

Biden administration will continue with extradition of Julian Assange

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The Biden administration will continue to pursue the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from the UK to face charges in the US, according to a statement released by the Department of Justice (DoJ) on Tuesday.

The Biden government's statement was in part a response to the January 4 decision of District Judge Vanessa Baraitser blocking the extradition of Assange on mental health grounds only—she completely endorsed the US prosecution's denial of the free speech and freedom of the press rights of the WikiLeaks publisher—and to set the record straight in advance of the Friday deadline for the administration to appeal the ruling.

A statement from DoJ Acting Deputy Director and Senior Communications Advisor Marc Raimondi said, "While we are extremely disappointed in the court's ultimate decision, we are gratified that the United States prevailed on every point of law raised. In particular, the court rejected all of Mr. Assange's arguments regarding political motivation, political offense, fair trial, and freedom of speech. We will continue to seek Mr. Assange's extradition to the United States."

The statement was also a direct rebuke to a coalition of civil liberties and human rights groups that mounted a campaign for the Biden administration to drop the effort to extradite Assange that was initiated by the Trump White House.

In a letter dated February 8 addressed to Biden's Attorney General Monty Wilkinson, the coalition of twenty-four organizations—including the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, Electronic Frontier Foundation, Freedom of the Press Foundation and Human Rights Watch—wrote, "We urge you to drop the appeal of the decision by Judge

Vanessa Baraitser of the Westminster Magistrates' Court to reject the Trump administration's extradition request. We also urge you to dismiss the underlying indictment."

The joint letter also explained, "The indictment of Mr. Assange threatens press freedom because much of the conduct described in the indictment is conduct that journalists engage in routinely—and that they must engage in in order to do the work the public needs them to do. ... In our view, such a precedent in this case could effectively criminalize these common journalistic practices."

The organizations also drew a connection between to the prosecution of Assange and the historical development of undemocratic measures in the US and internationally, "It is unfortunately the case that press freedom is under threat globally. Now more than ever, it is crucial that we protect a robust and adversarial press—what Judge Murray Gurfein in the Pentagon Papers case memorably called a 'cantankerous press, an obstinate press, a ubiquitous press'—in the United States and abroad."

In a separate statement the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, said, "Most of the charges against Assange concern activities that are no different from those used by investigative journalists around the world every day. President Biden should avoid setting a terrible precedent by criminalizing key tools of independent journalism that are essential for a healthy democracy."

The official announcement from the DoJ on Tuesday laid to rest any illusions that the Biden administration would take a position on First Amendment rights any different than that of Donald Trump. Biden intends to pursue the prosecution of Assange on 17 charges under the Espionage Act of 1917 that carry a maximum

prison sentence of up to 170 years.

Although a US grand jury had issued a sealed indictment of Assange in March 2018, the charges against him were only made public more than a year later in April 2019 after the WikiLeaks journalist was evicted from the Ecuadorean Embassy and arrested in London. Julian Assange—initially detained on a bogus charge of bail jumping—was remanded to London’s notorious HM Prison Belmarsh where he has been held without bail pending a final decision on his extradition to the US.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and other defenders of the rights of journalists to tell the truth to the public about government policy have consistently maintained, Assange has committed no crimes. He has been targeted by the governments of the US and UK because WikiLeaks published details about the criminal actions of imperialism during the illegal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that began in 2001 and 2003, respectively. WikiLeaks also exposed the role of major corporations in imperialist crimes as well as the conspiracy of the Democratic Party leadership during the nomination process for the 2016 presidential elections.

The decision by the Biden administration to push on with the persecution of Assange comes as absolutely no surprise to those who base themselves on a class analysis and understanding of the logic of political developments.

It is significant that the Trump’s top national security official in the DoJ, John C. Demers, is still in place at the National Security Division. Demers was asked by the Biden transition team to stay on for continuity purposes while many other Trump political appointees resigned.

Meanwhile, Mr. Demers’s predecessor from 2013 to 2016, John Carlin, has returned to the DoJ and is currently serving as the acting deputy attorney general. That there really are no fundamental differences between the Trump and Biden administrations on key national security topics is demonstrated by the fact that Carlin’s predecessor, Lisa O. Monaco, in charge of the National Security Division from 2011 to 2013, is Biden’s nominee to be deputy attorney general but has not yet been confirmed.

Additionally, *The New York Times* was cynically promoting illusions that the Democrat Biden might stop the Assange extradition policy while it was fully aware

that no such change was in the offing. Speaking out of both sides of its mouth, *The Times* said on Monday, “A Friday deadline in the London extradition case may force the Biden administration to decide whether to keep pursuing a Trump-era policy,” while at the same time, “For now, the Justice Department remains committed to appealing the denial of its request to extradite Mr. Assange, said Marc Raimondi, a spokesman for its National Security Division.”

It is also possible to go back further and review what Biden said about Assange more than ten years ago after WikiLeaks had published the diplomatic cables and when he was Vice President during the Obama administration. When asked about the WikiLeaks exposures on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on December 19, 2010, Biden called Assange a “high-tech terrorist” and furthered the unproven claim that “this guy has done things that have damaged and put in jeopardy the lives and occupations of people in other parts of the world.”



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