

The Global War on Those Who Speak Truth

By John Whitehead, The Rutherford Institute, 18 November 2019

“What happens to Julian Assange and to Chelsea Manning is meant to intimidate us, to frighten us into silence. By defending Julian Assange, we defend our most sacred rights. [Speak up now or wake up one morning to the silence of a new kind of tyranny](#). The choice is ours.” — John Pilger, investigative journalist

All of us are in danger.

In an age of prosecutions for thought crimes, pre-crime deterrence programs, and government agencies that operate like organized crime syndicates, there is a new kind of tyranny being imposed on those who dare to expose the crimes of the [Deep State](#), whose reach has gone global.

The Deep State has embarked on a ruthless, take-no-prisoners, all-out assault on truth-tellers.

Activists, journalists and whistle-blowers alike are being terrorized, traumatized, tortured and subjected to the fear-inducing, mind-altering, soul-destroying, smash-your-face-in tactics employed by the superpowers-that-be.

Take Julian Assange, for example.

Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks — a website that published secret information, news leaks, and classified media from anonymous sources — was arrested on April 11, 2019, on charges of helping U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning access and leak more than 700,000 classified [military documents that portray the U.S. government and its military as reckless, irresponsible and responsible for thousands of civilian deaths](#).

Included among the [leaked Manning material](#) were the [Collateral Murder video](#) (April 2010), the Afghanistan war logs (July 2010), the Iraq war logs (October 2010), a quarter of a million diplomatic cables (November 2010), and the Guantánamo files (April 2011).

The [Collateral Murder leak included gunsight video footage from two U.S. AH-64 Apache helicopters](#) engaged in a series of air-to-ground attacks while air crew laughed at some of the casualties.

Among the casualties were two Reuters correspondents who were gunned down after their cameras were mistaken for weapons and a driver who stopped to help one of the journalists. The driver’s two children, who happened to be in the van at the time it was fired upon by U.S. forces, suffered serious injuries.

This is morally wrong.

It shouldn’t matter which nation is responsible for these atrocities: there is no defense for such evil perpetrated in the name of profit margins and [war profiteering](#).

In true Orwellian fashion, however, the government would have us believe that it is Assange and Manning who are the real criminals for daring to expose the war machine's seedy underbelly.

Since his April 2019 arrest, Assange has been locked up in a maximum-security British prison — [in solitary confinement for up to 23 hours a day](#) — pending extradition to the U.S., where if convicted, he could be sentenced to [175 years in prison](#).

Whatever is being done to Assange behind those prison walls — psychological torture, forced drugging, prolonged isolation, intimidation, surveillance — it's wearing him down.

In court appearances, the 48-year-old Assange appears disoriented, haggard and zombie-like.

“In 20 years of work with victims of war, violence and political persecution [I have never seen a group of democratic States ganging up](#) to deliberately isolate, demonise and abuse a single individual for such a long time and with so little regard for human dignity and the rule of law,” declared Nils Melzer, the UN special rapporteur on torture.

It's not just Assange who is being made to suffer, however.

Manning, who was jailed for seven years from 2010 to 2017 for leaking classified documents to Wikileaks, was arrested in March 2019 for refusing to testify before a grand jury about Assange, placed in solitary confinement for almost a month, and then [sentenced to remain in jail](#) either until she agrees to testify or until the grand jury's 18-month term expires.

Federal judge Anthony J. Trenga of the Eastern District of Virginia also fined Manning \$500 for every day she remained in custody after 30 days, and [\\$1,000 for every day she remains in custody after 60 days](#), a chilling — and financially crippling — example of the government's heavy-handed efforts to weaponize fines and jail terms as a means of forcing dissidents to fall in line.

This is how the police state deals with those who challenge its chokehold on power.

Make no mistake: the government is waging war on journalists and whistleblowers for disclosing information relating to government misconduct that is within the public's right to know.

Yet while this targeted campaign — aided, abetted and advanced by the Deep State's international alliances — is unfolding during President Trump's watch, it began with the Obama Administration's decision to revive the antiquated, hundred-year-old [Espionage Act](#), which was intended to punish government spies, and instead [use it to prosecute government whistleblowers](#).

Unfortunately, the Trump Administration has not merely continued the Obama Administration's attack on whistleblowers. It has injected this war on truth-tellers and truth-seekers with steroids and let it loose on the First Amendment.

In May 2019, Trump's Justice Department issued a sweeping new “superseding” secret indictment of Assange — hinged on the Espionage Act — that [empowers the government to determine what counts as legitimate journalism and criminalize the rest](#), not to mention

giving “the government license to criminally punish journalists it does not like, based on antipathy, vague standards, and subjective judgments.”

Noting that the [indictment signaled grave dangers for freedom of the press in general](#), media lawyer Theodore J. Boutrous, Jr., warned, “The indictment would criminalize the encouragement of leaks of newsworthy classified information, criminalize the acceptance of such information, and criminalize publication of it.”

Boutrous continues:

“[I]t doesn’t matter whether you think Assange is a journalist, or whether WikiLeaks is a news organization. The theory that animates the indictment targets the very essence of journalistic activity: [the gathering and dissemination of information that the government wants to keep secret](#).

“You don’t have to like Assange or endorse what he and WikiLeaks have done over the years to recognize that this indictment sets an ominous precedent and threatens basic First Amendment values....

“With only modest tweaking, the very same theory could be invoked to prosecute journalists for the very same crimes being alleged against Assange, simply for doing their jobs of scrutinizing the government and reporting the news to the American people.”

We desperately need greater scrutiny and transparency, not less.

