

Former CIA director Leon Panetta: We are prosecuting Assange to intimidate others

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Leon Panetta, who served as director of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from 2009 to 2011, and then as the Obama administration's secretary for defence, has let the cat out of the bag, telling interviewers that the US is seeking to prosecute WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange to send a threatening message to whistleblowers and publishers alike.

The comments were aired this week in a documentary produced by German public broadcaster ARD, entitled "Wikileaks - USA against Julian Assange." The program was a compelling and objective account of the ten year US persecution of Assange and featured strong interviews with his father John Shipton, his partner Stella Moris, WikiLeaks' lawyers, United Nations Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer and famous National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden.

Panetta's remarks were arguably the most significant, because they were confirmation from the horse's mouth of the mafia-character of the US pursuit of Assange, its politically-motivated nature and flagrant disregard for international laws and fundamental democratic rights. His comments have, not only political, but potentially legal significance, refuting the lies of the US Justice Department, aimed at presenting the attempted extradition as a bona fide process conforming with judicial norms.

Panetta's comments have probative value, because he was intimately involved in the initial stages of the US campaign to silence Assange. A decades-long Democratic Party political operative, Panetta was head of the CIA in 2010, when the US government responded to WikiLeaks' exposures of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and global diplomatic conspiracies, by launching an unprecedented operation against Assange and denouncing him as a "spy" or a "high-tech terrorist"

Panetta would undoubtedly have been involved in the Obama administration's establishment of a "WikiLeaks war room," staffed by hundreds of military and intelligence operatives, with the sole purpose of "neutralising" Assange.

It can only be assumed that he was privy to the plans surrounding various dirty tricks against the WikiLeaks

founder; the 2010 global tour by Hillary Clinton to mitigate the impact of the publication of hundreds of thousands of US diplomatic cables and to line up governments internationally against Assange, and the discussions that resulted in the establishment of a secret grand jury, convened for the purpose of concocting charges against Assange.

In other words, Panetta is not a disinterested observer, but a direct participant. Moreover, while he departed the CIA in mid-2011, and retired from federal office two years later, it is well known that no one ever quite leaves the agency. Its power is based not only on a vast bureaucracy and network of field agents, but also a web of influence encompassing "retired" officials and private security companies, who are "kept in the loop." Panetta remains a prominent political figure, heading the "Panetta Institute for Public Policy."

It was in this context that Panetta baldly declared: "All you can do is hope that you can ultimately take action against those that were involved in revealing that information so you can send a message to others not to do the same thing."

In other words, the prosecution of Assange is a political act, intended to send a warning to journalists who would consider publishing the secrets of the American government. Earlier in the program, Panetta had presented the publication of "classified" and "national security" material as a sin worse than any other.

Those statements alone demonstrate that the US government is lying to the British courts. Under the existing British-US extradition treaty, an individual cannot be extradited to face charges of a political nature.

Since extradition proceedings resumed last week, British prosecutors, representing the US Justice Department, have alternated between claims that Assange is charged with common criminal offenses related to hacking and espionage, meaning that his prosecution would not pose a threat to press freedom, and ominous assertions that the US government is entitled to decide what journalists can and cannot publish.

Panetta echoed the former claim, describing Assange as a "spy." But as Edward Snowden noted, Assange is explicitly charged with possessing and publishing documents. The

prosecution is an attempt to criminalise common journalistic practices, including communicating with a source and seeking to protect their identity. Snowden pointedly asked, if it was not journalism that Assange was engaged in, then what is?

Moreover Panetta's concluding comments, on the intent of the prosecution, clearly demonstrated that the motivation for the laying of charges is to crackdown on journalism more broadly.

Panetta's statements about Assange himself underscored the intensely vindictive character of the US prosecution. He declared, without attempting to provide any evidence, that "Assange is somebody who will sell somebody in his family if he thinks that, you know, that he is going to get some attention." This is not the language of legal proceedings, but of a vendetta.

The ARD program also included an interview with David Morales, a former Spanish navy marine turned mercenary. As head of the Undercover Global security firm, he is accused of overseeing a vast spying operation against Assange while he was residing in Ecuador's London embassy.

Undercover Global was contracted by the Ecuadorian authorities to manage security at the embassy. But former staff members have stated that in 2015, Morales entered into a secret agreement with US intelligence agencies to surveil every aspect of Assange's life on their behalf.

The operation, which spanned until March, 2018, allegedly ended up including the installation of cameras and microphones throughout the building, in conference rooms, a women's toilet and elsewhere. The material was then reportedly uploaded to a server, to which US intelligence had access.

Some of the material has made its way into the hands of Assange's defenders, and was featured in the ARD program. Assange and Moris were shown together on a high-definition video, which picked up the audio of their conversation. Most significantly, the interceptions allegedly included discussions between Assange and his lawyers, in a flagrant breach of attorney-client privilege.

Morales, who appeared uneasy, dismissed the accusations out of hand, without providing any explanation for the voluminous evidence substantiating them that is already on the public record. At one point, the ARD interviewers asked who he had been working for. Morales replied that his contract had been with the "intelligence secretariat." After a pause, he added, without any great conviction, that he had been referring to his official contract with the Ecuadorian authorities to manage security at the building.

Morales, who is credibly accused of spying on a political refugee for money in violation of international law,

pathetically complained that internal Undercover Global documents which cast an unfavourable light on his activities were "confidential" and should not see the light of day.

The denials were undercut by Panetta. With the hubris of an official accustomed to doing as he pleases, Panetta declared the allegation that US intelligence spied on Assange through Undercover Global "doesn't surprise me. That kind of thing goes on all the time. In intelligence business, the name of the game is to get information any way you can, and I'm sure that's what was involved here."

Panetta knows of what he speaks. The alleged espionage likely involved the agency that he previously directed.

Two further points should be made. Panetta's unequivocal endorsement of the Trump administration's attempt to prosecute Assange demonstrated, yet again, the bipartisan character of the US war against WikiLeaks and journalism. It is further proof that in the official contest between the Republicans and the Democrats in this November's presidential election, there is no alternative for the working class.

Secondly, while Panetta's remarks clearly indicated that, in the first instance, the prosecution is intended as a threat to dissident journalists, the warning is much wider. It is an attempt to establish the conditions for victimisations and frame-ups, amid an immense global crisis of capitalism, widespread anti-war sentiment and the reemergence of the class struggle. The primary target of the turn to authoritarianism is the working class.

The program concluded with a powerful remark from Snowden: "We are setting a precedent, right now, that we are going to live with for the next hundred years. No matter what you feel about Julian Assange, the methods that WikiLeaks and everyone connected to it pioneered have changed the way journalism is done. If we cannot recognise that, and we are not willing to protect it, I think the saddest part of this whole story is that we probably don't deserve it, and as a result we will no longer have it when we need it the most."



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