**Free press in peril**

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Years pass and Julian Assange languishes in a dungeon. His crime? Well, he hasn’t been convicted of anything yet, but he had the intolerable courage to embarrass the US military and national security state, by reporting on how American soldiers murdered Iraqis for sport. This was a truth the pentagon never wanted aired to the world.

But Assange did just that. His collaborator, Chelsea Manning, was instantly clapped into prison and tortured until she attempted suicide. The viciousness with which the so-called justice system pursued her even involved a de facto double jeopardy prosecution. Meanwhile Assange hid out in the Ecuadorian embassy for seven years in London, where he had been granted asylum – until he wasn’t, because the US hunted him with relentless belligerence and pugnacity. The objective was to crush him, maybe kill him, and thus, by example, to finish off a free press once and for all.

Despite media mockery which turned out to be entirely wrong, Assange holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy to avoid extradition to the US Arrogant, expert naysayers in newspapers like the Guardian pooh-poohed this worry. It turned out to be spot on. For the moment in 2019 when British police stormed the embassy, laid hands on Assange and then tossed him into maximum security Belmarsh prison where he has been ever since, the US started extradition proceedings to bring Assange to the very hostile territory of Northern Virginia, populated by employees of the US security state.

Just try to get juror unbiased against whistle-blowers from Northern Virginia – you can’t. There Assange would stand trial under the odious Espionage Act, a law that would not exist in anything remotely daring to call itself a free country. Assange faces 175 years in prison if convicted. He was right. The press know-it-alls were idiots.

Plenty of people fight for Assange. Most recently, his father released a film, ‘Ithaka’, which follows his son’s 2019 struggle against extradition to the US. There were other films about Assange, one rather biased against him by Laura Poitras in 2017, the documentary ‘Risk’. Protests of varying sizes have occurred, and lots of luminaries have argued publicly for his release and that his extradition trial was a sham. Heads of state like Mexican president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador admirably displayed backbone by personally intervening – AMLO twice wrote US president Joe Biden about Assange, offering the journalist asylum in Mexico. But so far nothing besides surly silence out of the white house greeted either epistle, which could end this appalling assault on a journalist and a free press in an instant – if Biden so chose. One can only hope the US president is mulling the role of a hero on the world stage, for releasing an unjustly imprisoned publisher.

Most recently, in mid-February, Assange was invited to his friend, the designer Vivienne Westwood’s funeral. During his memorial speech, Westwood’s son called for freeing Assange. But the answer was no. Assange remained in his six-foot by 12-foot cell for over 20 hours per day. Over a decade of confinement has taken its toll on the publisher, physically and mentally, Newsweek reported January 27. Indeed, during his original trial before the very hostile judge Vanessa Baraitser, a frail Assange was observed to be confused, unable to comprehend questions or remember his birth date and unsure where he was – possibly the result of being dosed up with psychotropic drugs, in a clear attempt by his persecutors to break him.

Award winning journalist Chris Hedges called that first trial “a farce,” (the later one was no better) and that it lacked a legal basis ab initio – to try an Australian citizen under the US Espionage Act or even for holding him in prison. “The CIA spied on Julian in the embassy…recorded the privileged conversations between Julian and his lawyers as they discussed his defense. This fact alone invalidated the trial.” The U.S. government directed the British prosecutor, John Lewis. According to former diplomat Craig Murray, “Lewis presented these directives to Baraitser. Baraitser adopted them as her legal decisions.” And then, of course, the CIA planned to kidnap or assassinate Assange, whose rights by the time this rotten scheme came to light had been violated so many times and in so many ways, it’s hard to know where to begin an accounting of it.

In November 2019, 60 doctors penned an open letter, saying Assange’s health was so bad, he “could die in prison.” The UN special rapporteur on torture, Nils Melzer, deplored Assange’s treatment in May 2019: “Mr Assange has been exposed to persistent, progressively severe abuse, ranging from systematic judicial persecution and arbitrary confinement in the Ecuadorian embassy to oppressive isolation, harassment and surveillance inside the embassy and from deliberate collective ridicule, insults and humiliation, to open instigation of violence and calls for his assassination” – most famously from Hillary Clinton, whose threats are always to be taken seriously: remember her ghoulishly chortling over the murder she helped engineer of Libya’s leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Melzer later asserted that Assange’s treatment amounted to torture. In October 2021, Assange suffered a mini-stroke, which testifies to the stupendous stress on this prisoner, who, age 49 at the time of his aneurysm, was definitely young for a stroke.

Assange appealed his extradition in August, and the High Court still weighs that appeal. “Even if he loses,” according to Newsweek, “there remains the possibility of an appeal to the British Supreme Court or to the European Court of Human Rights. Assange could be in the U.S. within months, but he might remain in Britain for years.” According to his family, this uncertainty has caused him depression, anxiety and weight loss. But there are indications that his condition may have improved somewhat: his wife reports that he is teaching himself Chinese.

If Biden wants to secure a spot on the side of the angels, he will ensure that the US drops the case, initiated by the Trump administration, against Assange. Such a spot might have all the more appeal, given the huge threat to Biden’s legacy from such white house actions as provoking and prolonging the needless Russian/Ukrainian war, committing an act of terrorism which was also an act of war against ally Germany by blowing up its critical infrastructure, the Nordstream pipeline, and so far failing to cool things down with China. From the current vantage point, it does not look like history will treat Biden kindly. “America is back” and “nothing will fundamentally change;” with these two mottos bracketing his presidency, we have seen many dismal developments.

Biden might well want to rescue his reputation by ending the Assange prosecution travesty. What happens if Biden does nothing? Assange stays in jail, and Biden goes down in history as a president who muzzled a free press. If he does extradite, history’s verdict will be even harsher – it will portray him as the rabid executioner of freedom of expression.

But if Biden ends the case, he gets credit for his efforts to promote the first amendment, something his predecessor hypocritically trashed; and by halting this prosecution once and for all, Biden may well secure a place in the ages as a free speech champion. Does he care?

Excerpted: ‘A Free Press in Peril: The Assange Case Drags on’.

Courtesy: Counterpunch.org