Alleged WikiLeaks whistleblower hit with 40-year sentence: A warning of what's in store for Assange if extradition is not defeated

Oscar Grenfell
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In a brutal act of state vengeance, alleged WikiLeaks whistleblower Joshua Schulte was sentenced to 40 years' imprisonment on Thursday over Espionage Act and other "national security" offenses. The 35-year-old was convicted in 2022 of transmitting documents to WikiLeaks, exposing the Central Intelligence Agency's hacking and global spying operations.

The Schulte case marks a deepening of a protracted war on whistleblowers and journalism. The computer expert has effectively been tried, convicted and sentenced as a terrorist. His term of imprisonment is comparable to that meted out to individuals convicted of the most heinous crimes.

Aside from motives of retribution, Schulte is being made an example. His sentencing is a message that anyone exposing the crimes of the military and intelligence agencies, amid the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, preparations for broader wars and a crackdown on democratic rights, will be treated as they would in Saudi Arabia or another US-backed dictatorship.

In the first instance, the sentence is a signal of what the American government intends to do to WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, who faces the imminent threat of extradition from Britain to the US.

The sentence is all the more striking, given the flimsy character of the case against Schulte, who maintains his innocence. There was sufficient doubt over his guilt for a jury to be unable to reach agreement on the Espionage Act and national security charges in a first trial of Schulte in 2020, resulting in a mistrial.

Schulte has stated that he was fitted-up, because the government was desperate to find a scapegoat for the CIA data breach. As a disgruntled and idiosyncratic former CIA employee, he was identified as a suspect almost immediately after WikiLeaks began publishing the material in March 2017.

Shortly thereafter he was indicted on charges of possession of child pornography. Whatever their veracity, those charges were clearly aimed at ensnaring Schulte in the legal system, as the government sought to build a case. It took more than a year for the Department of Justice to cobble together an indictment against Schulte over the CIA leak.

The timeline strongly suggests that the FBI and the government decided upon Schulte's guilt and worked backwards from there. WikiLeaks stated that the material it published on CIA hacking tools had been circulating among numerous former government employees and contractors.

The limited coverage of Schulte's sentencing in the mainstream press has uncritically cited the statements of US officials, describing the leak as the digital equivalent of Pearl Harbor, an unprecedented blow to "national security" and the like. Very little has been written about the content of the leaks.

Dubbed by WikiLeaks "Vault 7," the material pointed to a global CIA operation involving cyber-hacking and dirty tricks on an unprecedented scale. Among the revelations, "Vault 7" showed that:

• The CIA was the world's biggest purveyor of malware. It developed viruses and hacking tools directed at virtually all operating systems.

• The CIA had developed programs enabling it to hack smart televisions and other household devices for spying purposes.

• By hacking directly into smartphones, the CIA could overcome encrypted messaging apps.

• The agency was seeking to develop capabilities to remotely take control of the computer systems that run newer model cars. The only conceivable purpose would be to do physical harm.

• The CIA had developed capabilities to create digital "evidence" to attribute its own malicious hacking operations to adversaries, useful in "black propaganda" campaigns blaming other countries for supposed cyberattacks.

In other words, everything the US government has accused other states such as Russia and China of doing in relation to

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cyber-hacking, the CIA has done far more extensively and successfully.

A WikiLeaks announcement of the Vault 7 publication explained, “In a statement to WikiLeaks the source details policy questions that they say urgently need to be debated in public, including whether the CIA’s hacking capabilities exceed its mandated powers and the problem of public oversight of the agency. The source wishes to initiate a public debate about the security, creation, use, proliferation and democratic control of cyberweapons.”

The response was apoplectic. A month after the initial release, in April 2017, then CIA Director Mike Pompeo delivered a speech in which he denounced Assange and WikiLeaks staff as “demons” and “enemies” and declared that they would be treated as a “non-state hostile intelligence agency,” without First Amendment or other democratic rights.

A 2021 *Yahoo News* investigation would later reveal what this meant in practice. Based on the comments of more than 30 US officials, it confirmed that in 2017 Pompeo, the CIA and other figures in the Trump administration, including the president, had discussed illegally kidnapping Assange from Ecuador’s London Embassy, where he was a political refugee, or assassinating him. This was not idle chatter. The company that provided security to the embassy and controlled Assange’s physical environment, UC Global, was secretly working for the CIA.

It was only with the failure or abandonment of those extrajudicial plans that the US government indicted Assange. He faces Espionage Act charges and 175 years imprisonment if extradited. While those charges are over separate 2010 and 2011 WikiLeaks publications exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and global conspiracies by the State Department, Assange and WikiLeaks have stated that the main impetus for his stepped-up persecution was Vault 7 and the ferocious CIA response.

At the sentencing hearing Thursday, prosecutors argued that Schulte should be imprisoned for life. “There is a need for incapacitation,” one reportedly said. They called for his sentence to be extended based on “terrorism enhancement” provisions.

Schulte has already served more than five years in barbaric conditions. He has been under Special Administrative Measures, a form of detention involving almost total isolation and sensory deprivation.

According to *Inner City Press*, one of the few publications to have extensively covered the case, the alleged whistleblower told the sentencing hearing: “The US Federal government tortures me with 24/7 white noise and solitary confinement. The window is blacked out. When I am offered access to the law library, I have to urinate and defecate on the floor. I am left there for 9 hours.”

Schulte added: “I have been locked in my torture cage with rodent excrement. Ice accumulates near the window. I wash my clothes in my toilet. I’m forced to eat with my bare hands like an animal. They look down on you like you are not human.”

These conditions, akin to a medieval dungeon, are what awaits Assange if he is extradited. The WikiLeaks founder is perilously close to being dispatched to his persecutors. On February 20-21, he will appear in court, where an application to appeal the extradition order will be heard. If unsuccessful, Assange’s avenues within the British legal system are exhausted.

The Schulte case again underscores the criminal, gangster-like pursuit of Assange. The courageous journalist is being hounded as a criminal for exposing the illegal activities of the American government and its allies. This began under the Obama-Biden administration, was escalated by Trump, and the current Biden presidency is seeking to complete Assange’s destruction.

That underscores the commitment of the entire political establishment, whatever their tactical divisions, to ever-greater authoritarianism as they pursue a program of global war and confront growing social and political opposition domestically.

The bipartisan character of the assault on Assange, not only in the US, but in Britain and his home country Australia, demonstrates the futility of any perspective of securing his freedom through appeals to the powers that be. That perspective has been tried and has failed.

The alternative is the fight to mobilise the working class in Assange’s defence. That is not only necessary but possible. All over the world, masses of people are engaging in protest and opposition to the genocide in Gaza. There is immense anti-war sentiment, and to those who are familiar with him, despite media blackouts, Assange is rightly regarded as a heroic figure.

These sentiments must be developed into a movement fighting for his freedom, in opposition to the governments, their wars and the capitalist system that is responsible for militarism and dictatorship. The working class must demand freedom for Joshua Schulte and anyone who exposes the crimes of imperialism and freedom for Julian Assange.

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