Indeed, transparency is one of those things the shadow government fears the most. Why? Because it might arouse the distracted American populace to actually exercise their rights and resist the tyranny that is inexorably asphyxiating their freedoms.

This need to shed light on government actions — to make the obscure, least transparent reaches of government accessible and accountable — was a common theme for Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, who famously coined the phrase, “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.”

Writing in January 1884, Brandeis [explained](#):

“[Light is the only thing that can sweeten our political atmosphere](#) — light thrown upon every detail of administration in the departments; light diffused through every policy; light blazed full upon every feature of legislation; light that can penetrate every recess or corner in which any intrigue might hide; light that will open up to view the innermost chambers of government, drive away all darkness from the treasury vaults; illuminate foreign correspondence; explore national dockyards; search out the obscurities of Indian affairs; display the workings of justice; exhibit the management of the army; play upon the sails of the navy; and follow the distribution of the mails.”

Of course, transparency is futile without a populace that is informed, engaged and prepared to hold the government accountable to abiding by the rule of law.

For this reason, it is vital that [citizens have the right to criticize the government without fear](#).

After all, we're citizens, not subjects. For those who don't fully understand the distinction between the two and why transparency is so vital to a healthy constitutional government, Manning explains it well:

“When freedom of information and transparency are stifled, then bad decisions are often made and heartbreaking tragedies occur – too often on a breathtaking scale that can leave societies wondering: how did this happen? ...

“I believe that when the public lacks even the most fundamental access to what its governments and militaries are doing in their names, then they cease to be involved in the act of citizenship. [There is a bright distinction between citizens, who have rights and privileges protected by the state, and subjects, who are under the complete control and authority of the state.](#)”

Manning goes on to suggest that the U.S. “needs legislation to protect the public’s right to free speech and a free press, to protect it from the actions of the executive branch and to promote the integrity and transparency of the US government.”

Technically, we’ve already got such legislation on the books: the First Amendment.

The First Amendment gives the citizenry the right to speak freely, protest peacefully, expose government wrongdoing, and criticize the government without fear of arrest, isolation or any of the other punishments that have been meted out to whistleblowers such as [Edward Snowden](#), [Assange](#) and [Manning](#).

The challenge is holding the government accountable to obeying the law.

Almost 50 years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 6-3 in *United States v. Washington Post Co.* to block the Nixon Administration’s attempts to use claims of national security to prevent The Washington Post and The New York Times from [publishing secret Pentagon papers on how America went to war in Vietnam](#).

As Justice William O. Douglas remarked on the ruling,

“The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. [Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government.](#) And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell.”

Almost 50 years later, with Assange being cast as the poster boy for treason, we’re witnessing yet another showdown, which pits the people’s right to know about government misconduct against the might of the military industrial complex.

Yet this isn’t merely about whether whistleblowers and journalists are part of a protected class under the Constitution. It’s a debate over how long “we the people” will remain a protected class under the Constitution.

Following the current downward trajectory, it won’t be long before anyone who believes in holding the government accountable is [labeled an “extremist,”](#) is relegated to an underclass

that doesn't fit in, must be [watched all the time](#), and is rounded up when the government deems it necessary.

Eventually, we will all be potential suspects, terrorists and lawbreakers in the eyes of the government

Partisan politics have no place in this debate: Americans of all stripes would do well to remember that those who question the motives of government provide a necessary counterpoint to those who would blindly follow where politicians choose to lead.

We don't have to agree with every criticism of the government, but we must defend the rights of all individuals to speak freely without fear of punishment or threat of banishment.

Never forget: what the architects of the police state want are submissive, compliant, cooperative, obedient, meek citizens who don't talk back, don't challenge government authority, don't speak out against government misconduct, and don't step out of line.

What the First Amendment protects — and a healthy constitutional republic requires—are citizens who routinely exercise their right to speak truth to power.

As I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#), the right to speak out against government wrongdoing is the quintessential freedom.

Be warned: this quintessential freedom won't be much good to anyone if the government makes good on its promise to make an example of Assange as a warning to other journalists intent on helping whistleblowers disclose government corruption.

Once again, we find ourselves reliving George Orwell's [1984](#), which portrayed in chilling detail how totalitarian governments employ the power of language to manipulate the masses.

In Orwell's dystopian vision of the future, Big Brother does away with all undesirable and unnecessary words and meanings, even going so far as to routinely rewrite history and punish "thoughtcrimes."

Much like today's social media censors and pre-crime police departments, Orwell's Thought Police serve as the eyes and ears of Big Brother, while the other government agencies peddle in economic affairs (rationing and starvation), law and order (torture and brainwashing), and news, entertainment, education and art (propaganda).

Orwell's Big Brother relies on Newspeak to eliminate undesirable words, strip such words as remained of unorthodox meanings and make independent, non-government-approved thought altogether unnecessary.

Where we stand now is at the juncture of OldSpeak (where words have meanings, and ideas can be dangerous) and Newspeak (where only that which is "safe" and "accepted" by the majority is permitted). The power elite has made their intentions clear: they will pursue and prosecute any and all words, thoughts and expressions that challenge their authority.

This is the final link in the police state chain.

Having been reduced to a cowering citizenry — mute in the face of elected officials who refuse to represent us, helpless in the face of police brutality, powerless in the face of militarized tactics and technology that treat us like enemy combatants on a battlefield, and naked in the face of government surveillance that sees and hears all — our backs are to the walls.

From this point on, we have only two options: go down fighting, or capitulate and betray our loved ones, our friends and ourselves by insisting that, as a brainwashed Winston Smith does at the end of Orwell's [1984](#), yes, 2+2 does equal 5.

As George Orwell recognized, “In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”

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