

Obama administration officials testify at Manning sentencing

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The sentencing phase of the court martial of US Army Private Bradley Manning continued Monday with the testimony of Undersecretary of State Patrick Kennedy, called by the prosecution. Kennedy parroted the government's allegation that Manning's leak has produced "irreparable harm" to national security. Cross-questioning by the soldier's defense team challenged Kennedy's credibility and honesty.

When examined by lead Obama administration prosecutor Major Ashden Fein, Kennedy repeated the unsupported accusation of the government that Manning's bulk release of classified materials had "a chilling effect that will go on for some time."

"People have long memories," declared Kennedy, making reference to the willingness foreign officials will have to speak candidly to US diplomats.

The entire case being put forth by the prosecution surrounds the fact that Manning has knowingly "harmed" the United States. However, the only thing harmed has been the reputation of the government. This was drawn out inadvertently by Manning's defense team.

During the cross-examination, Kennedy became increasingly defensive as he was questioned about his own history and interests in this case.

Defense attorney David Coombs focused on dissecting statements made by government agencies and officials that contradicted Kennedy's initial assessment.

Coombs cited an anonymously sourced 2011 report from Reuters that unnamed State Department officials had told Congress that WikiLeaks' release of thousands of diplomatic cables was "embarrassing but not damaging." This report came only a few months after Kennedy himself had testified to Congress in a closed session regarding damage from the anti-secrecy

group's activities. Kennedy insisted that he made no such statement, even when he was reminded by Coombs that he was under oath.

Coombs also played before the court a video recorded last November, featuring then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates stating that "governments deal with the United States because it is in their interest. Not because they like us, not because they trust us, and not because they believe we can keep secrets." This statement contradicted Kennedy's earlier analysis.

When asked whether Kennedy had a vested interest in ensuring that the Department of State looks "good," he responded that he could not give a yes or no answer. Coombs implied that Kennedy did not sign off on an August 2011 WikiLeaks damage assessment the department had drafted, merely because it might have made previous public claims about widespread harm look hyperbolic.

This is not the first time that Kennedy has been accused of acting in such an interest. Last year, the undersecretary's integrity was called into question regarding the attack on the US mission in Benghazi, Libya. Kennedy signed off on altered talking points, removing references to "Al Qaeda" and "terrorism" from the documents that initially guided the Obama administration's response to the attack.

While the US intelligence agencies had initially announced that the attack was an act of terrorism, this character was downplayed to a more general attribution of the violence to "extremists." This was due to the dubious links between the United States' ruling establishment and Al Qaeda, which were deemed too "tenuous" to make public.

Kennedy is among a parade of prosecution witnesses selected to testify for the government during the sentencing phase of the court martial. The defense will

also have an opportunity to call their own witnesses.

The result of this phase will determine the number of years Manning will serve in prison following the malicious verdict last week that found Manning guilty of 19 charges, including six under the 1917 Espionage Act. He faces up to 136 years behind bars.

US Army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel S. Justin Platt has stated that any sentence longer than 10 years must be served at the United States Disciplinary Barracks in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Manning would have very limited contact with the outside world and much tighter restrictions on his activities.

Manning would have no access to the Internet and would only be able to draw on a very limited set of books, reports Philip Cave, a lawyer who represents soldiers in military prisons. He said that inmates are allowed to receive titles from friends and relatives, as long as they meet “official” approval.



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