

# Ex-CIA whistleblower Jeffrey Sterling sentenced to three years in prison

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Former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer Jeffrey Sterling was sentenced to 42 months in prison Monday by Eastern District of Virginia Judge Leonie Brinkema, after being convicted in January on nine counts relating to his alleged disclosure of national security information to the *New York Times*.

Sterling had been threatened by prosecutors with a jail sentence of more than 20 years for allegedly passing classified information about “Operation Merlin,” an operation launched by the CIA in 2000 aiming to sabotage Iran’s nuclear program using dirty tricks, including the provision of flawed nuclear component blueprints.

Sterling refused to apologize or admit guilt after the sentence was read, according to the *Guardian*.

For allegedly assisting *New York Times* journalist James Risen to expose the CIA’s involvement in large-scale industrial sabotage, Sterling was convicted on nine counts of violating the Espionage Act, a federal law passed in 1917 and used to target and silence opponents of the First World War.

In recent years, the Obama administration has repeatedly used the Espionage Act to prosecute government employees who reveal information about the government’s activities, often of a criminal character, to the press.

Before sentencing Monday, the Justice Department attorneys launched vociferous attacks against Sterling, pressing for the harshest possible sentence and denouncing the former government employee for his “crimes.”

US government prosecutors demanded a “severe” and “substantial” sentence, including 20-25 years imprisonment. Sterling was “vindictive,” “selfish,” and acted out of “pure spite,” US attorneys claimed in a document submitted to the court Monday.

Sterling’s actions had “made the agency appear hapless, even reckless, in its handling of the program,” a US government memo previously stated, suggesting another possible motivation for his aggressive prosecution.

Major figures within the US ruling elite, including former CIA Directors John Brennan and Leon Panetta, and former Vice President Dick Cheney, have been implicated in “leaks” of classified information during the past decade, without facing any official reprimand, let alone jail sentences.

On the other hand, Sterling, a man whose supposed “crime” was speaking to a journalist at the “newspaper of record” about an illegal and reckless geopolitical provocation involving attempted sabotage of nuclear energy systems, is now to be locked away for more than three years.

The ferocious assault against whistleblowers and investigative journalists spearheaded by the Obama administration has gone into overdrive in recent years. Last year saw an “unprecedented rise” in reports of retaliatory measures against whistleblowers emanating from the federal government, with a total of some 5,200 incidents, according to the US Office of Special Counsel.

The US ruling class has clearly been shaken by the emergence of growing opposition from within the lower levels of the state, including figures such as Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning.

For their combined efforts, which exposed historic US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the erection of a vast spying apparatus by the US National Security Agency (NSA), Manning and Snowden have both faced the full wrath of the US elite.

Manning is currently serving a 35-year sentence in military prison. Snowden remains in exile in Russia,

unable to return to the United States, where he is threatened by either a sham trial or state murder.

Lesser known whistleblowers have also received substantial jail sentences, including John Kiriakou and Stephen Kim, who received 30-month and 13-month sentences respectively. In each incident, US attorneys sought to exploit the cases to establish new precedents expanding the government's power to punish those who reveal state secrets and crimes.

In the lead up to Sterling's trial, the Justice Department sought to utilize the ex-CIA employee's connection to Risen to assert its authority to forcibly seize the names of confidential sources from investigative journalists.

Risen has faced years of threats and harassment by the federal government for his research, publication of aspects of which was suppressed in 2003 by the editorial leadership at the *New York Times* at the behest of the Bush administration. As recently as last year, the Obama Justice Department was continuing to threaten Risen himself with jail time in an effort to force him to reveal his sources, including the source connected with his reporting on Operation Merlin.

Risen declared in an interview with the *New York Times* last year that President Obama is "the greatest enemy to press freedom in a generation."



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