

Fifteen years since Assange established WikiLeaks

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Today marks fifteen years since WikiLeaks was founded by Australian publisher Julian Assange on October 4, 2006. In the years since, the small media organisation, founded on a shoestring, has become synonymous with the courageous exposure of government and corporate crimes, as well as the ever-more ferocious attempts of state agencies and the ruling elites to censor the internet and suppress independent journalism.

As with all recent anniversaries related to WikiLeaks and its founder, Assange is unable to celebrate today's milestone with his colleagues, friends and family. Instead, he is in London's Belmarsh Prison, a maximum-security facility dubbed Britain's Guantanamo Bay, where he has been detained for more than two years, most of that time without having been convicted of any offence.

The cause of Assange's imprisonment, an extradition request submitted by the Trump administration, remains in force under his successor President Joe Biden. Both the Democrats and the Republicans are committed to prosecuting Assange, under the draconian Espionage Act, for WikiLeaks' publishing activities, including its exposures of war crimes, human rights violations and global diplomatic intrigues.

Despite having blocked Assange's dispatch to the US in January on the grounds that he would likely die in American custody, the British judiciary has allowed an appeal which will be the subject of High Court hearings later this month.

The US prosecution has always been a transparent attempt to destroy Assange, finish WikiLeaks and suppress press freedom. The appeal hearings, however, will be held under conditions in which the US case has been fully exposed as a criminal enterprise, involving the most egregious violations of international law and the US Constitution.

Last month, *Yahoo News* published a detailed report, revealing that beginning in early 2017, the Trump administration and its then CIA director Mike Pompeo had plotted to kidnap Assange while he was a political refugee in London's Ecuadorian embassy, and even to murder him. Former officials told the publication that both Trump and Pompeo had been at meetings where Assange's assassination was discussed. The possibility of murdering other WikiLeaks' staff in Europe was also canvassed.

The plans for an extraordinary rendition or a CIA hit were explicitly developed in response to the WikiLeaks publication of truthful and newsworthy information, as was the subsequent pseudo-legal attempt to extradite and prosecute Assange.

The immediate trigger for both was WikiLeaks's 2017 exposure of CIA documents, exposing the agency as the biggest purveyor of malware in the world. The Vault 7 material, as it was known, revealed some of the CIA's most closely-guarded dirty tricks, including techniques to attribute its own hacking activities to foreign powers, such as Russia, mass surveillance through smartphones and TVs, and attempts to develop the capability to take over car computer systems.

In response, Pompeo branded WikiLeaks a "hostile non-state intelligence agency." The definition was aimed at allowing the US state to deploy its full arsenal of repression against Assange, because the American authorities knew their own claims that WikiLeaks worked with Russian intelligence were a sham. Instead, they settled on the new category, one which essentially equated publishing organisations that fell foul of the American government as the equivalent of terrorists.

While the discussions about Assange's assassination may have been conducted in secret, the plans for extraordinary measures to be taken against WikiLeaks were carried out in plain sight. Indeed, the new definition of the organisation as a "hostile non-state intelligence agency" was adopted by the US Congress and Senate in the Intelligence Authorization Act for fiscal year 2018, with the overwhelming support of Democratic and Republican representatives.

In the weeks since *Yahoo's* report, its veracity has been all but confirmed by those implicated in the crimes it detailed. Pompeo has publicly declared that "pieces of it are true," while demanding that the 30 former officials who were *Yahoo's* sources "be prosecuted for speaking about classified activity inside the Central Intelligence Agency."

When asked about the revelations last week, Biden's press secretary Jen Psaki refused to make any comment, directing the journalist to instead inquire with the CIA. The response from the British authorities, who are implicated in the assassination plot, has been radio silence, while Australian politicians have also remained "mum" or have dubiously professed ignorance.

For its part, the corporate media has downplayed or completely buried the story, despite it going to the heart of press freedom and the rights of the press. The revelations, more sensational than those that triggered Richard Nixon's removal, have been treated as a minor news item. The general trend is summed up by the state British Broadcasting Corporation, which didn't even publish a report on the *Yahoo* claims, except for an item on its Somali-

language page.

