

Chelsea Manning released amid growing attacks on democratic rights in the US

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Chelsea Manning walked out of the US military's maximum security prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in the early morning hours Wednesday after serving a sentence of more than seven years, marked by brutality and ill-treatment tantamount to torture.

Manning's supposed "crime" was that of exposing to the people of the United States and the entire planet the criminal atrocities carried out by the US government in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Washington's conspiracies around the world.

It is ironic that the release of the US Army private imprisoned for leaking classified documents received minimal coverage from the corporate media, even as it churned out endless stories covering President Donald Trump's alleged exposure to Russian officials of classified secrets.

The political crisis in Washington is the product of a bitter internecine struggle between rival factions within the ruling political establishment and the US state apparatus, which are equally hostile to the democratic principles and antiwar sentiments for which Chelsea Manning sacrificed her freedom and nearly lost her life.

Days after her sentencing in August 2013, Manning came out as a transgender woman, but the military held her in an all-male prison, subjecting her to sexual humiliation and denying her treatment for her well-documented gender dysphoria. Much of her imprisonment was spent in punitively imposed solitary confinement. The predictable result was extreme mental anguish, depression and attempted suicide.

Manning's seven years of imprisonment and torment at the hands of the US military represented the most draconian punishment ever imposed for leaking classified documents in the United States. She was originally sentenced to 35 years in prison in a drumhead military court martial, in which the prosecution pressed for a "treason" conviction, a charge that carries the death

penalty.

Whom did Manning "betray"? Certainly not the American people, to whom she helped expose crimes being carried out behind their backs. Rather, her actions cut across the interests of the American capitalist ruling class, which is waging endless predatory wars and building up a police-state apparatus to suppress social unrest and popular resistance at home.

Working as a 22-year-old military intelligence analyst in Iraq, Manning became increasingly opposed to the US war and occupation in that country. In early 2010, she provided WikiLeaks with hundreds of thousands of classified documents exposing Washington's crimes.

Among the first pieces of this classified material to catch the attention of a wide public was the chilling "Collateral Murder" video. Viewed by millions, the video, recorded through the gun sight of a US Apache helicopter, provides a gut-wrenching exposure, not only of a deliberate massacre of over a dozen unarmed civilians, including two Iraqi reporters working for the Reuters news agency, but of the criminal character of the US war as a whole.

Other documents provided by Manning made it clear that the US was vastly underreporting the number of civilians being killed and wounded in Afghanistan. Manning also gave WikiLeaks some 250,000 diplomatic cables from American embassies around the world, which exposed official US lying, efforts to subvert governments, and dossiers on the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, showing most of them had no significant role in terrorist operations.

The exposure of these crimes provoked a vindictive reaction from the Obama White House and the State Department, then headed by Hillary Clinton. The persecution of Manning was part of a broader crackdown on whistleblowers—the Obama administration prosecuted more individuals under the Espionage Act of 1917 than all

previous administrations combined. This crackdown went hand-in-hand with the buildup of a state repressive apparatus that extended from the massive spying on the US and world population to the president's invoking of the power to order the drone missile assassination of anyone, anywhere in the world.

If Obama commuted Manning's sentence on his final day in office (adding 120 days onto her time served), it was not out of any last-minute sympathy for the imprisoned soldier's suffering, or any newfound democratic convictions. It was a calculated political act, aimed at sanitizing the filthy record of his administration and currying favor for the Democratic Party. The conviction and the draconian sentence remain on the books, a brutal warning to anyone thinking of following in the persecuted private's footsteps.

During the seven years that Manning spent enclosed behind cement and iron bars, the government's witch-hunt and persecution against those daring to expose its crimes has only intensified.

Julian Assange has been trapped in the Ecuadoran embassy in London since 2012, threatened by a US federal grand jury. US Attorney General Jeff Sessions stated last month that Assange's arrest was a "priority," adding that the US government was "stepping up our efforts on all leaks ... whenever a case can be made, we will seek to put some people in jail." This was accompanied by an extraordinary speech by CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who branded WikiLeaks "a non-state hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia." He declared that Assange "has no First Amendment freedoms" and that anyone who reveals the secrets of the US government is an "enemy" guilty of "treason."

Edward Snowden, who exposed the NSA's illegal wholesale spying operations, has been turned into a man without a country, living in forced exile in Moscow. Both Trump and Pompeo have publicly called for his execution.

If Manning, Assange and Snowden are compelled to face the threat of imprisonment and even death for lifting the lid on Washington's dirty secrets, it is in large measure because the corporate media in the United States is fully complicit in these crimes, functioning more and more openly as a propaganda arm of the US government.

In a revealingly hostile response to Manning's pending release, the *New York Times* buried an article deep inside its printed addition Wednesday under the headline "Manning Is Set to Be Freed 28 Years Ahead of

Schedule." Presumably the newspaper of record would have preferred she serve her full term.

The *Times's* former executive editor, Bill Keller, expressed his attitude toward the WikiLeaks revelations in 2010, while Manning was being brutalized in a Marine Corps lockup in Quantico, Virginia. He described himself as "uncomfortable" with the notion that the *Times* "can decide to release information that the government wants to keep secret," a practice that in an earlier period was regarded as the most essential function of the so-called Fourth Estate. He made the Orwellian declaration that "transparency is not an absolute good" and that "Freedom of the press includes freedom *not* to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise with some regularity."

Today, the *Times's* editorial pages are under the direction of James Bennet, a figure with the closest ties to the state apparatus and the top echelons of the Democratic Party. (His father is a former head of USAID, a front for the CIA, and his brother is the senior senator from Colorado.) The *Times* churns out war propaganda, while news coverage is, by the paper's own admission, vetted by the US intelligence agencies. These practices set the tone for the corporate media as a whole.

The suppression of freedom of the press and free speech in the US—epitomized by the relentless persecution of Manning, Assange and Snowden—is driven by the needs of America's ruling oligarchy, as it seeks to extricate itself from deepening economic and political crises by means of ever more dangerous acts of military aggression abroad, while confronting rising hostility and anger from masses of working people in the US and around the world.

The defense of these rights and the fight against state repression can be waged only as part of the struggle for the independent political mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system.



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