Assange legal advisor: Pentagon spearheaded pursuit of WikiLeaks founder

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Further evidence has emerged that the American military is playing a central role in the US pursuit of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange over his role in exposing its war crimes and neo-colonial operations in the Middle East and around the world.

Geoffrey Robertson, a senior legal advisor to Assange, revealed in a radio interview that he was told by senior figures in the previous US administration of Barack Obama that the Pentagon was spearheading the campaign to secure the WikiLeaks founder's extradition to the US.

Robertson made the comments in an interview last Thursday with Phillip Adams on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Late Night Live" program.

The lawyer noted that the open US persecution of Assange began in 2010, in response to WikiLeaks' publication of US army documents and videos revealing extrajudicial killings in Iraq and Afghanistan, and other violations of international law.

The Obama administration responded by prosecuting Chelsea Manning, the courageous whistleblower who leaked the material to WikiLeaks, and convening a secret grand jury to concoct charges against Assange.

Robertson stated that during this period, he had spoken with "high connections in the Obama administration." He told Adams: "I said to them, do you really want him because there are dangerous precedents here for the *New York Times* and for newspapers around the world?" The lawyer said the officials responded: "We don't want him, but the Pentagon does, and the Pentagon may eventually get their way."

In reality, the Obama administration viciously persecuted Assange, Manning and WikiLeaks. It did not issue public charges against Assange, despite convening the grand jury, only for fear that this would further discredit the US political establishment, and undermine the bourgeois-democratic framework through which the American oligarchy has prosecuted its interests.

The central role of the American military chiefs in the campaign against Assange, however, is no doubt true. It is another demonstration that Assange would not receive anything resembling a fair trial or due process if he were extradited to the US.

The US military and the Central Intelligence Agency, which also has played a role in the pursuit of Assange, are both implicated in torture programs and other human rights violations.

Robertson issued a warning about the plans of the Trump administration. "What is intended by the current regime," is that Assange "dies in an American supermax" prison, he said.

The dangers confronting Assange were underscored in a tweet yesterday by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer. He asked: "Will the US try Assange for terrorism?"

Melzer pointed to articles noting that the statute of limitations for existing computer intrusion and conspiracy charges against Assange appeared to have lapsed. He wrote: "How can he be charged in 2018 for conduct in 2010, subject to 5yrs statute of limitation?"

The UN official commented, however, that "Penal Code Sct 2332b" extends the limitation for both offenses to eight years, for "acts of terrorism transcending national boundaries."

The possibility that Assange could face charges in addition to the 18 publicly-unveiled US counts against him has been indicated by the continued imprisonment of Chelsea Manning. She has been jailed for the past month for refusing to give perjured testimony to a

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grand jury convened to concoct an indictment against Assange.

Manning's lawyers requested earlier this month that her detention be reconsidered, given that charges against Assange already had been laid. The US Justice Department replied on June 14: "Manning's testimony remains relevant and essential to an ongoing investigation into charges or targets that are not included in the superseding indictment."

Such charges could potentially include terrorism counts against Assange carrying the death penalty. US authorities would have an interest in concealing such charges, which often carry a death penalty, to get around provisions banning extradition from the UK on charges with a maximum sentence of capital punishment.

The US attempts to lock Assange away for life, or execute him, underscore the perfidious role of successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, which have refused to defend the WikiLeaks founder despite him being an Australian citizen.

During his interview with Robertson, Phillip Adams stated: "One of the problems in this country is that neither side of politics has shown the slightest interest or sympathy" for Assange. "We've got a prime minister, we've got a foreign minister, and opposition MPs. None of them are speaking out for him," Adams stated.

The radio host said he had received a letter last week from former Labor politician Bob Carr, stating that the US indictment against Assange "stops one notch short of capital punishment" and "threatens media freedom in exposing abuses." Carr wrote: "Above all, for Australians, it serves up one of our citizens to the moors of the hideous American justice system."

Carr's statements are a damning self-indictment. Beginning in 2012, he was foreign minister in Julia Gillard's Labor government, which publicly attacked Assange and assisted the US campaign against WikiLeaks. While in office, Carr dismissed warnings that Assange faced US extradition and rejected public demands that the Labor government defend the WikiLeaks founder.

Carr's latest statements have the character of a warning to the Australian government that it will inflame popular anger if it does not at least pretend to aid Assange.

In a comment published in the *Daily Telegraph* on Saturday, Greg Barns, an Australian advisor to Assange, condemned the media's participation in the attacks against him.

Barns rejected claims advanced by Peter Greste and other Australian media figures that Assange is "not a journalist." Barns wrote: "He is a journalist who is the target of the most aggressive attack on freedom of the media we have seen in modern times."

In his article, entitled "Australian media need to accept Julian Assange is one of them," Barns said the persecution of Assange was part of a broader crackdown against press freedom internationally. He referred to the Australian Federal Police raids this month on News Corp journalist Annika Smethurst and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The police operation concerned articles exposing government spying plans and Australian military involvement in war crimes in Afghanistan.

Barns concluded: "The plea is this. Assange, the ABC and Annika Smethurst are linked. They represent an assault on free speech and a free and fearless media. That is what is at stake in these cases and it is why Australians should be deeply concerned about the fate of all these cases."

The escalating assault on press freedom and other democratic rights underscores the importance of the call issued by the WSWS International Editorial Board last week for a Global Defence Committee to coordinate a worldwide campaign to prevent Assange's extradition to the US, and to win his and Manning's freedom.

In Australia, the Socialist Equality Party will advance this crucial struggle by convening demonstrations in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, beginning this Saturday. The rallies will demand that the Australian government use its diplomatic and legal powers to secure Assange's return to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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