The response is yet another demonstration of the central role of the official press in Assange's persecution. Having relentlessly smeared the WikiLeaks' founder for years, contributing to the conditions for his illegal arrest in 2019, they have since dropped the story, all the more so as the criminal character of the US campaign is revealed. Far from being a result of a personal dislike of Assange, the corporate media's treatment of him is a marker of its transformation into an arm of the state, and a willing accomplice in the escalating drive to war and the accompanying assault on democratic rights.

WikiLeaks was established as an antithesis of the state and corporate-controlled media and its routine censorship of information that clashes with the interests of the powers-that-be.

Shortly after founding the organisation, Assange wrote a 2007 statement which summed up its mission. He wrote: "Authoritarian regimes create forces which oppose them by pushing against a people's will to truth, love and self-realization. Plans which assist authoritarian rule, once discovered, induce further resistance. Hence such schemes are concealed by successful authoritarian powers until resistance is futile or outweighed by the efficiencies of naked power."

In more popular terms, Assange outlined the same mission statement, when accepting the Sydney Peace Foundation's Gold Medal in 2011. He explained:

"I always keep in mind something that was said by the great poet and novelist May Sarton: you have to think like a hero in order to act like a merely decent human being..."

"We are objective, but we are not neutral. We are on the side of justice. Objectivity is not the same as neutrality. We are objective about the facts when it comes to reporting and not distorting facts. But we are not neutral about what kind of world we would like to see. We want to see a more just world.

"For my staff and me, WikiLeaks will always strive to be an intelligence agency of the people. And we will always—as long as whistle-blowers are willing to act as heroes—act like merely decent human beings."

To further these aims, WikiLeaks introduced pioneering innovations, which have since been taken up more broadly, including by corporate outlets, but usually without attribution. This included the development of a digital dropbox for the receipt of leaks, and a model of collaboration involving multiple journalists and media organisations around the world examining material submitted by whistle-blowers and preparing it for publication.

In the years since 2006, WikiLeaks has fulfilled its mission statement, breaking more explosive revelations than perhaps any other publication. The full scope of the organisation's publications spans millions of documents and dozens of releases, touching on political and economic life in every corner of the globe.

Among the most significant are those for which Assange has been charged. They include the Iraq and Afghan war logs, which revealed thousands of hidden civilian casualties and exposed the US-led invasions as the most brutal neo-colonial operations since the crimes of the Nazis.

Hundreds of thousands of US diplomatic cables revealed American imperialism's involvement in coup-plotting, political

corruption and anti-democratic conspiracies the world over.

Detainee files from the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay lifted the lid on a global dragnet, involving torture and the imprisonment of those whom the American government knew to be innocent of any crime.

WikiLeaks's impact matched the significance of its publications and helps to explain the determined efforts of the American state and its allies to crush the organisation. The Collateral Murder video, showing US troops in an Apache gunship mowing down civilians and journalists, came to symbolise the criminality of the Iraq war. The diplomatic cables, providing an unprecedented picture of capitalist politics as it plays out behind closed doors, helped to trigger the revolutions that swept Egypt and Tunisia in 2011.

The ever-greater persecution of WikiLeaks and its founder corresponds with, and is one of the sharpest expressions of, a broader turn towards authoritarianism and dictatorship by governments around the world. As Leon Trotsky once explained: "Under the impact of class and international contradictions that are too highly charged, the safety switches of democracy either burn out or explode. That is what the short circuit of dictatorship represents."

Assange's case has demonstrated in spades that there is no constituency for the defence of democratic rights within the political establishment. All of the official parties in the US, Britain and Australia support his persecution, while the trade unions and pseudo-left organisations which once feigned sympathy abandoned him long ago.

This underscores the bankruptcy of those, such as the official Don't Extradite Assange group, who call on people fighting for Assange's freedom to limit their efforts to polite moral appeals to the likes of Trump and Biden.

In reality, the fight for Assange's liberty is inseparably connected to the struggle against imperialist war, authoritarianism and the outmoded capitalist system that underlies both. The working class, as it enters into struggle against the criminal "herd immunity" policies of the ruling classes and the onslaught on social conditions, needs to recognise that the fight for their own democratic rights is bound up with the fight for Assange's freedom.



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