

White House rejects petitions to fire prosecutors who drove Internet activist Aaron Swartz to suicide

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The Obama administration formally rejected on Wednesday a pair of petitions to fire the prosecutors whose vindictive pursuit of Internet pioneer and activist Aaron Swartz drove him to suicide in 2013.

The petitions had called for the firings of US Attorney for Massachusetts Carmen Ortiz and Assistant US Attorney Stephen Heymann, who had overseen the malicious prosecution against the open Internet activist, charging him in 2011 with numerous felony counts under the 1986 Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA) for downloading copies of academic journal articles through the digital library JSTOR.

Swartz, who had warned that “The world’s entire scientific ... heritage ... is increasingly being digitized and locked up by a handful of private corporations,” had sought to make the journal articles publicly available.

At the time, Ortiz had sought to equate Swartz with a common thief, declaring that “stealing is stealing whether you use a computer command or a crowbar,” insinuating that the well-known advocate for Internet freedom was attempting to personally profit from the web site’s scholarly material.

The US government pressed its prosecution against Swartz despite the fact that JSTOR had agreed to drop the charges against him, and had recommended that the US government do the same.

Swartz had expended all of his personal resources in the struggle to defend himself, fighting off prosecutors who had threatened him with millions in fines, a prison sentence of up to 50 years, as well as subjection to regular harassment from US officials, before finally taking his own life in early 2013.

“Aaron did not commit suicide but was killed by the

government,” his father declared at the young man’s funeral. “Someone who made the world a better place was pushed to his death by the government.”

In 2013, US Attorney General Eric Holder called the prosecution of Swartz “a good use of prosecutorial discretion.”

The tragic death of Swartz, an esteemed activist and web technology innovator, prompted a wave of popular outrage against the US government and the draconian measures it went to in order to make an example of him. The petitions, which had long ago received the required 25,000 signatures meriting a response from the White House, had called for both Ortiz’s and Heymann’s removal for their roles in instigating Swartz’s suicide.

The Obama administration allowed the petitions to remain in limbo for nearly two years before providing a 180-word response last week. Addressing the petitions as if they were a mere matter of a requested personnel change, the White House asserted that “our response must be limited... we will not address agency personnel matters in a petition response, because we do not believe this is the appropriate forum in which to do so.”

The White House’s response hypocritically declared that the Obama administration was committed to “a spirit of openness,” pledging to “continue to engage with advocates to ensure the Internet remains a free and open platform as technology continues ... to connect our communities in ways we can’t yet imagine.”

The White House’s rejection of the petition once again expresses the administration’s solidarity with the campaign to victimize the young Internet activist, as well as its fealty to the interests of private corporations

and the military-intelligence community more broadly. The Obama White House has prosecuted more whistle-blowers than any other presidency, while expanding domestic spying programs, carrying out extrajudicial drone murders of American citizens, and shielding government officials guilty of torture from prosecution.

The legal hounding of Swartz was part of the Obama administration's crackdown on information leakers and whistle-blowers. Included in the list of victims of the administration's witch-hunt are domestic spying whistle-blower Edward Snowden, living in exile in Russia, and Army Private Chelsea (Bradley) Manning, now serving a 35-year prison sentence for having exposed US war crimes overseas.



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