

FBI director threatens WikiLeaks and Assange

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4 May 2017

FBI Director James Comey lashed out at WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange, calling the anti-secrecy organization a hostile intelligence service and suggesting that Assange would have been taken into custody if he had not taken sanctuary in the Ecuadorian embassy in London nearly five years ago.

Comey's diatribe came during testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, its annual hearing to conduct oversight into all operations of the FBI. The committee hearing was dominated by wrangling among Republican and Democratic members over the FBI's role during the 2016 election, about which the WSWS will have more to say.

The question of Julian Assange came up during questioning of Comey by Senator Ben Sasse, a Republican from Nebraska who occasionally postures as a libertarian, and who refused to support Donald Trump during the presidential campaign. In relation to WikiLeaks, however, Sasse adopted a fascistic tone, demanding to know why the FBI has not yet crushed the organization.

He led Comey through a series of declarations, asking him to agree that WikiLeaks "is a known outlet of foreign propaganda," that it "has released sensitive and classified information," and that the group's disclosures "have endangered American lives and/or put at risk American interests," before concluding with the question, "Can you help me understand why Julian Assange has not been charged with a crime?"

Comey gave a carefully worded response, saying, "I don't want to comment on the particular case, because I don't want to confirm whether or not there are charges pending. He hasn't been apprehended because he's inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London."

Sasse then criticized the "intelligence community" for inaction in relation to WikiLeaks, and asked, "Is the

FBI participating in any interagency dialogue about whether or not Assange has committed crimes?"

Comey replied, "I don't know where you got that impression, but WikiLeaks is an important focus of our attention."

Sasse then declared that he was turning over the remainder of his question time to allow Comey to discuss "at what point an allegedly journalistic organization crosses a line to become some sort of a tool of foreign intelligence. There are Americans, well-meaning, thoughtful people who think that WikiLeaks might just be a journalistic outfit. Can you explain why that is not your view?"

After paying lip service to the First Amendment, Comey echoed recent comments from other US officials to the effect that it does not apply to WikiLeaks and Assange.

"To my mind, it crosses a line when it moves from being about trying to educate a public and instead just becomes about intelligence porn, frankly," he said. "Just pushing out information about sources and methods without regard to interest, without regard to the First Amendment values that normally underlie press reporting. And simply becomes a conduit for the Russian intelligence services or some other adversary of the United States just to push out information to damage the United States.

"And I realize, reasonable people as you said, struggle to draw a line. But surely, there's conduct that's so far to the side of that line that we can all agree there's nothing that even smells journalist about some of this conduct."

In response to further questions, Comey concluded, "in my view, a huge portion of WikiLeaks's activities has nothing to do with legitimate newsgathering, informing the public, commenting on important public

controversies, but is simply about releasing classified information to damage the United States of America...

“American journalists do not do that. They will almost always call us before they publish classified information and say, is there anything about this that’s going to put lives in danger, that’s going to jeopardize government people, military people or—or innocent civilians anywhere in the world. And then work with us to try and accomplish their important First Amendment goals while safeguarding those interests. This activity I’m talking about, WikiLeaks, involves no such considerations whatsoever.”

The final statement amounts to a damning description of the collaboration of the so-called mainstream—i.e., corporate-controlled—media in the United States with the intelligence apparatus. WikiLeaks and Assange have proceeded in the tradition of actual journalism: collect facts and publish them, regardless of whose ox is gored. The “American journalists” praised by Comey are accomplices and stenographers of the military-intelligence apparatus. If, as Comey says, they “almost always call us before they publish,” it is because they, too, serve the interests of American imperialism.



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