected under the First Amendment.

"We now live in a country where someone who exposes war crimes can be sentenced to life even if not found guilty of aiding the enemy, while those responsible for the war crimes remain free... Manning's treatment, prosecution, and sentencing have one purpose: to silence potential whistle-blowers and the media as well."



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