

NSA leaker Reality Winner sentenced to more than five years in prison

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National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Reality Winner, 26, was sentenced last Thursday to five years and three months in federal prison for leaking classified documents to the press which contained allegations of Russian manipulation of the 2016 presidential election.

Winner is the first person to be tried by the Trump Administration under the Espionage Act and according to her attorneys her punishment will be the longest sentence ever imposed for leaking classified information.

She pleaded guilty in June at a federal courthouse in Georgia as part of a plea deal to reduce her sentence. Prosecutors from the Justice Department did not seek the maximum sentence of 10 years imprisonment and instead recommended a 63-month penalty.

Winner was employed by defense contractor Pluribus International Corporation in May 2017 when she printed a classified document from the NSA office in Augusta, Georgia and mailed it to an “online news outlet.”

The news organization was never named by prosecutors, but the Justice Department announced Winner’s June 2017 arrest the same day that the online news source The Intercept published an article on a secret NSA document.

The document alleged that Russian military intelligence launched a “cyber attack on at least one U.S. voting software supplier and sent spear-phishing emails to more than 100 local election officials just days before last November’s presidential election”. Upon closer examination, however, the document fails to provide any real evidence to back up these claims as it merely rests on summary statements that are to be taken at face value.

For example, it reads “Russian General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate actors ... executed cyber

espionage operations against a named U.S. company in August 2016, *evidently* to obtain information on elections-related software and hardware solutions. ... The actors *likely* used data obtained from that operation to ... launch a voter registration-themed spear-phishing campaign targeting U.S. local government organizations” (emphasis added).

Short on any specifics, the document fails to note if the operation had any discernible impact on the outcome of the 2016 election. Furthermore, the NSA documents contain hypothetical charts which show how Russian intelligence agents, or anyone else, might infiltrate US election systems. Winner may have thought the documents were proof of Russian hacking and leaked them to the media.

The ruling class has been involved in a ferocious conflict since Trump’s victory in November 2016 over allegations of Russian hacking of the election for which no real proof has been offered. Behind these conflicts lie questions over foreign policy and democratic rights, with President Trump being criticized by Democrats and Republicans for his lack of bellicosity toward Russia and with Congressional Democrats leading the charge for the censorship of the Internet to combat “foreign meddling.”

The sentencing of Winner for leaking documents to the press and the Trump administration’s war on journalists and whistleblowers is entirely consistent with the Obama Administration’s persecution of Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and Julian Assange.

Winner grew up in Kingsville, Texas, a small city 44 miles southwest of Corpus Christi. She joined the Air Force upon finishing high school and became a linguist, fluent in Arabic and Farsi. She was employed as a translator by the NSA at Fort Meade, Maryland. After

leaving the military she again worked for the NSA, this time as a civilian contractor.

In court, Winner apologized for her actions calling them “an undeniable mistake that I made,” adding “My actions were a cruel betrayal of my nation’s trust in me.” For their part, prosecutors made the claim that “the defendant’s unauthorized disclosure caused exceptionally grave harm to our national security.”

US Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia, Bobby Christine, appointed by Trump last year, told reporters outside the federal courthouse in Augusta, Georgia, “Winner will serve a term of incarceration that will give pause to others who are entrusted with our country’s sensitive national security information and would consider compromising it,” and “Anyone else who may think of committing such an egregious and damaging wrong should take note of the prison sentence imposed today and the very real damage done.”

Needless to say, the government’s attorneys did not explain or make an effort to prove how exactly Winner compromised “national security” or put anyone’s lives at risk.

President Trump responded to the sentencing by publicly criticizing his own Attorney General Jeff Sessions for not prosecuting his rival Hillary Clinton in a similar fashion, tweeting, “Ex-NSA contractor to spend 63 months in jail over ‘classified’ information. Gee, this is ‘small potatoes’ compared to what Hillary Clinton did! So unfair Jeff, Double Standard.”



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